

Herbert Tucker, Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/09/67
Administrative Information

Creator: Herbert Tucker

Interviewer: John Stewart

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Biographical Note

Tucker was assistant attorney general of Massachusetts from 1959 to 1968; chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Boston chapter; and a worker in John F. Kennedy's (JFK) Senate campaigns 1952 in and 1958, and presidential campaign in 1960. In this interview, Tucker discusses his work promoting JFK's senate and presidential candidacy with African American voters, JFK's relationship with civil rights leaders and record on civil rights, and Tucker's trip to Gabon on behalf of the Kennedy administration, among other issues.

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Papers relating to Herbert E. Tucker's activities during the Presidential Campaign of 1960 and an Oral History interview conducted for the Kennedy Library in 1967.
Less than 1 cubic foot.

Herbert Tucker – JFK#1

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Oral History Interview

with

HERBERT TUCKER

March 9, 1967
Boston, Massachusetts

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Mr. Tucker, when did you first meet John Kennedy?

TUCKER: I first met John Kennedy when I was the chairman of the executive committee of the Boston branch of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] back in 1948. At the same time I was also working my way up in my college fraternity, and at that time I was the regional director of the fraternity in a sense, and from both of those organizations we formed a relationship.

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Actually I had taken a personal liking to the man as an individual at that time and knew that from my connection with these two organizations I could give him a platform, first of all because up to that time he had had little or no contact with the Negro constituency. His district which he represented as a Congressman probably had less than one percent Negro vote, and he had nobody to whom he could turn. And I think he also took this as an opportunity, not only to establish what I thought was a very fine relationship, but to give him a platform to speak on intergroup relations as he wanted to do.

STEWART: You knew him then in 1948 I assume he, of course, was thinking at that time

of a statewide campaign either for Governor or Senator.

TUCKER: Well, I would assume so, knowing the individual as I thought I did, and he planned far ahead. If you remember, he ran for Congress twice, I believe it was, and then United States

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Senator in 1952. So it was in that period that he probably was looking toward a statewide office.

STEWART: How would you assess his interest at that time in the whole problem of civil rights and intergroup relations?

TUCKER: I felt that he had a moral conviction within himself. I didn't think that he was making, if I may use the vernacular, political hay out of the situation. I think that he felt morally that the minority had been denied opportunity, and he wanted to learn something more about the denial of this opportunity, become acquainted with individuals so that he could assess for himself, using his favorite term "so he could make a judgment."

STEWART: What contact did you have, if any, with him in the 1952 campaign?

TUCKER: Well, in 1952 he asked me and one Elwood McKenney, who is now a judge here in the city of Boston, to draft a paper for him

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for use in the 1952 campaign dealing with minority problems. That was my first political contact. Prior to that time it was just through these organizations. In fact, as an aside, he still -- I don't know whether it's he or his estate -- owes me two dollars. [Laughter] He took a membership in the NAACP, and, as was his custom, he never carried much money with him, and he didn't have two dollars. So, "Herb, would you pay the man two dollars for me, I'll give it to you sometime." And I have yet to see the two dollars.

STEWART: In that 1952 campaign were there any significant differences from a Negro point of view between Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] and Kennedy?

TUCKER: Well, you've got to, I think, look at it again from a political point of view; that was, most of the people in Boston actually were, even though they were of the Negro minority, had always leaned toward the Republican Party. It was a sentimental gesture in so far as Henry

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Cabot Lodge was concerned, and here was a newcomer about whom few people knew anything. And it was a matter of, actually I think, distrust at first. In fact, I found that this so-called distrust grew to enormous proportions in later years as I worked with him. We can go into that later, if you wish.

STEWART: That's interesting, this distrust at this early date in '52. What was that based on? Generally his impression as the son of a rich man and so forth?

TUCKER: Mainly because he had had no contact, had made no effort to have any contact with Negroes and seemed to be impervious to the problems. I'm not sure that it was because he had a certain amount of wealth. He just had no contact. I mean, he came in here practically to run for office as a student. He had been living all over the world, going to social with his father, and so forth. And so his contact was nil. So I think the distrust was based

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upon taking the known, as I might put it, against the unknown. And there were just a few of us who had faith in him as an individual and could see through this sort of thing, that once he became familiar with the problem that we were sure that something could be done about it.

STEWART: Did he campaign to any great extent in the predominantly Negro wards of Boston?

TUCKER: He didn't have to. That's what I'm saying. His constituency had no...

STEWART: I mean as a Senator, I'm sorry.

TUCKER: Oh, as a Senator. In 1952 he did campaign extensively in the Negro areas because I accompanied him many times as he went there. I don't know how familiar you are with Boston, but it's grown somewhat now, but in 1952 the Negro population of Boston was relatively small. Even now the voting population is only two percent of the entire state. So I would say in '52 -- since the population grew in that period it was very small. So it was

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a very small factor. And that's another important factor, too, because the Negro, as such, as a block could have no affect one way or the other, even as to controlling whom would be or carrying the balance. It was really a negligible factor in any campaign. So I say that by actively campaigning there was another feeling of sincerity on my party, insofar as he was concerned, of really feeling this problem and wanting to do something about it with no previous knowledge.

STEWART: What contact did you have with him between 1952 and 1958

TUCKER: Well, I was a member, I had to introduce him a couple of times at two or three affairs, one of which I remember. He was coming from Worcester, and it was in the wintertime, and they had a storm. He was delayed for forty-five minutes, and I had to spend forty-five minutes thinking of introductory remarks. Finally somebody tapped me on the shoulder and

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said, "He's here, he's here. But aside from those occasions, I was instrumental in getting the Foundation, the Kennedy Foundation, through him to make a sizeable contribution to the Freedom House, Inc., which is a civic center here in Boston, and take a very deep interest in it. I was a member of his finance committee in both campaigns and was called upon many times to render various services. I can't think now.... [Interruption] I forget what I was talking about.

STEWART: You were talking about the extent of your contacts with him in the interim of the campaigns.

TUCKER: Oh, and then on many times he would call me to see if I could ascertain the feeling in the community about various problems with which he might have faced. I know on one occasion particularly we had quite a squabble here in the State Democratic Committee: the McCormack [John W. McCormack] forces versus the Kennedy forces.

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There was one vote splitting them and he didn't know this individual who was a member of the state committee, and he thought that I might have some influence with her, and he called me to see if I could persuade her to vote the Kennedy way. And as it turned out she did because of me more than because of him, because she was also one of the distrusting things, but the vote turned out fourteen to thirteen, and he was successful. So I think he was grateful for that, also. But there were innumerable times that he would call and ask me to come over to 122 and sit down and talk with him generally about the problems, particularly those problems that involved the Negro minority.

STEWART: Did you see any discernible change in his attitude or his awareness of problems of the significance of Negro people generally politically during this period?

TUCKER: No. No, that didn't begin to show in any

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discernible fashion or any marked discernible fashion until probably '56, '57, somewhere in there. He was very cautious about it. Yet as you probably can recall that in those times of '51 and '52, much more so than it is now, most liberals were very cautious as to how far they were going to take a stand on some of these problems, and he followed into that pattern. He was always concerned about the results of any action that he took. I can recall in 1959 when he called me to Washington, and he sat in that rocking chair of his, and he wondered then. If you remember, Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had just been successful in getting the -- not just, but the year or so before -- the 1957 Civil Rights Bill through, and he wanted to know how I felt on its impact on the Negro population of the country. He must have been thinking about something. I'm sure he was, of course, but he was thinking of the results

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of this, how it was going to affect, and what steps he ought to take.

STEWART: Were you consulted at all on the stand he would take on the 1957 Civil Rights Bill?

TUCKER: Well, that's when we, I suppose you would say, I was critical, that's when I was very critical because at that time I was President of the Boston branch and in my capacity as President we had to criticize him for the stand that he did take in 1957 -- I'm not sure of the Title now; I think it was Title IV of that. I'm not sure. Either Title III or Title IV; I'm not sure which --

STEWART: I think III was something else.

TUCKER: For the stand that he took on that. As a result of that, he sent Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] up here to talk with me and I arranged a meeting so Ted -- of course, there's a difference. I mean, I still felt the way I did about him as an individual, but being head of the organization any criticism had to come as president of the

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organization. So I arranged a forum for Ted Sorensen to come here and try to explain his position. And as I recall without going into too much detail that most of the people were satisfied with the way he explained it. But I should say cautiously satisfied because, as I found out later, we were still having problems trying to convince the entire population of the country as we went around the country that this man meant what he said and intended to do something about this.

STEWART: Do you recall the substance or the main thrust of the explanation? Was it basically because of the advice he had gotten from the people at Harvard Law School and other people? Was it based on these Constitutional grounds?

TUCKER: It was. And now that you bring it to my attention, he did seek the advice of certain members of the faculty out there whose names slip me now. I know the members that he would have talked with, and I'm not sure at that time whether he talked with

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Mark Howe or Arthur Sutherland, or Dean Griswold [Erwin N. Griswold], whom he used many times to talk with, but I do recall saying how they felt about the Constitutional questions involved and that his opinion was guided by their opinion.

STEWART: Then you personally were quite satisfied with his explanations and his...

TUCKER: Well, because I had such a personal admiration for the individual, I suppose, unlike the other people who hadn't had the opportunity to see him and under the circumstances that I had seen him, I suppose.

STEWART: Was Belford Lawson actively advising him at this time?

TUCKER: No.

STEWART: He wasn't?

TUCKER: No, I don't think Belford came into the picture until early 1958 or late '57 when he ran for Senator the second time and we all knew that at that time he was actually running for the Presidency of the United States. Well,

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I think that's when Belford first came into the picture. In fact, he bowed out, as far as I know. His wife took over most of the duties that he would have been.... It was Marjorie [Marjorie Lawson] and I who worked very closely together for that whole year of 1958 and then again during the presidential campaign. Saw very little if any of Belford.

STEWART: Well, then, during the 1958 senatorial campaign then I assume you were an active member of the campaign.

TUCKER: Yes. I had the title of Associate Director of the Civil Rights Section of the campaign.

STEWART: Were you successful in getting through to people why he had voted as he did on the '57 Civil Rights Bill?

TUCKER: Well, if I were to say that based upon the results of the election in the urban areas where the Negro vote counts for something, I would say that we got our message across. I was sort of a trouble shooter in that campaign in that I had, of course, specific duties, but my main

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job was to move about in any area that I thought there was a problem. That decision was my own, and I was based in Washington four days a week and here three days, and I'd just take off whenever I thought there was a problem to talk with a group. In fact, as I recall how I got involved in this thing, the state Democratic Committee of Michigan was having its convention in Grand Rapids, and I got a call from Ted Sorensen, say this afternoon, asking me how quickly I could get out to Grand Rapids. Naturally, I was curious as to why I had gotten this call out of the clear blue sky, and as it turned out I was to be exhibit number one -- "This is a Negro who has faith in Kennedy and should be able to sway the rest of you."

STEWART: When was this now?

TUCKER: This was in, let's see, 1960. This would be the year of the campaign, in April of the year of the campaign, prior to the Convention. That would be 1960, wouldn't it? So it

[-15-]

was in April of 1960. This is going beyond, of course; if I'm carrying you too fast, you bring me back.

STEWART: No, that's all right.

TUCKER: But as I say I found out that actually I was to be exhibit one -- "Here is a Negro who has known Mr. Kennedy for a number of years and can tell you just what type of individual he was. And I can see now, as I look back, why that was so important, because as I looked around -- probably unlike many of the Democratic state committees in the entire nation -- about thirty percent of the delegates were Negroes and that was a very important convention. "Go out there and have something to say about the individual and make sure that he was represented." Particularly, I think Symington [Stuart Symington] was running at that time and, of course, Johnson, and there were some there who were interested in Johnson.

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STEWART: How successful generally were you at that convention?

TUCKER: Following that convention, after I made my report and stated that I had thought that I had made some inroads but they weren't definitive enough, a group of these people was invited to Washington, if you remember, you may or may not. A group, they sent the *Caroline* out there for a group of these people whom were designated to come and talk further with him.

STEWART: Did they have a breakfast meeting at his house?

TUCKER: I'm not sure where. I think it was at his house. I didn't go to that meeting myself. I didn't know about it until after it had happened. I just came back and made my report, and then I heard some time later that these people had come.

STEWART: Going back, if we could then, to 1958 during that campaign was it generally recognized that

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Kennedy had to get sizeable support from the Negro community in order to convince people throughout the country that he did have the support at home?

TUCKER: Yes. And in order to do that, to make sure that he got at least his message across to the Negro population or to a great segment of it, we formed an organization called the Massachusetts Citizens Committee on Minority Rights and sponsored a testimonial dinner for him, expressly for the purpose again of giving him a forum, hoping that the audience would be ninety percent Negro. We directed all our efforts in that vein. And we had about six or seven hundred representative Negroes at this meeting. Now it could have been that it was personal pride in a Massachusetts son or it could have been that we finally convinced them that this was the type of man, because he had little problem in Massachusetts after that meeting.

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STEWART: Was Mr. Wilkins [Roy Wilkins] generally receptive by now?

TUCKER: No.

STEWART: Not at all?

TUCKER: No. You're talking about Roy Wilkins of the NAACP?

STEWART: Yes.

TUCKER: No. If he was, he didn't make it publicly known; I'll put it that way. Maybe it was because of his being head of the NAACP and not wanting to be involved in politics, but I know Roy well enough for him to take me off in the car and tell me how he felt, if he had any feelings, without involving the organization. But for the many opportunities that he had and knowing what I had been engaged in, he never did make any such suggestions to support. And I was quite surprised to know that he was one of the first ones to go down there when he was finally elected.

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STEWART: Moving on then, as the presidential campaign picked up in late 1959, early 1960, were you generally satisfied with the type of advice that Kennedy was getting on the approach to civil rights problems?

TUCKER: Yes, yes. He had -- you mean, by best advice you're thinking of individuals, the make-up of the committee? I think that Harris Wofford probably gave him the most vital piece of good advice during the campaign when he had him call Martin Luther King.

STEWART: Well, I was referring to the three campaign periods. During the primaries, for example, and a few months before that.

TUCKER: Well, if I were to put it that way, I think I -- and I don't say this immodestly, but I think it was pretty narrow prior to that time. I think, again I say that I was exhibit number one and whatever advice I tried to give him, I think that's how he moved. I don't know anybody else who was advising him

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at that time except maybe the Lawsons. And I think that they volunteered their services, more or less, than having been sought out by him originally. Oh, and I should mention another name, Frank Reeves. I don't know whether you've talked with him. Frank at the time was a national committeeman from the District of Columbia. But, as far as I know there were just the three of us who were trying to steer him in this course, the proper course.

STEWART: Do you recall any significant examples of things you were advising him to do that he or members of his staff were opposing? Here again during the pre-Convention period?

TUCKER: Yes. Yes, just one. During the Convention in Los Angeles we had been trying to actively participate on the national level in so far as the rights of minorities were concerned. And I can recall very vividly my second meeting with Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy.] We were looking at the -- what do you call it, closed television

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in the hotel?

STEWART: Yes.

TUCKER: And President Johnson was down in the press room. [Interruption]

STEWART: You were mentioning an incident at the Convention.

TUCKER: Yes. We picked up and were looking at a television, and there was President Johnson down in the press room expounding on civil rights and expressing the general notion that everybody ought to be given equal opportunity and if he were given the chance what he was going to do and so forth and so on. Up to this point John Kennedy had said nothing about civil rights in his attempting to get the votes at the Convention. So Frank Reeves, Harris Wofford and I drafted a document as fast as we could and ran up to the fourteenth floor to see if we could see John Kennedy and tell him that we think it was about time that if this man from Texas

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can say anything, I think it's about time that you ought to say something. And we drafted what we thought was a pretty good document, and, of course, we had to go through Bobby. I'll never forget his words. He looked at it, and he says, "I'm busy as hell. What do you think we're running a campaign for? Negroes alone?" And that was it. Now later on that was given to him, and he, of course, put it in his own words and did make a statement before the nomination. Maybe we just got the younger Kennedy at a bad time. But I do remember that. Now whether he meant, again, that he was too busy at that particular moment or there were other factors -- they were still trying to get votes, we recognized that -- or whether that was his feeling or what. Certainly it wasn't shown later, particularly with Bobby. I mean, he was much more outspoken on this than John ever was. But that was the... You say, "Did anybody disagree?" That

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was the first time and only time that anybody turned down any suggestion made by the section.

STEWART: Do you recall any significant voicing of opinion by civil rights people that Kennedy had courted favor with the Southern people to get votes at the Convention or to get second ballot votes at the Convention?

TUCKER: Yes, this was at the NAACP convention in St. Paul -- either St. Paul or

Minneapolis, I can't remember -- St. Paul when it was suggested that I go out there, even though I was a delegate to the Convention, to try to take some steps in persuading the individuals there that this man was sincere in what he wanted to do for minorities, and got a lot of disregard for, or disagreement with what I was trying to put across. So much so that we put in a hurried call for Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver], who came out and was one of the most pleasant individuals you'd want to talk with, and with his very pleasant manner and working and

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talking with these people sometimes ten and twelve hours a day. He slept in my room, so I know how hard he worked trying to persuade these people. That I think had some effect.

STEWART: But this definitely was a subject on many people's minds?

TUCKER: Yes, yes. All through. I had the same similar situation when I was instructed to go to Cleveland with Congressman Dawson [William L. Dawson]. He was going as the representative of the Democratic Party, the spokesman, and I was going as the spokesman for John Kennedy. And the general question was, at that time, "This man hasn't done nor has he said anything that would give you the impression that he favors equal opportunity, and how can you convince us that this is what he's going to do?" "The only way I can explain it is because I've known the man (at that time) for some nine or ten years, and I know how he feels inwardly, he calculates all of his moves.

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If this has to be interpreted as a political move, then that's the way it has to be interpreted. But as an individual I can tell you how he will react when he is faced with these problems." What I said to them turned out to be the fact.

STEWART: Did you have any role in any of the primaries?

TUCKER: No, I didn't. No, I didn't. I had no role.

STEWART: After the...

TUCKER: At that time I was just moving around from organization to organization. One of my jobs.... For instance, the Masons -- in any case you're not familiar with it -- are not supposed to engage in political activity in any way within the temple of the Masons, the Masonic Hall [Lodge]. And I can recall being holed up in a room in St. Louis for four days while I'm waiting for the Supreme Council to try to act on a resolution which I had phrased as innocuously as possible, but working through from the outside to the inside trying to get this resolution.

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And I was afraid to leave the hotel room to see what action they were going to take on it. Another time I had to go to the Baptist convention in Philadelphia. I don't know whether you recall that or not. There was a big squabble as to whether or not the Jackson forces or -- there was another faction, they had a big fight at the convention hall. So much so that we were trying to get a resolution through there that the Baptist convention would endorse his presidency, and, of course, that was the religious issue again, and we had quite a lot of difficulty, particularly with their own disagreements getting to the violent stage. There again I was in the middle. But that was what I did mainly rather than going directly to the polls. I just traveled around from one convention to another for that eight or nine month period, and I must have gone to maybe fifteen of the darn things to see if I could get a resolution through,

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personal in some instances, naming him by name, and impersonal in other instances, trying to get the principle of not turning this man back because he's a Catholic (depending on where I went) or not turning this man back because he hasn't made the forthright statement that you think that he ought to make, and that sort of thing. All sorts of conventions.

STEWART: Did the civil rights and the religious questions get quite intertangled at times?

TUCKER: Yes. Because in all Negro organizations, all of them, I don't care whether it's the convention of hairdressers or whether it's a convention of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] they're interested in equal opportunity. And each of the organizations will give as much time to it, maybe on a different level or in a different manner, but in back of every single Negro organization in this country there is the question of civil rights, and we have to deal with them.

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STEWART: And how did the religious problem generally come into the situation? Or did it to any great extent?

TUCKER: The only one that I went to was this Baptist national convention, and, as I said, they had an internal struggle there, so much so that the president of it was booed off the stage and he had to conduct his meeting in an anteroom off convention hall like this with so many people and policemen there. However, even in that split organization we were able to get the resolution to him which was acted upon favorably, and then he became one of the very strong supporters of President Kennedy later and by virtue of his support they were able to get much support from the Baptists or Negro Baptist organization which is the largest religious organization we have in the country.

STEWART: Within the civil rights division or section it's been reported that there was a

considerable amount of internal friction, specifically among

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Harris Wofford, Frank Reeves, Marjorie Lawson and, I assume, Shriver and other people. Were you aware and involved in any of these...

TUCKER: Well, if there was any friction I certainly don't think it was because of any particular policy. I think that it could have been.... If there was now, I didn't recognize it, but having been in politics for a long time, I know that there are many people who engage in this so-called infighting because they want to be the closest one to the candidate. Whether they be successful or not is another question, but they want to be the one closest. In that sense there may have been. [I know that Margie, being a woman, sometimes played her feminine tricks on us, crying and that sort of thing] but I don't think that it was over any basic problem of policy. I think it was more a matter of who was the leader and why couldn't I be the leader rather than you and that sort of thing, because I'm to be the one

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that's going to the closest. I had a distinct difference or different position than most of them because I didn't want anything from him. All these people were looking for jobs and, of course, the more they did I suppose the more important they could be presumed to be and probably be offered these types of jobs. As I say, I went down there, decided I'd go to Los Angeles, so I didn't see all of this going on in the office. And, in addition to that, I had made it very plain that I was just in it because of my personal admiration for this man, and I didn't want any job, and they knew that. Somewhat independent in a sense.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in the registration campaign, the very successful registration campaign that was conducted from Washington?

TUCKER: No.

STEWART: Not at all?

TUCKER: No.

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STEWART: Because I think there was some relationship with the civil rights...

TUCKER: Well, there may have been...

STEWART: ... at least a lot of the same people worked on it.

TUCKER: Well, there may have been a civil rights section that had about eight or nine people in it. [Marjorie was at least the titular head, she was the director. And I think this was when this came up because Harris, although he was a part of the civil rights section, he had no title. And I think it was to pacify Marjorie that they made her director, although they looked around and said "We'll make you associate director." Frank Reeves was one of the few who traveled with Kennedy. I don't think he had any connection with the civil rights section at all. Frank, after the campaign really got going, was, in a sense, the same as I was. He was exhibit one. I have to laugh

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about this, but I missed the opportunity to second his nomination, because, as Jack said, "You're not instant enough." Of course, he was telling me that too many people might not know that you're Negro appearing on the television and I won't get credit for it. So they suggested that Frank Reeves do it rather than I. I would have liked nothing better; I was quite disappointed. But Frank, getting back to what I was saying, actually wasn't connected with the civil rights section at all. He was the Negro who would accompany him, who would be seen when he made his various tours. Said he came to Boston once in connection with this registration, but that wasn't set, as I recall it, even though I went to that meeting, on racial lines. That was just a general registration, and they set up committees all over the country, particularly in the state with which I'm familiar.

STEWART: But the emphasis was on the northern and

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eastern industrial states and particularly in the cities....

TUCKER: Yes, that's right.

STEWART: So therefore naturally a lot of the effort was in...

TUCKER: Would have to be because of the make-up of the population of the city.

STEWART: Were you generally satisfied with the operations of these civil rights sections? Overall how would you assess their contribution to the campaign effort?

TUCKER: I think it made quite a contribution. Again, I have to go back and look at the vote in the -- and that's the only way that you can judge it -- is to go back and look at the vote in the larger cities: Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia. You'll find that the majority of the people and the majority of whom might be -- not the majority, but a large segment of them are -- Negroes, and you'll find that the Negroes probably voted for him three to one. And all of those are urban areas. So

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based on that, I think, certainly that we were successful. And you can't leave out Louis Martin, either. He did an excellent job in getting the story of Kennedy about. Just did a wonderful job.

STEWART: Were you at all fearful during the campaign that Kennedy was going beyond what could possibly be delivered? I'm thinking specifically they had a constitutional rights convention. I believe it was called, in New York, in which certain resolutions were adopted that went even beyond the Democratic platform of that year. Were you at all fearful that people would...

TUCKER: I'm not familiar with what you're saying. I was never fearful of the people because -- that the people would feel that he was going beyond reality in this, if that's what you're suggesting -- because after I got to talking with these people in the intimate groups I came out feeling very satisfied with the way they received what I had to say at that

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time. So I didn't -- it's the strangest thing in the world that even though the man, from a proverbial point of view, squeaked through with a hundred thousand votes, I have never felt any pessimism in my entire association with him. I never dreamed that it would be as close as it was. I think most of the people in the campaign walked off feeling the same way. So they were getting their message across, there's no doubt about it, and we were getting our message across.

STEWART: What was your reaction to the news soon after the inauguration that there wouldn't be any civil rights legislation, at least in 1961? Did you feel a let down, as many people did?

TUCKER: No, because I was sure that based on executive level that -- or executive decision, rather -- that he would do what he could in that capacity rather than be concerned about the Congress which could debate this thing over and over and over

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and delay it; whereby the width of a pen, after he had felt out the feeling of the country on various points, he could determine what the Congress would take months to do. So I thought -- because this was because of the faith that I had in the way I'm sure that he would have conducted himself, and it turned out that way. He was a cautious man -- there's no doubt

about that -- in decisions of that nature, but, as I say, you can't argue with success. He made the determinations, and they turned out to be rainbows.

STEWART: One other question about the campaign. Were you at all involved in any efforts to get open endorsements from Martin Luther King or other civil rights leaders?

TUCKER: Not personally. When I say not personally I know that the section that we were involved in was attempting to do that, not so much -- well, I guess we were trying to do it openly because we had asked for or arranged appointments

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for Roy Wilkins to have a private talk with him. We arranged for Whitney Young to have a private talk with him. Martin Luther King, even Jim Farmer [James Farmer], was at that time who was with CORE [Congress on Racial Equality], and each of them had a private conference with him. So in that sense, yes, we were trying to get endorsements, even to the extent of just getting their sympathy even if they couldn't through their organizations publicly officially endorse him.

STEWART: Was this effort generally successful?

TUCKER: Again, you have to look back and see what has happened.

STEWART: No, I mean in terms of these particular individuals you mentioned.

TUCKER: Yes, I'd say successful. Again, I'm saying what has happened,

STEWART: No, I mean in terms of these particular individuals you mentioned.

TUCKER: Yes, I'd say successful. Again, I'm saying what has happened, how strongly they took to his side when he became president, actually, all the way down the line.

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STEWART: You say you had absolutely no intention of joining the Kennedy Administration. Did you ever weaken in this determination not to go to Washington with the Administration? Or were you ever tempted to go?

TUCKER: Yes, I was on two or three occasions. In fact, he sent me over to Gabon in Africa for the express purpose of seeing how I liked the country with the

hope.... and at that time the country named -- I was supposed to become ambassador to Tanganyika, which has since become Tanzania, although I didn't see that country when I was over there. It was generally understood that this was not only an honor to be representing the President, but it was a sort of a test case to see if he could involve me in the Administration. And I had offers of going into the Justice Department, I suppose as one of the Assistant Attorney Generals or something like that. But I felt that I didn't want to do it. Wasn't persuaded even after he died they have

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been trying to get me to come to Washington, but I won't go.

STEWART: You mentioned your trip to Gabon, was it for the independence festivities?

TUCKER: That's right.

STEWART: Did you meet with the President either before or after that trip or with anyone in the White House?

TUCKER: That was funny. My daughter had just gotten married, and we were sitting out on the patio relaxing. Father was worrying about paying the bills and so forth. And someone yelled out the back door, "The President is on the phone." Of course, we all took it as a joke, and nobody paid any attention to it, and even with a lot of persuasion, we just sat there and laughed at the situation. However, when I did finally decide to get up to go, we lost the connection. So I picked up the phone and called Ralph Dungan. And he said, "Yes, the President had to go, he couldn't wait for you."

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You see this was on a Monday....

[BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE]

TUCKER: ... this way as far as I'm concerned. And he said, "Can you go to Gabon?" And that's how that happened.

STEWART: Who else was in? There were three people that went, weren't there?

TUCKER: Yes. A man with whom I've maintained a very fond friendship ever since then -- I got a letter from him today -- Charlie Engelhard [Charles W. Engelhard Jr.] from New Jersey and his wife. The three of us went.

STEWART: I see. Were you as impressed...

TUCKER: He and I were the official representatives. Jane just went to accompany him, really.

STEWART: Were you as impressed as most people were with the affinity that many African leaders had with President Kennedy? Or was it evident at that time? This was in August of 1961, I believe.

TUCKER: Yes. I didn't discuss the President at that time at any great length with the President there. I was more concerned with the man in

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the street. And using Mrs. Engelhard as an interpreter, I spent most of my time there around the wharf and in the city and villages talking to the people about, not so much about the personality but about the country of America. I know that we did spend some time at President M'bah [Leon M'bah] on several occasions, but that type of discussion never came up. But as far as personalities were concerned we did talk about the relative worth of the country and what it could do for Gabon which at that time had just been separated from France for a year. And I think that we were successful in persuading Sarge to get the Peace Corps started over there. They seemed to be receptive to that sort of thing, so I would suppose they were not so much -- they weren't in a frame of mind to criticize because they knew that they were going to have to get some help from us. So I would say that even if they had some criticism of either the country or the personalities in it, they reserved them because they wanted help.

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They finally got it.

STEWART: You say you did talk to the President on your return about the trip?

STEWART: I sent him a written report and he replied, but I didn't talk with him personally. No. I talked with Ralph Dungan and -- oh I forget, Dave, not Dave -- Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], people like that.

STEWART: From a public relations viewpoint, do you feel that the Administration erred in saying that no legislation was needed when, in fact, the reason was that none could get passed? This was during the first two and a half years of the Administration.

TUCKER: No, I don't think so. I think that what he had had in the -- maybe idealistically -- what he had in the back of his mind that he could help solve the situation by

executive order and intended to do so, and... Certainly there was a need, but it didn't have to be done by legislation, let's put it that way. It could be done by executive order, and he thought that was the

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most expeditious way. I'm convinced that he believed that people should be given an opportunity regardless of the accident of birth, and I think he wanted to make an honest try of that first. As he started making his selections for appointments to various positions throughout the country I think he made it obvious that what he intended to do was to pick qualified people and be color blind in a sense, in the hope that this would alleviate the necessity for legislation which could be bogged down for any number of reasons over a long period of time, and that if he gave these people an opportunity in some of these sensitive positions that there would be an awakening that these people were capable and that it would be easier then to try then to move along with some progressive legislation. He never discussed this with me personally, but I think that's what he thought, as I looked around and see where he put these people. United States District

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Court Judge -- we never had any Negro judges. Ambassadors to a country other than a black country. I'm talking about Wharton [Clifton R. Wharton], whose son my daughter married. I'm talking about Carl Rowan in the information agency. You probably could go down the line. Frank Reeves in the White House in a position other than such as Ed Morrow [Everett Frederic Morrow] -- when he was down there specifically as a Negro to handle Negro problems. But Frank was a White House assistant, even though it didn't last very long. But he wasn't relegated to the position of handling only Negro problems. So I think that he said, "If I can put these people into these sensitive positions, I think..." Well, didn't he appoint Luke Moore as United States Marshal, or was it Deputy Marshal, in Washington? I'm not sure now whether Johnson elevated him, but I'm.... The fellow that just took Hoffa [James R. Hoffa] to jail.

STEWART: Oh yes, yes.

TUCKER: Luke Moore, United States Marshal. I think that

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he appointed him. And he put these people in these sensitive positions and said, "Now look at them and see how they behave. This will give me an opportunity now; it'll make the legislation that I want to offer a little easier."

STEWART: Were you still active in the NAACP during this period?

TUCKER: I have been active in the NAACP as long as I can remember. And I'm still a member of the...

STEWART: Were you president...

TUCKER: No, I wasn't president then. I retired from that, that's quite a responsibility. I was president of the NAACP until 1960. Now I'm just a member, and they call me an elder statesmen, now that I'm getting older.

STEWART: Well, one final question. Do you recall defending the President's or the Administration's position on the need for legislation, defending it from...

TUCKER: Just as I have explained it to you just now. In that same manner, yet.

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STEWART: Did you have any other contacts socially with the President?

TUCKER: Well, he's been to my home.

STEWART: I mean during the Presidential year.

TUCKER: Well, I was invited to the White House or to White House receptions on one or two occasions. Of course, there were hundreds of other people there. Mrs. Tucker danced with him, not since he's been President, of course. But that's been the extent of it on the social level. I never considered myself a social friend of his. I couldn't possibly. But I think I can consider him a friend. A political ally, if you want to put it that way, but I think he was a friend of mine. It was quite a wonderful feeling to be able to -- I don't know whether the number's still there or not, National 8-4141, I think it was -- and ask for the President, and not be pushed around. I'd pick up the phone and call. It's quite a feeling. Few people in this country enjoy it, I suppose.

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STEWART: Did you talk to him on many occasions?

TUCKER: I would say several. It all depends on what you mean by "many." But on enough occasions. I certainly didn't make any frivolous calls. Anytime I called it was for a purpose. Or many times when he didn't have an opportunity or he wanted some information or something from me, he may not have called himself, but I would get a call from Kenny or Dave Powers or Ralph or somebody who was down there. It was just like getting a call from him. You can't expect him to; when you become President you get away from the people; you don't belong to anybody anymore, really.

STEWART: Okay. Is there anything you want to say in conclusion or before we shut this off?

TUCKER: No. I don't know what else to say, John. I can say that, no there's nothing else to say. Just a wonderful thing to me to think that I did have the opportunity to know him personally and be friendly and to work with

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him and to help him on the way, even though it was rough going at first. It ended up beautifully, and certainly we're all pleased. I can remember the night of the election we were down at Hyannis waiting for those returns to come in.

STEWART: Oh, were you?

TUCKER: Yes. And that was quite an experience in itself just see the operation. And we flew on the *Caroline* -- that was the last few days of the campaign -- to see what the New Englanders felt about him. It was just an experience that I wouldn't want to trade with anything I've ever done.

STEWART: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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