

Jonathan B. Bingham, Oral History Interview – 10/21/1965
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Biographical Note

Bingham, U.S. representative to the United Nations Trusteeship Council from 1961-1962 and to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) from 1962-1963, discusses his interactions with John F. Kennedy (JFK) before and during the presidency, and JFK's relationship with Adlai E. Stevenson, among other issues.

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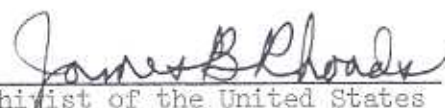
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Jonathan B. Bingham

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Oral History Interview

with

Jonathan B. Bingham

October 21, 1965
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let me ask you when you first met John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy].

BINGHAM: My first meeting with John Kennedy, as far as I can recall, was at a luncheon in Chicago at a hotel during the 1956 Convention. My wife [June R. Bingham] and I were there, and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], and, I believe, the Stewart Alsops [Patricia Alsop; Stewart Alsop]. I don't have any very clear impression of that luncheon.

[-1-]

Kennedy had not yet launched his effort to obtain the vice presidential nomination. He seemed quite relaxed, and I don't recall any great signs of tension. My wife recalls that Kennedy questioned her closely on mental health matters, on which she had written pamphlets and a book. As she puts it, "I felt that my mind was being given a vacuum cleaning."

MORRISSEY: Were you involved in any way in the contest between Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] and Kennedy for that vice presidential nomination?

BINGHAM: Not particularly, no. I was at that time on Governor Harriman's

[William Averell Harriman] staff as Secretary to the Governor. I went to the Convention and worked in Harriman's headquarters in his effort to obtain the presidential nomination.

[-2-]

When that failed, I did not become further involved in the Convention.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall John Kennedy commenting on the fact that he thought Mr. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] had asked him to give the keynote speech as an indication that John Kennedy would probably not be chosen as a vice presidential candidate?

BINGHAM: No, I don't.

MORRISSEY: You don't recall any conversation about that? Let's move on. Did you see him at all between the 1956 Convention and the 1960 Convention?

BINGRAM: I don't believe I did. I had occasional emissaries from the Kennedy camp. One was John Saltonstall [John L. Saltonstall, Jr.] of Boston, asking me in early 1960 if I wouldn't join those who were working for Kennedy's nomination. But I had no direct contact

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with Kennedy himself during that period. The only extended personal contact I ever had with him, was just two days before he was inaugurated. At that time I was invited by Governor Harriman to a small luncheon at Harriman's house in New York City. The other guests were Senator Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], Gaitskell [Hugh Gaitskell], then head of the Labor party in England, and Mike Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal]. Most of the conversation was between Gaitskell and Kennedy. What fascinated me was that Kennedy seemed to forget everything else except this conversation with Gaitskell I'm sure Kennedy had a million things on his mind, but he gave the impression of total concentration on the conversation at hand—as if he wanted to get the maximum out of it and wanted to

[-4-]

learn everything that Gaitskell had to say to him. I also was impressed that day with the fact that he had a very good appetite. It seems to me that he had two helpings of everything.

MORRISSEY: Any other recollections of this dinner party?

BINGHAM: Yes, a little bit of a sidelight on his relation with Harriman. Harriman, as you know, is a little hard of hearing. At this luncheon he made a

mistake at one point; he thought I had said something when Gaitskell had said it, and he snapped at me as he sometimes did. It was embarrassing, in that clearly the mistake was made because he was hard of hearing. Later, I heard from Bill Walton [William Walton] that Kennedy had said to Walton, “if you

[-5-]

want your friend Harriman to have a place in my Administration, tell him to get an earphone.” Harriman promptly did and was wearing one at the time of the post-Inaugural party for the new appointees. My wife, who knows Harriman very well, made a pun appropriate for that occasion when she congratulated him on his “new front” ear.

MORRISSEY: What was your next meeting with the President?

BINGHAM: Well, I saw him in the White House at that party and also from time to time during my period at the United Nations. He appointed me to, first, a position as Representative on the Trusteeship Council and, later, as representative on the Economic and Social Council with the rank of Ambassador—both

[-6-]

of these at the US Mission to the UN. These appointments were made at Stevenson’s recommendation. Kennedy told me later that he had called Charles Buckley [Charles A. Buckley] to find out if the latter had any objection to my appointment. Apparently Buckley did not raise any objection.

I do not know whether Kennedy considered me seriously for any other position, although various people close to him, such as Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] and Bowles [Chester B. Bowles], talked to me about possible other positions, including Director of the Peace Corps or an Ambassadorship. The UN job was what I wanted and I conveyed this information.

President Kennedy regularly invited the General Assembly delegation to the White House to be sworn in.

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This happened on three occasions and he would have a casual word for each of the delegates, in addition to making some general comments about the importance of the UN and of the Assembly session. I would see him occasionally in New York, but these were not very meaningful or lengthy contacts.

At times I communicated indirectly to the President on UN matters. One such communication was a letter I drafted for Ambassador Stevenson’s signature, arguing strenuously that any new atmospheric nuclear explosions not be conducted in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (a recommendation which the President followed, in spite of the fact that some preparations had already been made for tests within

[-8-]

the Trust Territory.) On several occasions I also talked with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] on colonial and African questions arising at the UN. On one occasion, I heard that the President had seen and was upset about a cable from Ambassador Elbrick [Charles Burke Elbrick] in Lisbon, saying that the Portuguese were up in arms about a statement I had allegedly made on TV which was insulting to the Portuguese in connection with the Angola question. I got hold of the transcript of the TV show to prove that I had been severely misquoted. This incident demonstrated the degree to which the President followed day to day events in the foreign field.

In January of 1962 I seriously considered running for Congress against Congressman Charles Buckley in the

[-9-]

primary. I sent word to the President via Arthur Schlesinger that I was intending to do this; that I was not asking his permission because I realized it might embarrass him to give his permission, but I wanted him to know what I was going to do. The word came back from Schlesinger that the President was very opposed to my doing this. He felt very strongly that Mr. Buckley ought to have one more term, which was all Buckley was interested in.

I tried to talk to the President about it, first in person and then on the telephone. I talked to Arthur about this and said I didn't think Kennedy realized the whole situation, for example, that there would be a primary fight against Buckley anyway.

[-10-]

Arthur said that he was sure that Kennedy would be glad to see me and talk about it. Arthur actually arranged a date, and I was to call Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] and confirm the time. Then I got word from Arthur that Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] did not want me to meet with the President; he didn't want the President involved in any way. Then I said to Arthur, "Well, could I at least talk to him on the telephone?" Arthur again, said, "Yes. We'll set it up through Mrs. Lincoln." And again Kenny O' Donnell intervened and prevented the contact. Finally, Arthur said, "That's all that I can do. You'd better talk to Kenny O'Donnell." So, I called O'Donnell, whom I didn't know at all—or maybe

[-11-]

had met casually—and I asked him if I couldn't speak to the President. He argued with me for a bit. I guess I sounded a little insistent, and he said, "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, I'll go in and ask him." Well, apparently (as I heard later from those who were sitting in the room at the time) O'Donnell went into the President's office and said, "This guy Bingham insists that you call him on the telephone and ask him not to run." At that, the President became annoyed and said, in effect "You tell Bingham I don't give a damn what he does: He's on his own." O'Donnell reported the answer to me, and I realized that this was not at all the result that I was looking for. I did, then, decide

[-12-]

to get out of the race and to give a reason for withdrawing from the race such that it did not involve the President, which was what O'Donnell was very anxious that I do, and I called O'Donnell to tell him this.

I tried to send word to the President that I hadn't demanded that he call me or anything like that, but I never knew just how successful I was in getting that word through. Anyway, when I saw him that fall, I mentioned the fact that his friend Buckley had won the primary (he did have one, against Levy [David Levy]). The President grinned and said, "Yes, but this will be his last term." So I felt that a commitment had been made to the President that Mr. Buckley would look for only one more

[-13-]

term. So in 1964, when it turned out Buckley wasn't going to abide by that commitment, I felt free to go ahead and run.

MORRISSEY: At different times we've heard different accounts of the relationship between Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Stevenson; that it was good, that it was not good. What's your impression of the state of their relationship?

BINGHAM: I don't think it was ever an easy relationship. I don't know much about it from the Kennedy side; I do feel this way—that it improved after the Bay of Pigs for two reasons. I think from Kennedy's point of view he very much appreciated the fact that Stevenson had been such a good soldier in that unfortunate episode and had never blamed Kennedy for anything or publicly complained that he was

[-14-]

allowed to make false statements at the UN. At the same time I think from a human point of view, Stevenson felt more kindly toward Kennedy because here was a failure. Up until then Kennedy had had nothing but success. I think it was always hard for Stevenson to accept the fact that this relatively young man had come in and passed him on the road and had achieved the presidency and then had not appointed him as Secretary of State. I think, just humanly, when this young President, for whom everything seemed to have gone right, had a real failure, Stevenson felt more kindly toward him.

MORRISSEY: How strongly did Mr. Stevenson want the Secretaryship of State?

BINGHAM: He never discussed it with me. I

[-15-]

don't know, but I assumed he wanted it and expected it. I know he was not happy about the appointment to the UN. He felt that it was an impossible assignment, as he told me in December of 1960 when I was discussing the possibility of my going with him. I think in the end he liked the job a lot better than he thought he was going to.

Stevenson had a trick of almost never referring to the President—at least in a small group—as the President. He always referred to him as “Kennedy.” But I'm not sure that that wasn't just his manner. He did the same with Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. I don't think there was any significance in that.

MORRISSEY: Is there anything, else you would like to put on the record?

[-16-]

BINGHAM: I don't think so. Thank you.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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