

George A. Smathers Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 4/14/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: George A. Smathers

Interviewer: Don Wilson

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Length: 11 pages

Biographical Note

George A. Smathers (1913 - 2007) was a United States Senator from Florida who served in office from 1951 to 1969. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s congressional career, his efforts to diminish the national deficit, and his relationship with Congress, among other issues.

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By George A. Smathers

to the

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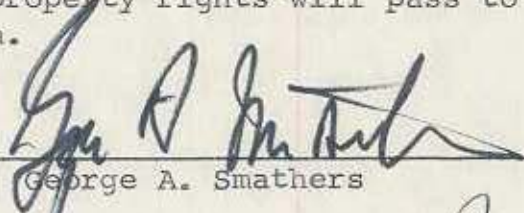
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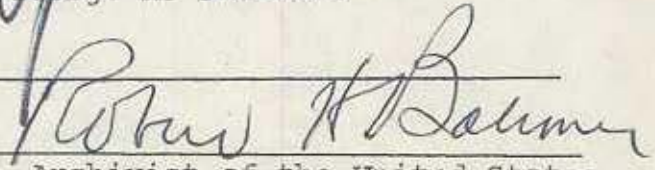
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Signed _____


George A. Smathers

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George A. Smathers—JFK #2
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1D	John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s interest in balance of payments
3D	JFK's ignorance of economics before becoming President
4D	1960 presidential election
5D	JFK's relationship with Congress
1E	JFK's congressional career

Second Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE A. SMATHERS

April 14, 1964

By Don Wilson

For the John F. Kennedy Library

WILSON: Did the President discuss the outflow of gold with you?

SMATHERS: Well, yes, Don. This particular item, I think, interested and concerned the President more than any other matter over a longer period of time than any other one matter. I was on the Finance Committee and I presume that he concluded that I knew something about it, although I am really not an international economist. I didn't know how much he knew about it. But he hired this fellow Roosa and brought him down. Somebody had recommended Roosa, who had been with the Federal Reserve Board in New York -- a very brilliant fellow -- and the President talked about Roosa. I told him the impression Roosa had made before the Finance Committee when we approved his nomination. I felt just like the President did that he was a very brilliant fellow. I think that the President did that he was a very brilliant fellow. I think that the President thereafter got much of his information, which I am sure the whole Administration did, from Roosa.

But this particular problem of our gold outflow and the larger question of balance of payments -- our deficit -- really disturbed him. I don't know who it was that impressed him with the idea that this was a very dangerous thing for the United States to continue to run this deficit in our balance of payments. Bob Kerr, whom Kennedy admired greatly -- his brilliance and his knowledge of financial affairs -- also was of this opinion. Consequently, Kennedy would talk about

[-1D-]

this particular problem with more regularity and frequency than almost any other problem which arose, because it was a continuing problem. The others would come and go, but this problem was a gnawing, agonizing one that there was no easy solution to, and I recall that almost everything that he would talk about, in time, he would relate it back to how it would affect our balance of payments.

We not only had discussions about it at the Legislative Breakfasts, but he talked with me about it on other occasions to the point where I finally got a book on balance of payments from the Library of Congress so that I would be somewhat more knowledgeable than I was. As was always the case, I never ceased to be impressed and surprised at the capacity, the sponge-like capacity, of this fellow's mind to assimilate facts, and he thoroughly appreciated the magnitude of the problem and the necessity of doing something about it. I know, of course, that's why he always talked about it. I think he began at the time of his - November - he began to get on top of the problem about the time of his assassination. I think he would have been very pleased at the latest developments in the balance of payments question. I saw where Roosa made a statement the other day to the American Chamber of Commerce that he felt as if the problem was really under control. But the credit is deserved by President Kennedy for getting it under control.

[-2D-]

WILSON: One thing you told me was that when you first got to know the President, he wasn't interested in economic matters. It would be interesting to know how much he changed, if you could give some illustrations of his personal problems as far as money was concerned.

SMATHER: I'm certain that he had no conception how difficult it was to make money, nor did he have any idea of the value of money, and I remember when he was first a Congressman and we traveled together in Europe one time, (we went on a couple of other trips together here in the United States) that he was a fellow who would frequently take off on a trip without a single penny in his pocket, never conscious of the fact that somebody had to pick up the bill.

I think the family ran a thing through the Comptroller's office -- not of the United States -- they had their own Comptroller -- and they just signed checks and sent bills, and so on, to this address in New York and that's all there was to it. And I recall being with him on several occasions where I specifically asked if he had any money with him. And he would reach into his shirt pocket, (it didn't take me long as a young fellow to know that when a fellow reached into his shirt pocket he didn't have any) -- and Kennedy obviously didn't have any and didn't know much

[-3D-]

about it and he wouldn't come up with it. He would reach into what used to be a watch pocket and hunt there for a crumpled up \$20 bill, which Lord knows how long it had been there, and he was always as surprised as anybody else to see what it was.

I remember after Kennedy was elected to the Senate that one time Joe Kennedy, his father, came by to see me and said to me, "Someday I want to come down and talk to you about Jack's finances, because he has absolutely no understanding of it and won't stop and talk with me long enough for him to understand it, and I know that you and he have seen a good deal of each other and I would like to tell you something about it, so that you might tell him what the financial situation is and where his money comes from and things of that kind." This was before Joe -- I should say Ambassador Kennedy, I have a tremendous respect for him -- before he got angry with me in the spring of 1960 when I ran as Favorite Son for the presidency from Florida. I was, in effect, forced into it by the local situation, but Joe Kennedy didn't appreciate it a bit even though Jack and I discussed it very frankly and talked about it many times. Joe took umbrage at my decision to run as Favorite Son and I regret to say that I don't think he ever really forgave me for it. But back to his finances, -- I was always

[-4D-]

surprised at his concern, and I used to say facetiously to him if you protect the money of the United States government the way you have protected your own, nobody will ever have to fear we will run a deficit because you give the impression of being the tightest fellow in the world with your own money. And it was not that I think that he was tight, it was just that he never did carry any -- he really didn't know how much to spend it.

WILSON: You derived a system when you traveled together --

SMATHERS: Yes, where I would pay the bills and then I would go around and see him and say this is for your half, and he would somehow -- Evelyn Lincoln would get me my half back. But he was not a man who concerned himself at all with any personal wealth or any money matters at all.

WILSON: Let's discuss for a few minutes his relationship with Congress after he became President and maybe a good place to start is his relationship with you on political matters. In 1961 there were a number of measures you voted on opposite from his position. What kind of a -- and then as I recall there was some (interruption) --

SMATHERS: I don't recall off hand what those things were, but I do know this, -- he was always satisfied. Do you remember what some of these were?

[-5D-]

WILSON: I looked it up. I looked up some articles in the newspapers, where it said

Smathers was his best friend --

SMATHERS: O, yeah. Drew Pearson gave me hell every couple of days saying Smathers goes over to the White House and eats breakfast and accepts Kennedy's hospitality and then kicks him in the shins, and so on.

WILSON: Well, in 1961, the year when your support was about 56% of the President, the main things I found were, first, unemployment compensation, which lost by a close vote of 42 to 44 in the Senate, remember that one?

SMATHERS: Unemployment Compensation Act -- frankly, as I remember, I supported that Act -- I thought I supported that. Maybe, -- see, what would happen would be this. This is not particularly flattering to me -- but anyway what would happen would be this. I would say to him, if they actually needed my vote he could get it, but if the outcome was evident from the start and if my vote would make no difference then I would vote with my Southern colleagues. So this is why, actually, Kennedy was never unhappy particularly with me. There were very few things which he knew I was going to vote directly against him on -- such as medicare. He knew I was going to vote against him on that -- I told him I was going to vote directly against him. I had learned that the thing to do with Kennedy, as well as with everybody else, was -- when you took a position you took it early. Then there would be

[-6D-]

no misunderstanding. At one time there was some misunderstanding -- I remember that he called me here on the phone -- when he got irritated he would say, God Almighty, can't you vote with me on this one? I expected you to vote with me. And I would say, now Mr. President, I told you a couple of weeks ago, and I told Larry O'Brien, don't count on me on this particular vote. I can't survive from where I come from -- (you see, I had to run in 1962) -- I can't survive by casting votes for some of these programs.

There was one time -- I don't recall exactly what it was -- if I looked back I could tell -- but he was very irritated because he called over here twice -- he had my private line -- Evelyn Lincoln would get me and he would just pop right on, you know, and just start right off, -- we just have to have this vote.

WILSON: Was it aid to schools or federally impacted areas?

SMATHERS: I voted for that.

WILSON: Huh-uh. According to the --

SMATHERS: You see, in our State -- I don't know Don -- we had better check it -- I wish John O'Keefe was here.

WILSON: This obviously reflects the concern of --

SMATHERS: Yeah. Unemployment compensation -- I voted for the foreign aid bill --

WILSON: Well, I may have made a mistake there.

SMATHERS: We're very strongly for that, and as a matter of fact, I voted for this -- this is one area I vote for --

[-7D-]

I vote for schools -- federal aid to schools. I always have -- and supported Kennedy in that very strongly.

WILSON: The important thing I really want to establish is -- not really how the votes went, but what kind of a relationship existed when you voted against him.

SMATHERS: Our relationship evolved after the first run-in we had. Over what bill it was I don't really recall. I think it could have been the Mass Transit bill. Or it could have been Urban Renewal. With Weaver. It could have been the effort to make Weaver a Cabinet officer. There were several things in that area on which I opposed him.

Now, I had learned that with him it was better for me to just say to him -- and I would work it out so I would see him by myself -- Mr. President, I am not going to be able to support you and I would appreciate your not publicly excoriating me over there at the Legislative Breakfast, and if you want to know why I can't vote this way we will go into it and talk about it. And for a while there he would use those Legislative Breakfasts in front of everybody to give me the needle on something on which I was not supporting him. But he stopped that after I had gone to him and said it was pretty embarrassing and I didn't like it and it would encourage these other fellows to say the same thing and I couldn't help but come back at them, whereas, of course, I would not have come back on

[-8D-]

the President. But, in any event, I don't think that any votes we had, except the first one, in any way ever interfered with our personal relationship. It was Drew Pearson that made me look so ungrateful. He's written several uncomplimentary articles since I came up here and I expect him to write several more before the year's out. But, in any event, it never really disturbed our personal relationship.

[END OF TAPE I]

[-9D-]

WILSON: Tell about how you ran your respective offices.

SMATHERS: When we were Congressmen our offices were very close together and we occupied offices in the old Senate Office Building on the same floor, and I used to think he ran a very sloppy office. He apparently used to think the same of mine. But I noticed that when I began to do something, he was very alert -- he used to wander through my office a good deal -- and he would pick up the better things really quickly. I heard Evelyn Lincoln say, or someone in his office, maybe Ted Reardon, Jack's Administrative Assistant there for a while -- Jack would go back to his office and say they're doing it up in Smathers' office this way. And I would go down to his office and it would always seem as if so much pandemonium such a disarray, poor, sweet Evelyn Lincoln just overwhelmed with books and papers. She took care of Kennedy's schedule. Everyone in his back office was very friendly, but it didn't seem to me as though there was any organization to it, and I used to tell him so. He would bounce right back at me and say -- Well, he had noticed various things about my office that he didn't approve of, and maybe in some instances he was right. I recall we rearranged our whole reception room one time on his recommendation, but he did nothing with his own office. He was the kid of a fellow whose mind was on bigger things. I never did feel that he was a well organized man either

[-1E-]

in his personal life or in just the mundane things of running an office. It just didn't occur to him; it didn't make a great deal of difference how the work was done. Somehow, Don, if the work got done that was about all that really concerned him.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-2E-]