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White, Lee C.; Legislative assistant to John F. Kennedy (1954-1957); assistant to Joseph P. Kennedy, member of the Hoover Commission (1954-1955); Counsel, Small Business Committee, Senate (1957-1958); Assistant Special Counsel to the President (1961-1963). White discusses his work as a legislative assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy [JFK], his work as an administrative assistant to Senator John Sherman Cooper, and begins to discuss his role in the Kennedy Administration, among other issues.

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Lee C. White – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

LEE C. WHITE

May 25, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Milton Gwirtzman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GWIRTZMAN: Mr. White, can you remember your first meeting with the then Senator Kennedy and when it took place?

WHITE: Yes, in May or June of 1953. Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], who was a classmate and a good friend of mine from Nebraska, wrote me a letter indicating that there was a possibility that the Senator would add someone to his staff, suggested that I stop in Washington and meet with Senator Kennedy.

GWIRTZMAN: Where were you at that time and what were you doing?

WHITE: I was working for the Division of Law at TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] in Knoxville, Tennessee. I

came to Washington and met with the Senator. This was, as I say, in May or June. It was my first meeting with him.

GWIRTZMAN: In his office?

WHITE: In his office, Room 362 in the Senate Office Building, a room that became fairly famous in the years to come. He was, of course, as youthful as we had been led to believe in Tennessee from reading the newspapers. He was a little bit disorganized in the sense that his suit was rumpled and I recall that he was not wearing any trousers. Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn Lincoln] was trying to get some ink out of his trousers that he had spilled. He was going someplace or another and he just looked a mess. But he took Sorensen and me to lunch in the Capitol in the senators' dining room. Ted told me later that this was fairly unusual. He didn't frequently have lunch with staff members. In fact, as Ted thought about it, he couldn't recall an earlier time when that had happened. The interview was not a very exhaustive or extensive one in the sense that

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he was interested particularly in knowing what I had been doing or what my background was. I think he was attempting more than anything else just to get a feel for the personalities that were involved and whether it would work. He told me rather candidly and straightforwardly that there wasn't anything personal about it but he thought he'd hire somebody from Massachusetts. Sorensen was from Nebraska and he thought that he ought to be able to find somebody from the state.

GWIRTZMAN: Ted Sorensen was his only legislative fellow at that time.

WHITE: Well, he was in a period of transition. Langdon Marvin was on his way out. As you know, Langdon was there initially with Ted. And, of course, Ted Reardon [Timothy Reardon] was and continued as Administrative Assistant. The Senator got fairly well occupied during the late summer and the early fall with his wedding and wrote Ted from Mexico saying, "Did you ever tell that guy from Tennessee to come

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and join the staff?"

GWIRTZMAN: When you left him, he…

WHITE: He said, you know, that he just plain was going to look for somebody in Massachusetts, and I couldn't quarrel with that decision.

GWIRTZMAN: So you went back to Knoxville?

WHITE: I went back to Tennessee and resumed my old job. Ted called me one day and said that he'd had this communication from the Senator and

was I still interested? I said, "Yes, I was." He said, "Well, it looks like you've got a job if you can be here in January." And that's about the way it went. It was that casual.

GWIRTZMAN: When you first started working, that would be in January 1954, did he sketch out any areas of assignments for you, or were you just supposed to help out with whatever…

WHITE: I think it was clearly understood among the Senator, Ted, and myself that I would work in the legislative area and with Ted. There was more than one person

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could properly do and do well. And between us, Ted obviously was the one who would work on the more important areas, but those that remained were to my likes rather interesting and exciting too. I never once regretted going there.

GWIRTZMAN: Can you remember the first project in which you had a personal relationship with him?

WHITE: Yes, it was S.2802. This was the famous Kennedy-Saltonstall or Saltonstall-Kennedy Fishing Research Bill. There used to be a little struggle, you know, over who got the name there. And as in so many of the other bills that were introduced jointly by the two senators from Massachusetts the idea sprang from the Kennedy end of the operation, but because Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] was senior, and at that time the Congress was controlled by the Republicans, they turned out to be Saltonstall-Kennedy bills. This particular one was not a very major bill, but because it was the first one I worked on it was pretty major as far as I was concerned. What

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it meant was working together with not only the New England senators but all of the coastal senators; Magnuson [Warren G. Magnuson] and Jackson [Henry M. Jackson] in the far West, and even Senator Butler [John Marshall Butler] in Maryland, and so on around the line. This was one of the items that had appeared in the Kennedy New England diagnosis and analysis that had taken place in May the year before. As you recall, those were the three speeches, the maiden speeches that constituted his attack on the New England problems, in particular in Massachusetts. The Senator was pretty full of the subject. He knew exactly what was going on, and I recall that I got so excited that first day I had a cup of coffee and I spilled it all over my suit. And I came to the floor of the Senate and he looked at me and said, "What the hell happened to you?" And I said, "Well, I got so excited coming over here for the first time that I spilled coffee all over." He said, "You look like a tramp." He didn't look so good himself,

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you know. He said, "All right, sit down." So I did, and I didn't seem to add much, but I didn't district much either. He was really quite full of the legislation. It wasn't, as I say, very consequential, and yet he had done his homework. He had mastered it and there wasn't any question that was asked he couldn't answer.

GWIRTZMAN: This was during the floor passage?

WHITE: During the floor passage, and it sailed through with practically -- I think a voice vote.

GWIRTZMAN: Now, one of the major assignments that you had at that time was in connection with his work on the Hoover Commission recommendations, wasn't it?

WHITE: Yes. In November '54 when the President's back had been acting up and giving him a very bad time, he had already either left for his operation in New York or was convalescing in Florida. The Army-McCarthy special session of the Senate was then underway. The Senator's father was a member of the Hoover Commission and Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] had left to go over and take the job at the Committee with

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McClellan [John D. McClellan] who was then the minority member, minority ranking member.

GWIRTZMAN: Bobby had left the Hoover Commission?

WHITE: He had been with his father at the Hoover Commission but was just in the process of leaving. And the Ambassador called the Senator and said that he needed somebody to help him out during this brief period and would I be -- well, you know, did he have any suggestions? The Senator said, well, his office was going to be limping along during his convalescence and that there wasn't a hell of a lot for me to do and if he thought I could do the trick, why didn't I go over? So I was, in effect, lent to the Ambassador from November '54 through June '55 when the Commission ended its work. I had a chance therefore to go through and watch the evolution of the Commission's recommendations. And then when I returned to the Senator's office in about either late June or early July of '55, it was fairly easy to go through and pick out some of the better recommendations and to

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urge the Senator to give some attention to them, first of all, as a senator who was interested in them, and second of all as Chairman of the Reorganization Subcommittee of the Government Operations Committee in the Senate.

GWIRTZMAN: So that it was logical that if recommendations were going to be put through the Senate he would be -- his would be the Committee through which they would go?

WHITE: Well, many of them would go through his Committee, but many specific recommendations were so set up that other legislative committees had jurisdiction.

GWIRTZMAN: Would you say that if his father had not been on the committee and if you had not been lent to the committee that he may not have been the primary Senate proponent of the Hoover Commission recommendations?

WHITE: Well, I would say his role as that particular subcommittee chairman would have brought quite a few of them to his attention. One of the most important

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from the Senator's point of view -- it never turned out to have much merit to it -- was one recommendation that there be an administrative vice president. This would have gone to his subcommittee regardless of whether he had any interest in it, regardless of whether his father had served on the Hoover Commission or whether anyone on his staff had any familiarity with it, simply because the substantive content would have given it to his subcommittee for consideration.

GWIRTZMAN: Did he favor that recommendation?

WHITE: I don't know that he ever really favored it but he thought it was worth looking at, and it had some extra appeal in the sense that he thought that he could secure testimony from the two former living presidents, and Mr. Hoover [Herbert Hoover] did, in fact, come to the hearings scheduled by the little subcommittee that Senator Kennedy headed. The hearing was held in the Caucus Room which was, I think, the first time that he had ever had any real role there and he was rather

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pleased with that physical assignment. But Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman] reluctantly declined the opportunity to testify. I think, first of all, he wasn't too hot on the idea, and second of all, he was just adjusting to being a former President and was fearful that if he said yes, they'd have him up there for every other damn bill that came along, and as a consequence he said no. But even with only Mr. Hoover, one of the former presidents, it was pretty exciting stuff and Senator Kennedy acquitted himself quite well and asked all the right

questions. Obviously he was feeling pretty good being the chairman of that particular little hearing, but nothing ever came of the…

GWIRTZMAN: As far as you ever know did he ever make any reference during his presidency to his experience with consideration to the possibility of an administrative vice president?

WHITE: I never heard him mention it once. I think that was one of those little incidents that is passed.

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It just never went anywhere, although Mr. Hoover was obviously very pleased that they were giving some attention to the Commission's recommendations.

GWIRTZMAN: When his committee reported out some recommendations, they were then reported out of the full committee and went to the floor. That was his first opportunity to be the floor leader for relatively complex legislation, wasn't it?

WHITE: I can't remember for sure which ones emerged and the way the timing went. It seems to me that the first one that he handled on the floor of any complexity that I was aware of -- and of course Ted's recollection would be worth consulting on this if it's important -- was the legislation to increase the retirement benefits for legislative employees. This was not a Hoover Commission recommendation. It was a recommendation that had a sort of double genesis. It arose, in the minds of some of the House members who felt that they couldn't quite vote themselves a pay raise, but they ought to at

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least sweeten up their retirement benefits, and also in the minds of some of the older and senior congressional committee staff people who figured that they ought to have a little extra assistance in their old age. So a fairly sweet retirement program for legislative employees was offered and attached to it was a few increases in benefits for members of Congress. This passed unanimously in the House and came over to the Senate committee and it was assigned to Kennedy's subcommittee, a fairly typical action even though it was very early. He and Ted Sorensen discussed it, I was in it briefly, and decided that maybe we ought to learn more about this. So he had a fellow by the name of Myers [Robert J. Myers] from the Social Security Administration and a fellow by the name of Irons [Warren B. Irons] from the Civil Service retirement program come over and begin to explain to the Senator all of the ramifications about these annuities, whether they were being satisfactorily paid for by the members and what

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amounted to subsidy in it, and so forth. In short, he became as familiar as anyone in the government with the way the retirement programs in the government operate in order for him to have some feel for what this legislation was all about. And he concluded that it was highway robbery, just a raid. He reached this conclusion and then he had a problem of what the hell to do with it. He began to let the word out that this thing really wasn't set up in a fashion that he could personally approve it, and word got back to the House and put him in a terribly tough spot because a lot of his old House buddies said to him, "Well, it's great for you to take this kind of position but, God, not all of us are millionaires. We can't raise our own salaries, so for God's sakes let's do a little bit for our families and jack up this retirement program." Well, he was in a tough spot but I think decided that he couldn't in good conscience let it go. And as a consequence the bill was altered drastically; not all of the subsidy was squeezed

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out of it, but enough to have changed it considerably. Sort of as a footnote, the Congress within less than a year had voted itself a $10,000 pay increase anyhow, so those poor guys didn't have to really suffer.

But there was an interesting little experience in handling of this. The guy at the Senate Committee, Walter Reynolds [Walter L. Reynolds], who is still there, chief clerk, had the biggest shouting match with the United States Senate I've ever seen take place with a staff member on the other side. Kennedy was absolutely livid. He chewed up Walter in little pieces and spit him out. Walter had been there such a long time he'd forgotten that he wasn't a senator, and particularly junior senators he had the tendency to push around. And one time he pushed Senator Kennedy just a little too far and there was the biggest damn shouting match you've ever seen.

GWIRTZMAN: The way he approached this bill and looked in every ramification of it, in your opinion, was an early indication of the way that he approached legislation

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when he was…

WHITE: Well, yes. There was another manifestation of his almost consuming desire never to go out anywhere unprepared. When he went on the floor to handle that bill, as I say, I think he knew as much about all of the retirement systems and the way they operated that there wasn't anyone who could give him a question -- almost the identical type of searching inquiry and preparation took place in his handling of the efforts to change the way the electoral college operated. There he was not a committee or a subcommittee chairman. He was just one guy from the Northeast with a deep interest in the way efforts were being made to change the electoral college.

GWIRTZMAN: These were the Mundt [Karl E. Mundt] amendments?

WHITE: The Mundt amendments, that's right. He had more damn statistics and tables and figures and things worked out as to the way they would be, in addition to having such a good grasp of the philosophy. It

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just wasn't the case of numbers.

GWIRTZMAN: When you say he had -- what was his approach? Was it to let a staff member do the basic research and then look at it very carefully and ask questions and commit it to memory, or did he sometimes go and look into some of the primary sources himself?

WHITE: Well, I think basically it was a reliance on staff, but not exclusively. In other words, there were times when he wanted to see for himself where these figures came from and how they were put together, or he would look at something and say, "Well, yes, we've done it this way, let's do it another way in addition."

GWIRTZMAN: When he went on the floor he was on his own.

WHITE: When he was on the floor he would have sitting next to him an assistant or on occasion two, who might be able to hand him some information or might even be able to answer a question that hadn't occurred to him. But I don't recall him asking for any assistance. He was pretty much in control of the situation by the time he actually

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got on the floor. Even in committee meetings -- and my primary concern was in the Government Operations Committee, and Ted followed more closely the Labor and Public Welfare Committee responsibilities -- but even there, when he went into a committee meeting on a committee that didn't meet more than oh, maybe once a month except toward the end of the session, he had done his homework even if it meant taking a look at some inconsequential little legislation to authorize the government to give a public square to Cherrystone, Oregon. He had looked at it and he has something from somebody on his staff indicating whether it was important and it so, whether he ought to take a look at it. It made a difference because most of his colleagues did not go through this preparation and a guy who is a little bit prepared is a hell of a lot better than a guy who isn't prepared at all.

GWIRTZMAN: You were still on the staff when he returned into active senate work from his recuperation, weren't you?

WHITE: Yes, I had finished at the Hoover Commission and returned there.

GWIRTZMAN: Did you notice any change in his approach to life, philosophy or any changes that you could attribute to that experience?

WHITE: That's an interesting question. No, I'd say that he struck me as about the same guy who went, frankly.

GWIRTZMAN: Isn't that when some of the use of quotations in speeches and the beginning of the strain erudition began? This has been sometimes attributed to the fact that he was able to do a great deal of reading while he was convalescing, in history and literature and politics.

WHITE: Well, I don't know. I haven't closely enough looked at the before and after material to see whether there's any great turning, but I recall distinctly before then one of the exciting votes in 1954 was on the Bricker [John W. Bricker] Amendment. In fact one of the earliest times that the President spoke was

on the Bricker Amendment. He marshalled his arguments, and incidentally he did a remarkably good job in the sense that for a highly junior senator on an issue that was dominant and a key one for a number of weeks his arguments were referred to in the editorial in the *New York Times*. And in those days, my God, that was the greatest thing in the world, you know, to think that little old Senator Kennedy was appearing in the *New York Times*. But the very end of his thesis which was -- he was looking for a quote that fit it. And he came up with one and he said to Sorensen, "There's an old quote. Some old Frenchman once said, 'When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change'." He said, "I want you to call up the library and find out who said that." So he called up the library and they scrounged around for four or five hours, came back and said, "Nobody said that." So he went back to the Senator. He said, "The hell they didn't. I remember it." So he

called back again.

GWIRTZMAN: Did he say from where?

WHITE: Yes, he said he thought it was some French statesman. So that's who he had him looking for, a French statesman. The word came back, they had looked again and they had found it and it wasn't a French statesman at all, it was an English statesman. But he'd remembered the quote exactly right

and it was right smack on target and was the last thing in that Bricker Amendment speech. I know that occurred before the operation.

GWIRTZMAN: He was interested. Well, when he did come back, what major projects were you working on? You were with him from when he came back to when you left…

WHITE: Till the end of '56, or really January of '57. One project, and I think this occurred in '54, was his taking up, together with then Congressman Pete Williams, who's now a Senator from New Jersey, a bill to provide assistance to the industries and the companies and the individuals that were adversely

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affected by our nation's trade policy. The idea was mentioned in the Randall Report [Clarence B. Randall].

GWIRTZMAN: This is the Clarence Randall Report that was prepared for President Eisenhower?

WHITE: Clarence Randall Report, yes. And as I recall that was released in the summer or the early fall of 1954 in conjunction with the effort to extend the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act. There was a footnote in which David McDonald [David J. McDonald] of the steel workers suggested there was some obligation on the part of the federal government to assist people who are hurt because it's, after all, it's a result of national policy that they are being hurt if tariffs are to be lowered. It's a pretty good theme, and I know that Stan Ruttenberg [Stanley H. Ruttenberg] of the economic department of AFL-CIO was working with the Senator and with Congressman Williams. In any event, they put this bill together and it was basically, as I saw it, what he Senator said, his desire to provide relief

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and assistance to those industries in New England that believe that they were suffering and indeed were suffering to some extent from imports.

GWIRTZMAN: These would be the wool, the textiles…

WHITE: The textiles were of course top among them, but there were others too, the watch industry was up there, the bicycles, the shoes, all of the industries. His approach -- it is interesting how each of these two people billed the same piece of legislation that they sponsored jointly. Kennedy billed it for Massachusetts consumption as a divide to provide assistance to those who were injured. Williams, on the other hand, from a very international trade minded district in northern New

Jersey, billed it as a device to encourage or to permit freer trade. They were both right, but each looked at it from his own political point of view at home. In that effort it was possible to see the way the Senator worked with senior members of the Senate. He never seemed to get into the problem that some of the junior

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senators did in the sunset hat he took the older members by storm or forgot about them. In this particular case he wanted to have Senate Republican sponsorship if he could and so he -- that was my first introduction to John Sherman Cooper. He wanted Cooper to co-sponsor the bill with him. Poor old Senator Cooper spent two or three weeks agonizing over whether he should or he shouldn't. He liked the idea but finally he decided not to do it whereupon Kennedy just introduced it on his own, didn't have any Senate Republican co-sponsorship.

GWIRTZMAN: Did Senator Kennedy talk to Senator Cooper personally on this a number of times?

WHITE: Interminably, and then we did at the staff level. But this, I think, was one of the first contacts that these two people had and they turned out subsequently to be -- a phenomenal friendship developed between these two.

GWIRTZMAN: Did he show a great awareness that he was dealing with an older man?

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WHITE: Yes, he, I'd say, played him just right even though he didn't land Senator Cooper on his bill, and it would have been helpful to do so. But this ability to work with older people, and without creating the same sort of resentment that, for example, Senator Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] generated when his own ambitions were such that he didn't quite work closely enough with the people who were there and got a lot of them annoyed with him. Out of these Hoover Commission recommendations there was one to create a national library of medicine. Of all of them in that whole series of reports this one, in my view, was the most delightful and the best one from every regard. It cost very little money. It took care of an existing problem. The Defense Department had, surprisingly enough, through the ingenuity of one medical librarian and medical officer, had amassed the best collection of medical literature in the United States in one library. But the damn library was falling apart. It was down on Independence Avenue

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about Third, just below the old Smithsonian Building there. So the Hoover Commission recommended that there be a national library of medicine and that this body of literature constitute the nucleus, put in up to date facilities and keep it and transfer it from the Defense Department to a truly national medical library. Senator Kennedy said that was great and so I

said, “Fine, I’ve got a bill all ready, a very simple bill to create the library.” He said, “I’ll tell you, I don’t think this bill is going to go anywhere if I introduce it.” He said, “Give me a copy of this draft, and I’ll go talk to Senator Hill [Lister Hill]” Senator Hill, who was the chairman of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee, and of course very sensitive and sympathetic to medical problems. He said, “Well, Jack, that’s great.”

GWIRTZMAN: Did you go with him to this?

WHITE: No, I think I just handed him the draft and he said…

GWIRTZMAN: Then you heard about it afterwards.

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WHITE: … “I’ll see him on the floor and I’ll talk to him.” He carried it around in his pocket for a day or two and he came back one day and said, “Senator Hill said he’d be glad to go on this. Let’s call this a Hill-Kennedy bill.” He said, “I think it will really go. We’ll get together with Jack Forsythe and his staff,” which happened.

GWIRTZMAN: Jack Forsythe being the chief counsel of the Senate Labor COmmittee of which Senator Hill was the chairman at that time.

WHITE: That’s right. He was then and I think still is. This bill was the greatest bill of all time. The only fly in the ointment was a few people including a surprising one, a guy by the name of Douglas [Paul H. Douglas] from the state of Illinois wanted to introduce a little amendment to the bill creating a national Library of Congress. He wanted to add just two words to it at the end: “in Illinois.” We had a hell of a time getting that out and he had to work with us, and finally everybody decided it ought to be in the nation’s capitol. It went through

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and for a brief period of time there the American Medical Association thought that Senator Kenendy was one of the two greatest guys in the world, the other being Senator Hill. It wasn’t until recent days, you know, that that wore off. But for a brief period there he was…

GWIRTZMAN: Following up on your observations on his relations with other senators, it has often been said that Senator Kennedy was pretty much a loner in the Senate, at least in personal relationships, if not necessarily in how he worked on projects. Do you find this to be true; did he have any close friends that you saw among the senators or was he a loner in that sense?

WHITE: That’s pretty tough without any references for comparison but…

GWIRTZMAN: Well, for example, did he usually eat lunch in his office or did he go and mingle with the other senators?

WHITE: Well, I think more often than not he either ate lunch at home if he could get away or he did eat

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lunch in his office when he wasn't moving too easily. But he did have friends among the Senate group. George Smathers, whose office is right around the corner, would stop in and watch the World Series for example, and a lot of joshing went on back and forth. I'd frequently see him with Senator Jackson. And on the floor of the Senate clustered around that back row on the Democratic side there were a lot of his people who had been elected to the Senate at the same time. He was not aloof in the sense that he would sit at his desk and pour over the *Congressional Record* without any comradery. He was a good one for banter and joking and jesting. But as far as his after hours conduct goes, I can't say for sure although I suspect he had quite a bit to do with some of his contemporaries.

GWIRTZMAN: There's one other legislative project that I wanted to ask you about. As I remember the first depressed areas legislation that Senator Douglas started was '55, wasn't it?

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WHITE: Yes, '55 or…

GWIRTZMAN: Did Senator Kennedy show any interest up until the time you left his staff in depressed areas? Could you tell me something about that?

WHITE: Oh, yes. He obviously had to be interested in it as a result of the movement of a lot of these textile mills from the state of Massachusetts out to elsewhere in the country, particularly the South. And he had plenty of reason to be concerned with the way that these problems were handled, and I remember a concern with the defense and manpower policy number 4 which indicated was the one that would have given preference in the award of government contracts to areas that were hard hit. But he worked with Senator Douglas. Senator Douglas, as you may recall, was on both the Labor Committee and the Banking and Currency Committee and could have had the bill referred to either one. He had it referred to the Labor Committee where he had a subcommittee that he chaired. And low and behold he was offered a chance to go on the Finance

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Committee and accepted, but in so doing had to get off of the Labor Committee which meant he almost abandoned control of it and thereby had to find somebody on the committee to

handle the bill. He asked Senator Kennedy who was on the committee to handle it. So he actually handled the bill in subcommittee.

GWIRTZMAN: In 195-....

WHITE: '55. There was a cute little story that happened there. Senator Flanders [Ralph E. Flanders] of Vermont was not a member of the committee but he was interested in it because all these New Englanders were, and he came to the committee, subcommittee meeting and he spent 45 minutes there and he said, "Pardon me, Mr. Chairman, but I've got to go to another meeting that's been scheduled for a long time. I appreciate your letting me sit here. I have one further request though. If you don't mind I'd like to have my assistant sit in here and report to me what takes place and observe." Senator Kennedy started to nod and Flanders, who was

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the Casey Stengel of the Senate, said, "My assistant here is um, is uh -- well, to tell you the truth I can never remember whether his name is Hayward Carlton or Carlton Hayward." Kennedy came back without batting an eyelash and said, "Senator, both Mr. Hayward and Mr. Carlton can remain."

GWIRTZMAN: The subcommittee reported out a bill in '56, didn't it?

WHITE: Yes, and not only the subcommittee, but the full committee reported out and it was passed by the Senate and it was in the last days of the session. The bill went over to the House and the House committee had acted, but the Rules Committee had not acted, had not given it a rule and Senator Kennedy was following this…

[END TAPE I, BEGIN TAPE II]

...thing inch by inch and literally hour by hour because the end of the session was so

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imminent. He checked with Speaker Rayburn [Samuel Rayburn] who said that he would be willing to bring it up under a suspension of the rules in this last day or so if he could get a nod from Joe Martin [Joseph W. Martin] who at that time was still the Minority Leader. The President who was of course a fellow Bay Stater with Congressman Martin, called him and Martin said, "Well, you come over to my office and we'll see. I'll have to check with downtown, with the Executive Branch." So Senator Kennedy, with me trailing behind, marched over to Martin's office and he said, "Alright, I'll get you in touch with the Assistant Secretary of Commerce." And for the life of me I can't remember what that guy's name is." But he said, "He's the guy in charge of the program. Now here, you talk to him." The Senator

said, “Well, Mr. Secretary, you’re the one who makes the decisions. Are we going to have a depressed areas bill or not?” The fellow said, “Well, we just can’t go for that bill.” He said,

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“You’re telling me ‘no’ in these last hours?” And he tried every way to persuade the fellow to just let Martin nod his head to Rayburn and the thing would go through. The guy said, “Note,” and the bill died. And it wasn’t until President Kennedy’s Administration that S.1 was enacted. But he played that role in it from the time that Douglas left the committee, the Labor Committee to go on the Finance Committee. He went right smack in it and of course, as I say, it was legitimate and natural and proper for him to.

GWIRTZMAN: Did you go up to Massachusetts with him on many occasions while you were working for him in the Senate?

WHITE: No, never once.

GWIRTZMAN: When did his interest in the vice presidency begin, in 1956 to your observation?

WHITE: Well, it was more or less at least from where I sat, held outside of my surveillance in a sense. I didn’t really realize that he had more than a tiny

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ghost of a chance till a few weeks before when some of the analyses about the advantages of having a Catholic on the ticket were being explored. I really didn’t think when he went to Chicago that he had a ghost of a chance.

GWIRTZMAN: Do you think he did?

WHITE: I don’t think so.

GWIRTZMAN: Since most of his votes didn’t come from the areas with the large Catholic populations.

WHITE: No. I don’t think he believed he had much of a chance either.

GWIRTZMAN: When he returned from the Convention the session was over, wasn’t it?

WHITE: Yes.

GWIRTZMAN: Did you have much contact, see him much that fall?

WHITE: I don't remember what he did. A little bit, but not much. It seemed to me that he went on a trip.

GWIRTZMAN: He campaigned for Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]?

WHITE: Yes, but he also went on a trip as I recall. I think that's when Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] had

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the miscarriage.

GWIRTZMAN: I just wondered whether that experience in '56 had given him the idea that he might have a shot in the future at the presidency, and whether you remember any indications of that?

WHITE: Yes, I think I sense what you're driving at now and I can respond to that. I think it was just as clear as a bell to everyone around the Senator and to him too that he had arrived on the scene…

GWIRTZMAN: … as a national figure…

WHITE: … in a big way. And the way it became obvious was that if all the people who reported to him how many votes they were responsible for his having gotten in the vice presidential run-off had been accurate he would have had more votes than had been cast. In short, everybody sensed that this was a new fountainhead of authority and of power and the bees came clustering around that honey in tremendous droves. And although it was not the dominant reason, it was one of the reasons I frankly

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moved off. This elbowing is not my own particular dish of tea and it was going on pretty furiously so that he had to be aware of the fact that he was a new force loose around the country. The way that his conduct in Chicago had captured the national fancy didn't leave anything to the imagination. People could sense. All you had to do was read the mail that came into him. Some of it was unbelievable. I'd say that there was a new awareness and properly so. He knew he…

GWIRTZMAN: Did he ever give you any indication in 1956 as to what he thought Stevenson's chances were winning the 1956 election?

WHITE: No. I'd say I don't recall anything specific. But I think just about everybody who was paying attention to the national scene then was not

very optimistic about the chances of beating Eisenhower. There was one incident though that comes to my mind in terms of the role he played in campaigning for Stevenson. You may recall one

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of the issues was the nuclear fallout and Stevenson's beliefs that we should attempt to put a moratorium on testing, nuclear testing. I don't recall where the Senator was, but he called one time from somewhere around the country where he was campaigning -- why he happened to get ahold of me, maybe Ted was gone or the nature of it -- but he said, "Listen, Stevenson's making a lot of claims about the danger to our people as a result of nuclear testing." He said, "Why don't you go over to the Commission on the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and find out what the hell that's all about and let me have a memo on it." So, I went over to the committee and to the extent that you can get anybody to talk about these things, it's awfully tricky stuff and the statistics are slippery, it became clear that Stevenson was indeed on good solid ground. So he told it to Senator Kennedy and you could see he began to support Stevenson's thesis on that after

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he'd satisfied himself that Stevenson knew what he was talking about. And this too, ironically, was one of the things that came along in his own Administration.

GWIRTZMAN: As far as you know this was his first contact with this issue?

WHITE: Yes. As far as I know…

GWIRTZMAN: When it was raised by Adlai Stevenson in the 1956…

WHITE: Yes, and this is not to say that necessarily Senator Kennedy thought it was wise to have raised it from a political point of view.

GWIRTZMAN: He didn't appear on the television show with Stevenson, did he, on that issue? It was Anderson [Clinton Anderson] and Symington [Stuart Symington].

WHITE: I'm sure that if they were picking people they wouldn't have picked Kennedy. It would have been people like Anderson and Pastore [John O. Pastore] and others who were familiar with the work in the field. There's one other odd ball vote of the Senator's that he had a terrible time explaining subsequently, especially as a candidate. This was

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on the Atomic Energy Amendments Act of 1956. The critical amendment was the Anderson Amendment which would have given the AED a right to instruct nuclear power plants themselves. We talked about it. The Senator recognized my TVA background and tried always to discount a little bit. In fact he used to discount it so much he used always to vote against TVA. But in this particular one it was a major issue and the labor unions were all involved and attention was focused on it. He understood perfectly and said, "Yes, I'm going to vote. You don't have to worry." So he left and, and luck would have it, he got on the little car that runs over to the Capitol from the Senate Office Building and he sat next to Senator Holland [Spessard L. Holland] from Florida. When we got off that damn car he went upstairs and he voted the wrong way, he voted against the Anderson Amendment. And he said later on he knew what he was doing wrong but, you know, just Holland made so much sense and he just plain wasn't enough committed at that time that he could run

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over the arguments that Holland had advanced. To complicate it, a nice little fellow from Ohio by the name of Burke [Thomas A. Burke], who had been the mayor of Cleveland who was appointed to take Senator Taft's [Robert Taft] place, came in late on that vote and he walked up to, of all people, Kennedy and said, "How are we voting on that?" And he said he just voted, "No." So this guy stands up and votes, "No." They nearly killed him in Ohio. He did the most unusual thing. About two days later he stood up and said that he'd been thinking about that vote and he wanted to announce that if it were to be voted on again he'd vote, "Yes." I don't think anybody ever knew where he got that peculiar steer.

GWIRTZMAN: Well, you left Senator Kennedy's staff in what month in 1956?

WHITE: January, '57.

GWIRTZMAN: … '57, and then went right on with Senator

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Cooper [John Sherman Cooper]?

WHITE: No. I left to go to the Senate Small Business Committee staff. I really was on my way out of government although I never quite made it. I would have to say that my session with the Senator was really quite good. When I told him I was leaving he said as far as he was concerned it's always better to have somebody stay on rather than break someone else in, but he could understand my wanting to move along. And then of course one of my points was that the way things were there and the way they should be, if Ted was going to be the top man and I was not interested in sitting in that shadow forever. He said, "Yes, that makes sense to me."

GWIRTZMAN: You had worked for him over three years?

WHITE: Three years with a gap for that time when he was convalescing.

GWIRTZMAN: And you went to the Small Business Committee as his staff man on that?

WHITE: Yes, and with the idea that I'd use that period

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of time and if I wanted to get adjusted outside, I…

GWIRTZMAN: And when did you become Administrative Assistant to Senator Cooper?

WHITE: Just one year later. But that too is an interesting story. The Senator was in Florida during Christmas vacation with his family. Senator Cooper told me that he came looking for me partly because he got directed there. And I called Senator Kennedy and said that I had a bit of a problem, that I really didn't want to go back to the Senate, if I did, I'd go back with him, but I had the chance to be the top guy in a senator's office; but as good and decent a fellow as he is he happened to be a Republican, and did he have any advice? He said, "Well, yes, Republican. You'd better think about it pretty carefully and do something different." I said, "Well, this guy is Senator Cooper." "Oh," he said, "that's different. Senator Cooper. God, he's the only guy that…." "Well," he said, "I'll tell you

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what you do." He said, "You go work for him and if you need to be purified or have the stigma cleansed you can come back and work for me for as long as it takes…." So he kept his part of the bargain and as far as I know the purification is now complete. But he had a peculiar relationship with Cooper. There was very little in common in age and in background and in spirit and liveliness. I don't know about spirit -- that might have been the bond. But he had as high regard for Cooper as he did for anybody and it was reciprocated -- just astonishing -- and oddly enough, between the two wives where the disparity was even greater. I think Kennedy never believed Cooper wanted anything from him, and vice versa. He was a soul of integrity and I think this appealed to Kennedy tremendously.

GWIRTZMAN: You were Administrative Assistant to Senator Cooper from January '58…

WHITE: … to January '61.

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GWIRTZMAN: … to January '61. You kept in touch with the Kennedy staff, saw them

around, worked on depressed legislation and other legislation with them.

WHITE: Yes, very closely. Yes, we did. India was another joint effort. Of course Cooper had been Ambassador to India and Senator Kennedy, who was then a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, had taken quite an interest in it and we worked very closely. There was one resolution that Kennedy was going to introduce and Cooper said he shouldn't do it. I wish I could remember the name of what the resolution dealt with. Finally when Cooper was convinced that Kennedy was going to introduce it, he decided in his own mind that it would be more harmful to have the thing introduced and fail than to have it adopted, so, reluctantly, put his name to it and then actually helped lead the fight on the floor of the Senate. It defeated I think on an early vote.

GWIRTZMAN: I think that was an increase in aid funds, wasn't it? There was an earmarking of….

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WHITE: I can't remember. It struck me as being a resolution rather than an amendment.

GWIRTZMAN: But was it the food -- well, I can check it. But I remember there was a food for India or wheat for India….

WHITE: Cooper did a good job on it and as I recall he did his best to persuade Senator Kennedy not to introduce the bill, but when he decided he was going to go on, wanted to do everything that he could to get it passed. I don't know that he gets the credit for doing the whole thing, but the two of them worked very very closely on it. That was a peculiar affinity those two fellows had for each other.

GWIRTZMAN: During those two years, which were the years of the most active pre-presidential, pre-convention campaign, your contact was primarily with the staff, you saw Senator Kennedy from time to time in the Senate?

WHITE: Yes.

GWIRTZMAN: But as a Republican you couldn't take part in any

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way in the pre-convention activities?

WHITE: I wasn't a Republican. I was working for a Republican. Yes, the only clear recollection I have one time is that Senator Kennedy saw me with

Senator Cooper and he said, "I think that must be a new suit that you've got. You couldn't afford a new suit when you worked for me." And I agreed with him, I couldn't afford a new suit when I worked for him.

GWIRTZMAN: Then after he was elected President he called you back. What were the circumstances of that?

WHITE: I had made up my mind when Senator Cooper was in his campaign for reelection that whether he made it or not I had spent enough time in the United States Senate. That was 1960. He ran for reelection the same time that Kennedy was running for president. But I was going to leave. I'd had enough. That would be three years I'd be rounding out with Senator Cooper. And as soon as the election was over I indicated to him that I was

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going to leave. He didn't put up too big a fuss and said that he understood and wherever I went, fine. It's sort of a curious thing. I put in a call to Ted Sorensen and…

GWIRTZMAN: When was this, before the campaign?

WHTIE: After the election, before the inauguration, probably in the middle of November. I got ahold of Gloria Sitrin and Gloria said that I was on the list of the people that Ted wanted to talk to. I said, "Well, that's great because I was calling him." I didn't know what he wanted, but I was just going to give him some information and that is that I knew there were going to be a few thousand people, friends of his from every half hour of his life, remembering their friendship with him now that Kennedy had been elected, but that I was leaving Senator Cooper's office and one way or another I was going to be free. And if there was any role in the Administration I could play, fine; if there's not, why it's alright." I just wanted him to be aware of it.

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And that's when she said, "Oh, I think that's the reason he's told me to get in touch with you." It was that two year coincidence in timing, that neither one of us got in touch with the other one first, because I could never get Ted on the telephone, as you may remember.

GWIRTZMAN: He had little mimeographed forms that he checked with X's. He had so many saying, "I do know, I do not know this fellow. He is a good fellow, he is not."

WHITE: In any event he said that he didn't know then how the White House was going to set up, but assuming he had anything to say about it, he'd

be pleased if I'd work in his end of it, if he had an end of it. In the meantime he'd ask the President-elect. And the word came back in about a week, "You can go down and get your identification."

GWIRTZMAN: Which week in which month was this?

WHITE: I think about the first - either the last week of November or the first week of December. Then the problem was, you know, to start in right away,

getting things ready for the budget review and questions and so forth, and how do you get Cabinet officers briefed for their hearings, and I was swept up immediately. My relationships with the President were just as good and cordial and warm…

GWIRTZMAN: Did you talk to the President himself before you accepted the job, or was it all handled through someone…

WHITE: All through Ted.

[END OF INTERVIEW]