

**Kenneth B. Newton Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 5/8/1964**  
**Administrative Information**

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**Biographical Note**

Kenneth B. Newton (1916-2007) was the Vice President of Sheraton Hotels. This interview focuses on his relationship with John F. Kennedy, the 1946 and 1952 political campaigns, and his numerous visits to the White House, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

Of

**Kenneth B. Newton**

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Kenneth B. Newton – JFK #1  
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK]
1,4	JFK's 1946 congressional campaign
3	JFK's interest in veterans
7	JFK's 1952 senate campaign
7	Impressions of the Kennedy family
11	Visiting JFK in the hospital in New York
13	Visits to the White House
15	Last time Newton saw JFK
16	Newton's visit to the White House on November 22, 1963

Oral History Interview

with

KENNETH B. NEWTON

8 May 1964

By Jack Hynes

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HYNES: Ken, when did you first meet Jack Kennedy?

NEWTON: Well, I recall vividly, it was in May of 1946 that I first met him. I had lunch with Jack Kennedy and, I think it was Eddie McLaughlin at the Bellevue Hotel. At that time I was a director in the Veterans Administration in Boston and I had read about Jack and, of course, had known about him all my life and was anxious to meet him because he was running for Congress. We had lunch together and I recall it so vividly because I remember paying for the lunch. Eddie McLaughlin didn't offer to pay and Jack -- I understand from experience -- never did carry any cash with him because of his circumstances and that's how I recall so vividly.

HYNES: Did he ask you at that time, Ken, to help him in his campaign?

NEWTON: Yes, Jack, knowing that I lived in Brighton and Boston all my life, asked me to assist in the campaign. I was more than happy to do so because I felt that he did represent a new generation and a new era in Boston and I was glad to work for him at the precinct level and in any way that he asked me to do in order to assist him to be elected to Congress.

HYNES: What type of men did he gather around him, Ken? Were they young veterans such as yourself and such as he, himself?

NEWTON: Yes, he had mostly young veterans but I would say it was a group of extremes in that we had intellectuals like -- Mark Dalton I always felt was an intellectual -- we had bright men like Eddie McLaughlin --

[-1-]

and we had just hard working men from the various districts in Boston who were anxious to work with him. I remember Dave Powers -- I remember Jimmy Kelly -- I remember Peter Cloherty because I knew him in Allston when I was a young fellow. But he had a representative group of young Americans with him, both well-educated men and fellows that had not gone to college, but were anxious to work with a man that represented some real new spirit in Boston and perhaps in the United States.

HYNES: Ken, as that first campaign progressed, did you come to know him a good deal more?

NEWTON: Yes -- with my various lunches with him and talks in the various hotels I got to know him intimately and noticed at that time his great power of perception, that he was quick to get to the facts and did not want to waste time with a lot of extraneous material. He wanted to know what the pulse was and he'd ask very penetrating questions and then he'd be on to the next subject.

HYNES: Ken, you had a story we were talking about earlier of buying four pairs of chino pants for the PResident at Camp Edwards.

NEWTON: Well, about in 1947, I was down in Camp Edwards for two weeks on active duty as a Reserve Officer and Jack invited me over to his home in Hyannis to have lunch and play golf and while playing golf, he asked me if he could obtain four pairs of Army chino slacks from Camp Edwards. And I went back to the PX with his size and bought four pair of chinos for him and delivered them to him. I do remember that time he reimbursed me for them, but I really was intrigued, because knowing he was a millionaire, he recognized a bargain when he saw one.

[-2-]

HYNES: Ken, did you ever have any talks with the President in those early days of other things, other than politics?

NEWTON: Yes, we discussed politics, but we also discussed business and the economy. I discussed with him in great detail the Veterans Administration statistics and the progress that the VA was making, at that time, with the veterans on all the various problems on insurance and the GI Bill of Rights and I remember him inquiring in regard to salary. I believe, at that time, as a director in 1946-1947, I was earning eight or nine

thousand dollars a year in a civil service job which was very good at that time and Jack asked me whether that salary was good and what the purchasing power of that money was. So he was interested in our problems and the problems of the individual and inquiring at all times as to just what we were doing and what progress we were making.

HYNES: Ken, you were married yourself at this time, weren't you?

NEWTON: Yes.

HYNES: And the President, of course, at this time was single. Did he ever talk to you about married life and what it was like?

NEWTON: Yes, I recall I was having lunch with him in Washington in the Capitol and during lunchtime Jack asked me what married life was like. We had two children at that time and he inquired about the children and whether there was great enjoyment in family life and the various problems that went with it. I recall it so distinctly in that I returned to Boston

[-3-]

and mentioned it to my wife and she, with a woman's intuition, said, "Well, perhaps he's considering getting married sometime." But even at that time his questions were penetrating and right to the point. He wanted to know all the details about marriage before he took the step.

HYNES: Ken, getting back to the campaign in 1946, what kind of a campaign was it? Was it a tough fight? Did he keep moving from morning till night?

NEWTON: Well I had not been in politics before and I would consider it a tough fight, because there were quite a few people in the fight. The odds were against Jack Kennedy because, perhaps, of his money and his prestige, but he was a real hard campaigner that worked from morning until night. I remember over in Charlestown he would go up to all the three-deckers, up to the top floor, and he would never miss anyone. He wanted to shake hands and meet people and he worked harder than any politician I had ever known or any businessman that I had known. And he impressed me, at that time, even with all of his apparent wealth, that he was a dedicated individual that wanted to be elected to Congress. And I also remember I asked Jack one time why didn't he consider running for mayor of Boston or governor of Massachusetts? Jack told me that he felt he could do more good for the country in Washington and that he did, at that time, aspire to the United States Senate, but at no time did he ever mention the Presidency. I recall one day we were at the Kennedy Post, which was named after his late

[-4-]

brother and I wanted to invite President Truman to be our featured speaker, and Jack at that time said, “Well, Ken, that’s out because the President is too busy and we could not even consider asking him to speak at our meeting.” But at no time in the early days of his political life, did I ever have any indication that he would aspire to the Presidency of the United States.

HYNES: He never discussed running for higher office in those early days?

NEWTON: Not with me, but he did indicate that he was dedicated to the welfare of the country and he wanted to do it on a national level. He felt that his talents could be greater used in Washington rather on a local level.

HYNES: Ken, in that first campaign what would you say was the biggest obstacle that the President had to lick? Was the opposition particularly tough?

NEWTON: Oh, the opposition was tough and he was a neophyte, he didn’t look like a politician, he didn’t act like one, and to me he was a shy author. He had not been exposed to the public a great deal in the rough-and-ready type campaigning. The odds were against him because he didn’t look like one either and he just didn’t have the knowledge, but he did surround himself with people who were dedicated to him. There was an unusual dedication that all of these people, such as Dave Powers and many other that I don’t mention at this time, even at that early stage had a complete love of the man and the work he was trying to perform and

[-5-]

they would do anything for him at any time. So he commanded the respect of the voters and the workers at that time and that’s who he overcame the lack of experience.

HYNES: You mentioned, Ken, that he was a sort of a shy person at this time. Did he have any difficulty meeting people or attending rallies or visiting veterans’ posts scattered throughout the district?

NEWTON: Well, no. Based on his education and his traveling abroad, he was naturally able to meet people. But he gave the impression to me of being shy, or not particularly enjoying it, initially, that he was doing it because he felt that he should do it and it was for the good of the country. But he never impressed me that he was really enjoying it at that time, but as time went on then I could see a change in the man and he started to take hold and started to enjoy it a little more as the years went by.

HYNES: This was in later campaigns then?

NEWTON: Well, yes. In the ‘40’s when he was in the House of Representatives, I would consider that he was shy, but when he went to the United States Senate in

1952 or 1953 and through those years, he gradually came to act like a statesman and to feel that he was enjoying it. He changed as he grew older.

HYNES: Did you see much of the President when he was in the Senate, or when he was running for the senatorial post?

[-6-]

NEWTON: Yes, when he was running for Senate in 1952, I saw a great deal of him and worked with him. A lot of my friends like Eddie McLaughlin and Paul Reddam and others worked hard and I remember they had Mark Dalton working with them too. At one stage of the game they changed and put Bobby Kennedy in command, because the organization wasn't working along on an efficient basis. And when Bobby took over things started to hum and they really went into high gear. Even though the odds were against him at that time in beating Senator Lodge, they came through by dedicated effort of teamwork of both the voters, the workers and the family. I think one of the great attributes that I noticed in the organization was the family working together as a cohesive group that helped put across his Senatorial campaign in 1952.

HYNES: Ken, you mentioned visiting Hyannis Port with the President on several occasions. Could you tell us on these occasions something more about the family when they weren't politicking? When they were at home on the Cape?

NEWTON: Well, I was impressed by the fact that Mr. Joseph P. Kennedy was in complete command. I remember having lunch one day at Hyannis and I noticed that you didn't speak to Mr. Kennedy until he spoke to you and you didn't start eating until he did. And then when he was finished, the meal was over. But there was no question in my mind, but that the great driving force and power behind this great family was Joseph P. Kennedy, that he was a very strong, powerful man and he knew

[-7-]

where he wanted the family to go. We used to play golf in Hyannis and we played touch football. I played golf with Jack one day and I was never a good golfer, but even then he was out to beat me and he worked hard and he did. We only played nine holes of golf, but he won and every shot he concentrated on and he meant business right away. And in touch football, just like we've all read about, there was no fooling around -- they were out to win and there was that dedication -- everything they did, they did to win. There was no half-hearted approach to sports or to politics or to anything. I recall having dinner with Jack Kennedy and Eunice in Washington when Jack was a Congressman and Ted Reardon was there also and after dinner we played a game of -- oh, some kind of a card game, and Jack and Eunice were arguing and I remember telling my wife when I went back home, "My heavens, you play with this family and they even argue over a mere game." It impressed me because they were dedicated again to win even in the family. It was friendly but there was an unusual feature

about this. It impressed me. Then that same evening, I recall, Jack Kennedy and Ted Reardon and I were walking down the street -- Jack had to go to a meeting. Both Ted and I had our hands in our pocket and Jack said, "Take your hands out of your pockets. You look like you're carrying guns or something." But that's quite a contrast to the fact that in later years, I noticed Jack quite frequently had his hands in his pocket. But, again, everything that he said to me impressed me and stayed with me even at this late date in life.

[ -8- ]

HYNES: Ken, you knew President Kennedy in these early days in 1946 and right up until he moved into the White House as President. Did many of these early associates drift away from him during the early years and, if so, why?

NEWTON: Well, yes. I knew quite a few of the earlier associates. I met with them in Boston and in Washington and some of them, I believe, were in for what I call a free ride. They felt that their association with Jack Kennedy would perhaps give them an easy way to make a living in life. And that was far from the truth. Jack expected great dedication and great work out of people but he offered no immediate rewards. He made no promises to anyone on jobs or anything else. And a lot of these people from Boston that were with him initially, faded out. Some of them Jack perceived after a while that perhaps their characteristics weren't what he expected they should be, but others were just looking for a free ride. When they could see that they weren't going to get it from Jack Kennedy then they dropped away from him. In my own case, I had always been gainfully employed either in the Veterans Administration or my own business or with the Sheraton Hotel company. I was there with Jack Kennedy because I thought he was good for America, I expected nothing from him and asked for nothing and that's why I remained a friend of his right up until the time of his death.

HYNES: Ken, did you ever discuss the Senatorial campaign of 1952 with the President and where?

[ -9- ]

NEWTON: Well, I recall that I used to visit Palm Beach with my wife and two younger children at that time. His father's phone number was in the book in those days and, being a friend of Jack's, I called him and he invited me over to his house to bring the children and go swimming. And this was before the Senatorial campaign. And while my children swam in the pool at Palm Beach, Jack and his father questioned me about politics in Boston and my personal reaction. They wanted to get the pulse from each individual. And I recall they questioned me about Governor Dever. I was not a professional politician or knew a great deal about it. I felt I was a businessman. But they were inquiring as to what the relative strength of Governor Dever was from a businessman's standpoint and I recall giving them my impressions at that time and they asked me in perhaps fifteen minutes the questions that the average person would take an hour and a half or two to get to. They

covered the whole field of the strength of the various individuals and weather I thought that Jack could win when he ran. And my impression, of course, was that he could win. And after the talk was over, Mr. Kennedy, Sr. had to leave for an engagement. Then Jack joined our children at the pool and we then had a great time and didn't discuss politics at all. We went from politics I think, to lunch and then just swimming. But my children have never forgotten the visit even at that young age. I think they were perhaps three and five at that time. But they again, were very impressed with the Kennedys and the way they handled everything there.

[-10-]

HYNES: Ken, you mentioned visiting the President when he was ill in the hospital in New York. Could you tell us about that?

NEWTON: Yes, I don't recall the exact date. It was in the early '50's and I was working on a major project in the Park Sheraton Hotel for Mr. Henderson, our chairman. And I knew Jack was seriously ill so I brought some fruit from the hotel and went over to the hospital in New York City and went in to visit him. He wasn't allowed visitors outside the family, but I was able to walk in and he was flat on his back, obviously in great pain, and he didn't look well at all. Yet, he was glad to see me and he enjoyed the fruit that I had brought to him. We spent about an hour together and again, we discussed politics. He was a U.S. Senator at that time, and we discussed business and family matters and other things. But even when he was ill and obviously in great pain, he still was anxious to keep abreast of current events. And I shall never forget the day. It was a dark gray day in New York and I think I brought a little bit of cheer to him, because it was so unexpected. He was surprised to see me but I always felt that I was glad that I made the trip that day to see him because it was felt that he was seriously ill and they didn't know whether he'd continue on the U.S. Senate at that time. I remember, that they took him to Palm Beach on a stretcher and I was there when he left. He really was a sick man but again with his great courage and spirit, he made a recovery where an average man would not have recovered. He had

[-11-]

some great driving force that brought out all the good in him.

HYNES: Were there other visits in later years, Ken, where you bumped into the President?

NEWTON: Well, I met him numerous times in Palm Beach and then I also met him in Honolulu. He was out to Honolulu in June of 1960 before he was nominated for President of the United States. And he stayed at our Royal Hawaiian Hotel which is a Sheraton hotel. At that time, John Harris of the Boston Globe was there with us and Red Fay [Paul B. Fay] and a picture appeared in the Boston paper of my shaking hands

with Senator Kennedy and everyone was very interested in it. I remember going out on a catamaran with Jack and he really enjoyed that. He was thrilled with the speed of the boat. And when we came in he asked me to get him some fresh orange juice. I guess he was sick of the canned orange juice he got in hotels, but I complied with his request. And one interesting feature was that when he was leaving, he needed \$50 and I cashed a check and gave him the \$50 but I saw to it from Stephen Smith that I got my \$50 back later on. As usual, President Kennedy, I called him Jack before he became President but, of course, after that I never referred to him as Jack, but at that time, again, he was shy of cash and we were able to help finance him. But I remember Red Fay was with him and Red, I consider, was one of his most intimate friends from World War II up until the time of his death.

[-12-]

HYNES: Did you have occasion to visit the President at the White House? After he became President?

NEWTON: Well, yes. I recall vividly the first time I was ever in the White House and that was on inauguration Day. Fortunately, I was invited by President Kennedy to the reviewing stand to review the parade with him. I stood beside him for two hours with General Gavin who was the Chief Marshal of the parade and later Ambassador to France was standing beside me and I also met the Aide, General Clifton, at that time for the first time. But the parade was not over until 6:30 or 7:00 o'clock and the reviewing stand -- a lot of people had left, it was so cold. It was a dark, dismal evening, but President Kennedy, he was full of exuberance and enjoying every minute of it. He stayed until the last float went by in the parade and he truly enjoyed it. Even though General Gavin was worried about the parade running about two hours behind time, it did not bother the President at all. And after the parade was over I was invited into the White House by the President. That was the first time I had ever been in the White House and, of course, I was thrilled. After that time, I have been in the White House many, many times, both to visit the President and to see Dave Powers and Kenny O'Donnell and all the people I knew from Boston, including Ted Reardon. One day I was with Eddie McLaughlin and President Kennedy just came out of the office and met us and came right over and talked to us for about a half an hour. Again

[-13-]

he asked me about business conditions and I gave him a review of Sheraton and the current problems we were having and he absorbed very quickly the pulse of what our problems were. But even as President, he was again interested in the business community and what was going on and he -- I noticed that he would absorb very quickly and get right to the point quickly and even though he spent a half an hour with us, he asked many questions at that time and I remember Eddie McLaughlin was there with me.

HYNES: Ken, what single quality of character would you say he possessed that made President Kennedy different or set him apart from the average young fellow?

NEWTON: Well, I would say it was some great strength or driving force and a devotion to duty. When I met him in Denver, Colorado, when he was a Senator talking at a Mayor's Conference, or any place, he worked morning, noon and night. He worked on his airplane when he was traveling, and I would say the single quality would be a great devotion and hard work. All of us have talked in business about hard work. Well, the secret of his success was that he never was afraid to work and he had the ability to get to the point quickly. And I would say that in my opinion he was a genius, because he had a brain that could absorb much more than the average and he didn't waste time. He could read fast and he could think fast. I would just say that he was always an unusual man, but the greatest thing, I think, is that he was not afraid to work hard even though he was a millionaire. He was devoted to the country and in that way he just kept propelling himself to greatness.

[-14-]

HYNES: Ken, would you say that President Kennedy in the early years and even later on -- do you think he had a good ability to judge others correctly, people whom he met or people who were working with him in his campaigns?

NEWTON: Oh, yes -- I would say he did. Just like any great man, some people will fool a great man for a short time but not for long. Sometimes they almost toy with them to see what they're up to. But I think right from the start that he had a great ability to perceive greatness in people and ascertain their abilities and their motives. Sometimes great men let a few stay with them for a while that are not great in order to -- oh, not to confuse the situation but just to keep people guessing. But in my opinion, he could size people up very quickly and no one ever fooled him or tried to kid him and get away with it for very long.

HYNES: Ken, when was the last time you saw President Kennedy here in Boston?

NEWTON: Well, again, I recall that vividly. It was October 21, 1963. He came to Boston for a Democratic fund-raising dinner at the Commonwealth Armory and stayed at the Sheraton Plaza. As a matter of fact, whenever he traveled he stayed in a Sheraton hotel whenever possible, due to our close relationship. And at this time we had the Presidential suite at the Sheraton Plaza redecorated and all set up for him. I met him at the airport when he arrived and, as usual, he was glad to see me and very gracious and always called me, "Ken," and my

[-15-]

picture was on the front page of a Boston newspaper that Sunday greeting the President and, of course, I cherish that picture a great deal. I also went to the airport on Sunday morning when he departed. As a matter of fact, I drove his secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, to the airport. She took a small private plane with all of his papers ahead of the regular jet. So I was there to

greet the President when he came out to the airport with Kenny O'Donnell and one or two other associates. I shook his hand before he went up in the aircraft and, of course, I never realized that that would be the last time that I would see him. But in contrast to the large crowds that greeted him upon his arrival in Boston the day before, on Sunday morning when he left there were only two or three people there and I am glad that I took the time to go to the airport that morning to see him off.

HYNES: Ken, tell me about your White House visit on November 22.

NEWTON: I shall never forget it. By coincidence, I was at the White House that day with Ernest Henderson, the Chairman of the Board of Sheraton Corporation of America, to have lunch in the White House staff dining room with Jack McNally and a few others associated in the White House. We enjoyed our lunch ever so much and then we showed Mr. Henderson through the White House and went into the President's private office and observed that all the carpet had been taken up and it was being refurbished. Mrs. Kennedy was going to surprise him upon his return from Dallas the next day by having all new carpet in the office and having

[-16-]

it completely redecorated. It was being done as a rush job and it impressed me very much how efficiently they were working there. After we left that office about 1:30 or shortly thereafter, we were walking through the corridor to the East Wing of the White House when somebody came running up in back of us and said the President had been shot. And, of course, we couldn't believe it, we thought it was just talk. We went in to Jack McNally's office and Jerry Behn [Gerald A. Behn] was there, the Chief of the White House Secret Service, and Jim Rowley [James Joseph Rowley], the Chief of Secret Service. At that time, about fifteen or twenty minutes before the world knew about it, we knew that the President had died and I just broke down and cried. It's one of the few times in my life that I've ever cried and I just sat in a chair for five minutes and I just couldn't believe it. They offered me coffee -- I couldn't even drink it -- and we all stayed in the White House until 2:30 or 3:00 until it was publicly announced and then we left. I was in a daze and just went back to Boston, but it was just an awful coincidence that I was in the White House that day it happened.

HYNES: We have been talking with Kenneth B. Newton, Vice President of the Sheraton Hotel Corporation of America, on May 8, 1964. This is Jack Hynes, WHDH News, Boston.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-17-]