

E. William Proxmire Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 3/25/1966
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Biographical Note

E. William Proxmire (1915-2005) was a Senator from Wisconsin from 1957 to 1989. This interview focuses on the 1960 Democratic primary and general election in Wisconsin and the Kennedy administration's legislative program, among other topics.

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By Senator William Proxmire

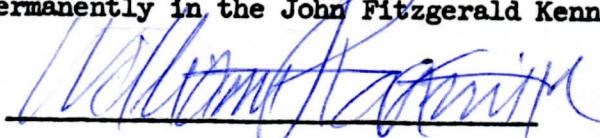
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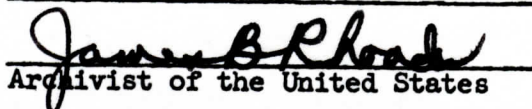
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Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM PROXMIRE

Washington, D.C.

March 25, 1966

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: I don't know when you first met John Kennedy, do you recall when it was?

PROXMIRE: Well, I'm not sure. I think that I may have met John Kennedy back in 1937 when he would have been a sophomore at Harvard, and I was a senior at Yale, that was in the fall. And I may have met him--I think he played JV football, I did, we played Harvard. I thought I met a fellow named Kennedy who played end on the JV football team, but maybe that was wrong. That would have been the first time. If I didn't meet him then for the first, I met him in 1957 when I was running for election to the Senate in a special election, and then Senator Kennedy came out to Wisconsin at our request and was tremendously helpful.

MORRISSEY: Where did he campaign?

PROXMIRE: Well, he campaigned in Milwaukee, in Green Bay, particularly, and I recall that we went to plant gates--A.O. Smith Co. gate--we went there at the wrong time, and unfortunately nobody was coming out, but he was very gracious about it anyway. Then he went on television for me, and we went up to Green Bay, we flew up there. He didn't eat dinner, but he had a beer and a sandwich, I think, instead.

We got into a little hassle in the Green Bay radio station-- television station. It was a radio-television combine, Channel 2, CBS television in Green Bay. The reporter asked Senator Kennedy about some remarks in Life Magazine, and I can't remember the substance, but I remember that Senator Kennedy was very unhappy about it. He didn't hesitate to tell the reporter that he thought the questions were unfair and wrong, and so forth. The reporter's name was Don Love, and he's never forgotten this. [laughter] As a matter of fact, he feels it's one of his great distinctions.

Then we went on from there to a big dinner meeting in Green Bay. President Kennedy spoke there before a big crowd, and I think he left Green Bay to fly back to Washington.

MORRISSEY: As I recall, you were running for the seat that [Joseph R.] Joe McCarthy had vacated?

PROXMIRE: That's right. Joe McCarthy had died on, I think, May 2, 1957, and the Governor called for a special election to take place in August, with the primary in late July. There were seven Republicans in that primary, and whoever won the Republican primary was considered pretty much of a cinch to win. We had a Republican governor, two Republican senators, overwhelming Republican control of the State Assembly, and State Senate.

I won the primary contest. And it was after I won the primary contest, of course, that Senator Kennedy came out. Former Governor Walter Kohler won the Republican primary contest. And in no small part owing to the assistance I got from Senator Kennedy and others, I won, and I won by a smashing margin. I carried nine out of ten congressional districts, although I had been defeated by the same man twice before. It was quite a reversal and an astounding and astonishing surprise.

Then I recall when I came down to Washington, Senator Kennedy was at the airport, I believe, with a group of senators to meet me and was very helpful and gracious and happy about it. Then we had a lunch the next day which the majority leader was kind of master of ceremonies at, and Senator Kennedy was there, too, and was very charming and friendly. I saw him then. And also, in the course of the next couple of years when we were both in the Senate, I had Senator Kennedy on my Report to the People of Wisconsin Program, and he was a wonderful guest. He was very articulate and very attractive, of course, well-informed . . .

MORRISSEY: Was that a televised program?

PROXMIRE: That was a televised program. We had it on film. And that worked out very nicely.

MORRISSEY: Did you anticipate at that time that he might enter the Wisconsin primaries?

PROXMIRE: Oh sure. Yes. There was no question that there was a good chance of that. He was a leading national figure, of course, in the 1956 Convention. He came very close, as you know, to becoming the vice presidential selection of the Party, and missed by a hair's breadth. So that before I was elected to the Senate, it was clear that President Kennedy--at that time Senator Kennedy--was a leading possibility for 1960. And I expected that he might very well come out to Wisconsin because if he did decide that he wanted to run, it was clear that his best chance would be in the primary. Wisconsin was one of the very few states with a primary, one of the larger states that had a primary, and it had been quite a decisive primary in the past. It had been the one, you know, that resulted in the end of [Wendell L.] Willkie's career. It was one that made [Harold E.] Stassen a national figure when he carried it at one point. And there was a real prospect that this might be the make or break primary for President Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: Were you a delegate to the '56 Convention?

PROXMIRE: Yes, I was. I voted for [Estes] Kefauver at that time, as did our whole delegation. We were pretty much bound to Kefauver. We liked Kefauver very very much. We had known him a long time. He had come out and won our primary. He won it in '52; he won it in '56. Now obviously we were released after the presidential race was over. We could have voted for anybody, and [R. Sargent] Sarge Shriver spoke to me. He was a classmate of mine at Yale, and I hadn't seen much of Sarge, but I always like him very, very much. And he urged me to leave Kefauver and vote for Senator Kennedy for vice president. Our feeling was that in view of the fact that people of Wisconsin had overwhelmingly supported Kefauver, and he had done extremely well against [Dwight D.] Eisenhower in the kind of popularity contest of the state, that we should stick with Kefauver. So of course I did.

Then I suppose the next event, the next occasion. . . . Well, let me say that I was interested in getting support for a dairy bill I had to increase milk price supports. I felt there was a strong case for doing this. Dairy farm income was very, very low. Our farmers--probably the most efficient dairy farmers in the world--produce more milk than any other state. As a matter of fact, we export more than the next five states combined. Our dairy farmers have an income which is less than a dollar an hour--it was far less at that time--although they average an investment per farm of around forty or fifty thousand dollars per farm; they work twelve, fourteen hours a day, seven days a week; they're very efficient; they've increased their efficiency immensely, but they aren't getting any commensurate return. And I felt it was just from that stand-point, plus logical, because at that time you could make a good economic case for a moderate increase in price supports.

So I put the bill in and I remember I talked to Senator Kennedy about it, and he agreed that he would co-sponsor the bill. And he did co-sponsor it. We got a number of other leaders in the Democratic Party and some Republicans to co-sponsor it. It was enacted into law. But it was a peculiar thing that. . . . I was so proud of this bill, and it was one of the best achievements and solidest achievements for my state that I had. But when it was enacted into law, the headlines in the Wisconsin newspapers, the report on the radio and on television--it was enacted and President Eisenhower signed it-- was "Eisenhower signs Kennedy dairy bill." [laughter] And here, you know, I had done all the work. I had testified on it, I had spoken on the floor. Senator Kennedy was gracious to put his name on it as co-sponsor, but he did it as kind of an afterthought; and, in spite of all that, all the credit in the AP [Associated Press] and UP [United Press International] story went to Senator Kennedy. [laugh]

MORRISSEY: Why should that be?

PROKIRE: Well, I guess because they'd make a little news story out of it; the fact that he was the leading, at that point, I guess, the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination, and it was a kind of a cute twist that President Eisenhower, the Republican President, was signing a bill that was co-sponsored by the leading candidate. I thought it was very bad newspaper reporting, and I told the Associated Press,

the United Press that, but they said, "Well, we're sorry. We shouldn't have done it that way perhaps, but it's done now, and that's it." Then in that 1960 campaign, we had a very fascinating situation in Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: Is this the primary?

PROXMIRE: This is the presidential preference primary. At one point, then Senator [Hubert H.] Humphrey, of course, as a man with presidential ambitions, was anxious to get the support of his sister-state, Wisconsin. He had done a lot for us in Wisconsin; he had been an excellent help; he's a marvelous speaker; and he's a very dynamic, attractive figure. He spoke at some of our fund-raising dinners, helped us raise money, worked hard in the state and was well and favorably known, and of course, he's right next to Wisconsin in Minnesota.

He was anxious to get the support of the delegation, and he tried several methods. One was to consider the possibility, of course, of running himself. Then a second was to see if he could get a favorite son candidacy favorable to him going. And he approached Gaylord Nelson, who was then Governor--he's now the Senator of Wisconsin. And Gaylord Nelson said he would--the word was that he was seriously considering being a favorite son. And when I heard about this--I had been talking with some of the Kennedy people--I announced that if Nelson ran as a favorite son candidate I would run against him as a favorite son candidate. So Nelson abandoned that.

I felt that if Wisconsin people were to have any real voice in determining who was going to be the presidential nominee, it was best to have a contest between two of the principal competitors. At least the people would have the choice between Humphrey and Kennedy. A choice between Nelson and Proxmire obviously wouldn't mean anything. If I went in as a favorite son with my delegates pledged to one of the other candidates, or Nelson did, it would destroy the whole purpose. And I said so. And I said that I thought it would be a good idea for Kennedy and Humphrey to come out to the state and run and that I would do all I could to promote that in any way that I possibly could.

Well, as you know, they did run. It was a tough campaign for both of them, very hard. Each had advantages and disadvantages in the campaign. I didn't play any further role in the primary at all because I thought it was up to the people of the state to decide. After the primary was over and President Kennedy had won--

he won six of the ten congressional districts, and he won a majority of the popular vote. So he got something like twenty-two of the delegates to eight for Humphrey. I went out to the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles in 1960 with the delegation.

MORRISSEY: Who were you pledged to?

PROXMIRE: Was I a delegate or not? I'm not sure. I think maybe I was not a delegate. I think I was not a delegate. I didn't want to indicate that I was for either one. So I guess I was not a delegate. But the day before the convention opened officially, on Sunday, I had a press conference and announced that I was for Kennedy.

Even though it was late in the day, I don't think there were many senators, if any--other than possibly one or two from New England--who had committed themselves. But I thought it was logical and clear that he should get support, especially since he had already won the primary in my state. And so I made my declaration and answered questions on it. You were going to ask something?

MORRISSEY: You answered my question. What prompted you to commit yourself to Kennedy at that point?

PROXMIRE: Well, that was part of it. And then also that I thought that he had an awfully good chance to win. I thought he had a lot of the qualities that would be very strong and appealing in a campaign and thought we could make a strong case for his competence in foreign affairs. And of course, we did. And then it was the whole aura and personality, and so forth, just seemed to be very, very appealing.

MORRISSEY: It must have been difficult to stay away from that primary campaign in your state between Kennedy and Humphrey.

PROXMIRE: Well, it wasn't so hard for me because I just made it clear that I felt that my position all along had been it was up to the people of Wisconsin to decide, and not for anybody to dictate it or try to arrange it either by shutting either candidate out or by using any influence he could to try and rally support for one of the other candidates.

It ought to be up to the people to decide as freely as they can.

And while it was true that I guess it would have been consistent if I had come out for Humphrey or Kennedy under those circumstances, I felt it would have been even more consistent if I didn't and to leave it open. And as I recall, most of the people--I don't think the Governor made any formal declaration. He previously indicated his support, some support and interest, at least, in the Humphrey candidacy, but I don't think he made a formal clear declaration that he was for Humphrey. Our state chairman at that time, [Patrick J.] Pat Lucey, was clearly for Kennedy, and made no effort to conceal it. But then some of the congressional district leaders indicated their position, and I'm sure [Clement J.] Clem Zablocki indicated that he was for Kennedy. I'm not sure, I don't think [Henry S.] Reuss indicated he was for either one. And [Robert W.] Bob Kastenmeier, I don't think, committed himself.

MORRISSEY: I think Lester Johnson committed himself to Humphrey.

PROXMIRE: Humphrey, yes, I think that's correct. And of course that district went for Humphrey. But there was very little choosing up sides, really, at the top level. I don't think the Governor nor I--I was the only Democratic Senator at that time in the state--did so.

MORRISSEY: I would imagine that representatives of both the Humphrey camp and the Kennedy camp were beating a path to your door?

PROXMIRE: Yes, but I think that they recognized pretty early that I was going to stay out, and they were awfully anxious to keep me kind of neutral for them a little bit, you know what I mean. And I tried to do that. There were a couple of times in that campaign when remarks that I made were adversely construed by the Humphrey people. I don't think the Kennedy people ever complained about anything I said.

But as I recall, at one point there was an attack on Kennedy's farm record by the Humphrey people. They said he was a Johnny-come-lately, that he had a long record of support for [Ezra T.] Benson's type of approach which would starve the farmer,

and he'd only switched because he'd gotten national political ambitions. And I said that wasn't fair, or true and that certainly since I had been in the Senate that his record had been as consistent in support of improving dairy farmers' income and all farmers' income as anyone else in the Senate, including Senator Humphrey. And that was viewed by the Humphrey people as a less than neutral statement. But I thought it was true. And I may have been involved one way or the other in that kind of thing, but it was always minor. It was never any kind of . . .

I recall on the primary night we had a little dinner party at our house, and [Theodore C.] Ted Sorensen and his wife were there, and Chester Bowles and his wife, and, oh, several other people. My wife would recall everybody that was there but I don't know just offhand. And I remember when the first returns came in, they were very bad for Kennedy, very good for Humphrey, because the first returns that came in were from the western part of the state, near Minnesota, in the rural part of the state.

Humphrey was leading, and Ted Sorensen's face was just ashen, and he said, "What does this mean?" And I told him that it didn't mean anything as far as he was concerned, that it was always true that we got returns in the small towns, in the rural areas first. Milwaukee has paper ballots. At that time there were no machines--I guess they're going to have them from now on--and accordingly. . . . And they don't close the polls in Milwaukee until 8 o'clock. They close them out in the country at 5 or 5:30, and a lot of the townships are very small. They count all the votes about fifteen or twenty minutes after the polls are closed, or an hour anyway. So you get all the rural vote first. I'm not sure he was satisfied with it. He was mighty uneasy. And then, of course, as the evening went on, it turned out that, as I say, Senator Kennedy had won, although it was a close and hot contest.

Then, as President, I saw very very little of President Kennedy. I think my wife and I went to the White House on one occasion, a large number of people, and I think it was the [Andre] Malraux Dinner. And the other Senators there were Senator [Henry M.] Jackson, Senator [Paul H.] Douglas. We didn't, I don't recall any other occasion. I shook hands with the President in the receiving line, and that was it.

I don't recall talking to him on the telephone or getting any kind of communication of any kind. We had perfectly friendly relations. When President Kennedy spoke at Yale, he twitted the audience a little bit about some of the Yale graduates, and he mentioned me, and he pointed out that I disagreed with his economic policy, which I had, I opposed the tax cut, which I was. But that wasn't at all personal, and I'm sure he wasn't at all concerned about it because there was no personal animosity of any kind, either way.

MORRISSEY: Were you there for that speech?

PROXMIRE: No, I wasn't. I guess that was about the end of it. Like everybody else does, of course, I recall precisely where I was when the tragic news came that President Kennedy had been assassinated.

MORRISSEY: Where were you?

PROXMIRE: I was going up to the gallery in the Senate to make a recording on some issue. Of course, everything was cancelled at that point. And at that point, three or four newspaper men were rushing down the stairs from the gallery to the Senate floor. And one of them said, "Have you heard the President's shot?" And I went right back to the floor of the Senate and came over to my office.

MORRISSEY: Back in the '60 campaign, the campaign against [Richard M.] Nixon, did you expect Wisconsin to go for Kennedy?

PROXMIRE: I did, and I remember there was a very, it turned out to be, a very true analysis in the New York Times. Because they predicted that Minnesota would go for Kennedy and Wisconsin would not, and I couldn't understand it, it seemed to me just the opposite. Kennedy had spent a great deal of his time in Wisconsin, a great deal--in fact more, I guess, in relation to the population of the state than any other state, more even than West Virginia. It was obviously crucial to his campaign. He made an awfully good impression, and of course,

the vote in the Wisconsin presidential primary was, Kennedy and Humphrey together got 71 per cent of the vote plus, and Nixon got only 29 $\frac{1}{2}$, or something like that, per cent of the vote. I thought on the basis of that, plus the terrific work he had done, plus his great national resurgence, especially after the debates, that he would do well in Wisconsin.

Also there was a religious element involved. We have a substantially higher than the national average of Catholics in our state. We also have a high Lutheran population. Well, the religious thing broke down in a bad way. The Lutherans crossed party lines to vote against the first Catholic candidate for the Presidency. And the Catholics didn't show that prejudice. They voted for Nixon if they were Republicans. But that prejudice is all gone now. The President's performance in office just killed forever the religious factors, and they won't have any significance in any future election.

MORRISSEY: Some people have argued in retrospect that by spending so much time in Wisconsin before the primary election, they concluded falsely that they didn't have to come back to Wisconsin during the general runoff against Nixon, and that the Party wasn't working particularly hard, nor were the volunteers coordinated well with the organization.

PROXMIRE: I don't know about the latter statement. You have to put it in perspective. Obviously the Party could have worked harder. It always can. But the people did work hard. They were enthusiastically for Kennedy. We had a good registration effort, compared very favorably with subsequent efforts and past efforts. They obviously could have done better. I think if the President had come back, it might have made the difference. Wisconsin wasn't as close as some of the other states though. Nixon did come back, and that might have made the difference. He was there the day before the election. He flew down from Alaska, I think. And I think he was in Wisconsin, and then he went over to Michigan. And he had a huge turnout in Wisconsin. I think, conceivably, it's awfully hard to tell--this whole thing is such an art instead of a science, no one really knows--but I suspect that his last minute appearance in the state may well have helped him some.

MORRISSEY: I was wondering if any of the wounds opened up during the primary had not healed by November?

PROXMIRE: Well, I'm sure that some of them did not heal. I'm sure that some of them didn't. I haven't made any analysis. The religious thing was one of them. Of course, that was opened, it was unfortunate. I thought the newspapers were terrible in the way they handled this. They put far too much emphasis on this thing. And when the election was over, they broke it down by township and so forth, and they just drove it into the consciousness of the people much more than they should have.

It's interesting that in 1962, we had our first, so far as I know, our first Catholic candidate for Governor, John Reynolds. And the newspapers appeared to have learned their lesson because I would wager that not more than 10 per cent of the people even knew he was Catholic. Of course, Reynolds is a name that could be Catholic or Protestant or almost anything. But all the gas went out of the balloon. Nobody gave it any real concern after that.

After the other scars that--the personal, you know, the people who had worked for Humphrey labor people and so forth. Labor was very good for Kennedy. They went all out for him. Harvey Kitzman, for example, who was head of the UAW [United Auto Workers] and stationed in Wisconsin--but he covers a number of states, he's a very powerful and strong leader--did everything he possibly could for Kennedy, although he had been a Humphrey man. And I think this was fairly typical. Some of the groups were very, very ineffective. The civil rights groups were never very effective in our state, they should be. They're fine people and they believe deeply in their principles, but they don't do much election work.

MORRISSEY: Some of the delegates to the '60 Convention commented on the fact that when [Lyndon B.] Johnson's name was presented for the vice presidential nomination, you argued that the delegation should support it and not try to fight it. Could you tell me about this?

PROXMIRE: That was an interesting development. In 1959 I made a series of speeches on the floor of the Senate attacking President Johnson's policies

because I thought they were too autocratic and that the Senator from Wisconsin had nothing to say about Democratic policy, and I resented that. I thought we ought to have caucuses and have an opportunity to speak out. On my previous experience in the Wisconsin Legislature, we'd have regular caucuses and all Democrats determined our party policy, in the State Assembly, and the leaders would take the policy back and try to influence everybody to get together on the consensus.

Well, here in Washington, President Johnson, then Majority Leader, would have a caucus at the beginning of each session and give a speech. We called them Lyndon's State of the Union Message, and then we'd not have another caucus for a solid year. And obviously under these circumstances, it was, it would have meant that it was a one man show.

Well, I made this attack. [laughter] I made it on Washington's birthday because there was just one speech, and then we were supposed to adjourn--"Washington's Farewell Address"--but I got permission to speak after that. And some wag in the gallery said, "There were two Farewell Addresses today: Washington's and Proxmire's." [laughter] Well, I made a series of three of those. And on the second or third one, I guess it was the second one when Johnson took me on on the floor and disagreed violently, of course.

But at any rate I established a clear position as being critical of Johnson as Majority Leader. I had no animosity toward him, and he was very helpful after that. He was the kind of man, as far as I'm concerned, that didn't bear any grudge. He helped me with my dairy bill greatly, and he was the Majority Leader and could easily have killed it without any effort, without any responsibility for doing so. But he helped me get it through. And he'd been, under the circumstances, I think pretty generous.

Furthermore, I thought that President Kennedy made a good choice. Johnson is very, very able. Obviously he would make a good president, strong president, and also he was a man who would have great influence keeping so many of the Southern states Democratic in a close, tough election. So I thought it was a good selection. And I said so at the meeting. We had a meeting, I remember it was under the stands, at Los Angeles. Some of the delegates were very very bitter about Johnson being selected. They were people who, by and large, had been for Humphrey instead of for Kennedy. One or two of them were very strong in

their denunciation of President Kennedy for having picked Johnson as his vice presidential running mate.

But I argued that the only basis for my attack on Johnson was that he was running the Senate like an executive agency, and the obvious place for him was in the executive branch, and that's where he was going. And there were two good things about him: One, all his executive genius would be at work where it ought to be; and number two, we no longer would have the Senate dominated by one man, we'd have the opportunity to have the Senate operating the way it ought to. And that, as a matter of the record, Johnson, of course, didn't have the same kind of record that Kennedy and Humphrey did, but he wasn't from the same state either. By and large he had a good progressive record on the issues. And he was a man who, as a matter of fact, came to Congress as the only one of about thirty people running in his congressional race who was for Franklin Roosevelt, and in his early years, when he was obviously voting his early impressions and convictions, he had as strong and vigorous a New Deal record as anybody had. There was no real basis for liberal Democrats from Wisconsin to oppose this kind of a selection.

Then we tried very very hard to get a solid delegation to vote for President Kennedy when he came up, and we just couldn't persuade some of the die-hard Humphrey people to do so. They just wouldn't do it, and the result was that Wyoming put him over instead of Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: Let me go back to 1957. Some members of the Kennedy family, as you know, were close friends personally of Senator McCarthy. Was this commented on when Senator Kennedy was campaigning in your behalf?

PROXMIRE: It may have been. There was not much comment on it. As a matter of fact, as I recall, Bob Kennedy came out to the state before that. I think it was 1956 or something. And there was some talk in the background about how he was on Senator McCarthy's investigating staff, but there wasn't much substance because the newspapers took a responsible position that the employment of a person on a staff didn't necessarily indicate what his views were.

When President Kennedy came out as a Senator in the '57 Campaign--to answer your question directly--this McCarthy connection was very much in the background, so far back that it

didn't really make any impression. The newspapers you know are very willing to print just about anything. Maybe the Capital Times in Madison, which really had a strong feeling of opposition for Kennedy in the primary and before, might have had a comment about that. I doubt it. At that particular time, later on, I think they brought it up because they were the first paper in the state to really attack McCarthy and they went after McCarthy strongly. Then after the time he was elected, they never let up.

MORRISSEY: From your viewpoint in the Senate during the years that Kennedy was President, did you feel that his legislative program was well presented?

PROXMIRE: Well, of course, President Kennedy was a very articulate exponent of any cause in which he believed. His speeches to Congress were beautifully organized, logical, strong. The messages that he sent down were clear and incisive. And I thought that the people that he had working for him were very able people. [P. Kenneth] O'Donnell, and [Lawrence F.] O'Brien and the rest of them were tremendously competent. He just didn't have the majority really that Roosevelt had when he was moving so fast and covering so much ground, or that Johnson had after the last election. But I thought under the circumstances that he did very, very well.

MORRISSEY: Some people mentioned that he had not been a member of the Senate "Club," and that might have affected the success of the legislative program or lack of success of the legislative program.

PROXMIRE: I don't think it had much to do with it. I really don't. Of course, I'm not a member of the Senate Club either by a hundred miles, but I don't think that that had much influence on this. And I think that when a man becomes president, it changes. Attitudes toward him change. He changes. The situation is entirely different. One of the more spectacular differences that I've seen was on the sale of wheat to Russia. President Kennedy lost by fifteen or twenty votes. He lost this issue in our Banking Committee. Then he died; he was killed. And Johnson got it through just like that. But why did he get it through? Not because it was Johnson, because Kennedy had been for it, Kennedy had been for it, Kennedy had been a martyr, and the whole Kennedy program was

enshrined in the halo. And it was almost sacrilegious to vote against it in this position. You could feel it on the floor. Any number of Senators just switched right over.

MORRISSEY: Would you say the same about civil rights legislation?

PROXMIRE: I think that the Kennedy martyrdom had a lot to do with it. Well, there was always a majority for civil rights legislation, and yet, as you know, he had to have a two-thirds majority to get it through. And I think this had a very great deal to do with it. There were other factors, too. It took a while for the church to have the impact they had because this is the kind of thing that is cumulative. But I think that the death of the President, the way he died, the feeling in retrospect that he had been such a remarkable person, made people think very deeply about that which the President felt strongly about. And I think it made many many people reconsider, and that put pressure on the Senate. And of course, senators also thought hard and long about it. I think this was true of civil rights. It was true of some of the economic legislation, too.

MORRISSEY: Did he try to get you to change your position on the tax cut?

PROXMIRE: As far as I know, I can't recall. I don't think that President Kennedy ever tried to get me to change my position on anything. Now once or twice O'Brien asked me to change on something. I recall on the farm bill it was, from the Kennedy standpoint, probably the worst thing that I ever did. I was one of the members of the Agriculture Committee, and Secretary [Orville L.] Freeman took me out for dinner one night--my wife and myself and his wife, [Mrs. Burton M.] Geri Joseph, I guess, the national committeewoman in Minnesota--and tried to talk me into taking the leadership in the Agriculture Committee for the Administration for some of the stuff they had. And I indicated that I would go along as far as I could.

Well, the trouble was that the bill had already come down, and they had already discussed it with [Allen J.] Ellender and they had already tailored it to what they thought Ellender would

take. Well, he might have talked to three or four other senators on the Agriculture Committee and asked them the same thing. But he had the tacit understanding that I was going to support the Administration. Well, I just plain disagreed with the feed grain proposal; I thought it was totally impractical; that it wouldn't work, and that, furthermore, you'd get crucified in a national referendum; that if they lost in a referendum, the Administration would look bad. It was worse than if they lost in a committee. So I voted against them in the Committee, and mine was the deciding vote and killed the program. Later on they passed a wheat bill. It was a lot like the feed grain bill, and had a much better chance of getting a referendum passed. It was subjected to the referendum and was defeated. And I felt that showed the wisdom of my position.

Subsequently, Secretary Freeman said that I was right and that they would have lost if there had been that feed grain referendum. But this was I think, at the time, I don't know if the President paid much attention to it, but I'm sure the people in the Department of Agriculture just never forgot it or forgave me. They felt that their feed grain bill was the guts of the farm program. They were all set. They needed my vote, and that I switched and my motion killed it in committee, and that I had stuck a knife in their back. The President never said anything to me directly one way or the other.

MORRISSEY: He was killed less than a year before he would have run again in '64. How did your people in Wisconsin look upon the Kennedy Administration? Do you think they were satisfied with it?

PROXMIRE: It's very very hard to assess how they felt just before he was killed and how they felt afterwards. I was surprised when the Gallup Poll indicated that he was at one of the low ebbs in his popularity right before he was killed. But I don't think that's particularly significant. That comes and goes all the time. It did with Eisenhower, Roosevelt.

I'm positive that he would have won by an overwhelming margin competing against [Barry M.] Goldwater and probably against anybody in my state, and in the country, because he had immensely increased his stature as President. He eliminated all the liabilities he had.

He was a kid in the view of many people when he was nominated. He looked like a kid. He was young. He'd had Senate experience, but people thought that it was something that he'd gotten in part because he had a family with a lot of money and a fine name and had been elected without much effort. This hurt him in the campaign. The religious thing was all gone. It was no longer an issue.

He now was just the reverse of the adverse things. They'd said he had no experience, and now he had more experience than anybody in the country. He'd had that remarkable success with Khrushchev and the Cuban missile crisis, the Test Ban Treaty. I think he'd just be bound to have won a smashing victory, and I think he would have had a marvelous session in 1965. So that I think that he would have won by a big margin if he had not been killed.

But of course, after he was assassinated, then there was just an overwhelming feeling on the part of Republicans, business people, all those who in the past had been critical, they felt, and I think they sincerely felt this way--they had had a chance to reflect on it--that this was a very very great man, a man that they admired, loved. It wasn't just a matter of regretting that he was killed.

MORRISSEY: I can't think of anything we're overlooking, can you?

PROXMIRE: No, I think this was very comprehensive.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

PROXMIRE: Thank you.

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