

W. Stuart Symington Oral History Interview—JFK #2, 9/4/1964
Administrative Information

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W. Stuart Symington (1901-1988) was a Senator from Missouri from 1953 to 1976, who ran as a presidential candidate in the 1960 election. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s commitment to scientific progress during the space race, Symington's role within the Kennedy administration, and JFK's interest in advancing the civil rights movement, among other issues.

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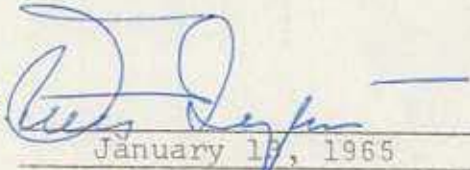
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Oral History Interview

with

W. STUART SYMINGTON

September 4, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Pat Holt

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HOLT: I wanted to ask you, Senator, about the missile gap and your discussion of it with Mr. Kennedy either while he was Senator or after he became President.

SYMINGTON: We discussed it several times. The figures in question were given us by Mr. Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, a man of ability and integrity. He cut his own estimates 96 ½ percent in less than two years. I wrote a story about this controversy, as a matter of fact, in the *Reporter* magazine, a story which gives the facts and percentages. At the time Dulles gave us the first figures, the gap was heavily against us. He reduced those figures three times to a point where the gap largely disappeared. Between late 1959 and mid-1961, believe it or not, the number of ICBM's (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) the Central Intelligence

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Agency stated they believed the Soviet Union had on launching pads was reduced 96 ½ percent. So, if there was a missile gap, it was created by Mr. Dulles in the Eisenhower Administration; and if there was an elimination of the missile gap, it was eliminated by Mr. Dulles, still the head of the CIA agency, in the Kennedy Administration. Let me emphasize,

however, that the result of Mr. Dulles' original figures created a tremendous impetus to our own defense programs. We certainly wouldn't have the number of Polaris submarines -- nuclear submarines with megaton weapons on them -- roaming the seas of the world, which we do have today. Nor would we have the number of Minuteman is the modern, solid-fuel, third-generation ICBM. With the Polaris it is one of our two greatest strategic weapons. The

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impetus for the rapid development and production of these weapons came from the so-called missile gap. So there's the silver lining. I don't know anybody except the more radical advocates of the theory of overkill, who would want to take a single current missile away from the defenses of the United States. Therefore, I believe that President Kennedy's position on the missile gap was of great merit to the defenses of the United States.

HOLT: Do you remember any specific conversations you had with Mr. Kennedy about this subject? What you said; what he said at any particular time?

SYMINGTON: Well, I remember that we both said that we hoped Mr. Dulles was right -- that the CIA was right -- because that could only be of benefit to the United States, its strength as against the strength of the Soviets. But, also, we regretted the estimates were so far off because

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the estimate of what the possible enemy has is one of the two or three primary considerations recognized by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their presentation to the Secretary of Defense and the President as to what *we* would have. And we were very worried about this hard line information being so far off. I think much of that now has been corrected due to various things which have developed in that particular agency.

HOLT: Well, let's move now to your associations with Mr. Kennedy while he was President. I have a list taken from his appointment books of the times that you saw him during those years. And I'd like to run over this and ask you as to anything you remember about the specific meetings. I noticed the first three on here involve Mr. Paul Fay -- two games of golf with him, and his swearing-in ceremony as Under Secretary of the Navy,

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which you attended. Was he a friend of yours, or were you his... did you discuss with the President his appointment as Under Secretary of the Navy?

SYMINGTON: No. Paul Fay (Red, as we call him) is one of the President's closest friends. He was with him in the Southwest Pacific. He was a Republican;

for all I know still is. He had a tremendous belief in the future of President Kennedy, to the point when he first ran for Congress, young Fay left San Francisco and went to Boston and lived in a hotel and worked for the President to be elected to Congress from Massachusetts. In addition to that, he gave the President a great lift. He is a natural wit and many's the time time you'd see them bantering each other about something that had to do with the Irish. Ray Fay literally worshipped the President and the President found him relaxing and

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a devoted friend. It happens that Fay and I are related through marriage. It's a little complicated. My father's brother married his father's sister. So I've known him and his family for forty years. He is a fine golfer, and therefore it was a natural thing, with Senator Smathers, for us to play when the President had an opportunity. As you know, he hurt his back a bit later and stopped playing for a while. He was far better than anybody realized, had a beautiful swing; and Smathers is a good golfer, and so Fay and Smathers would sort of square off against each other and the President and I. I remember one time we played when snow was on the ground, and we used sticks to putt instead of a hole. The President was uncannily able to hit these sticks, much to Smathers' and my disgust, and much to the delight of his partner Fay. He'd like to get off by himself, but it was difficult to do -- I

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remember one place, large crowds gathered and so he'd have the car come up and pick him up on the course. He was, as you know, a modest person, and he'd avoid coming into the final hole and meeting all the people when they heard he was on the course.

HOLT: Well, let's... the next item on this list is the swearing in ceremony of General LeMay as Chief of Staff of the Air Force. I presume this was a routine ceremonial occasion unless you remember something particularly about the President there that wouldn't otherwise be on the record, we can move onto the next thing which is the 17th of July, 1961, when the Foreign Relations Committee, or at least some members of it including you, met with the President off the record. That was at about the time when the foreign aid bill was before Congress. It was also the time of one of the Berlin crises. Do you remember this meeting?

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SYMINGTON: No.

HOLT: Was it about foreign aid, or Berlin, or something else?

SYMINGTON: No, I can't remember.

HOLT: Do you remember the next one -- the evening on board the Honey Fitz on the 19th of July in '61?

SYMINGTON: I was on there several times with the President. I can't remember this in detail, but I believe Secretary and Mrs. Dillon, my wife and I, were on that particular trip. It was always pleasant. As you know, he liked the sea as few people do. And he relaxed on the Honey Fitz or on any boat or ship, at least as much as anybody I've ever known. But I can't remember the details about that one.

HOLT: The next one here is on the 31st of August when you and some others spent an hour with the President and

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this meeting was about the resumption of Soviet nuclear testing which was announced the following day. Either with respect to this particular meeting on the 31st of August, or other times for that matter, can you tell us anything about your contacts with the President in regard to nuclear testing?

SYMINGTON: The President was anxious to obtain some form of nuclear test agreement with the Russians, but he also was anxious not to be pocketed. Therefore, he was very interested in the details of the matter before the Military Preparedness Subcommittee. We'd had considerable discussion, witnesses, etc. And as I remember it, what we were talking about -- well, of course, when the Russians started to resume testing, it was very important for us to resume, which we did.

HOLT: After about six months.

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SYMINGTON: But my position was that we should test immediately if they continued to test, because otherwise they would be ahead of us in the art. And at that time there were a lot of rumors floating around the breakthroughs in the nuclear picture. Much of it had to do with the yield to weight, which of course is vitally important. And much of it had to do with a death ray bomb, etc. There was a lot of talk going around. In any case, some of us were strong to have testing resumed. That was true (noticing who was there) of Senator Hickenlooper and myself especially, perhaps.

HOLT: What was the President's reaction to this?

SYMINGTON: I think he was being pulled by different thinking. There was a group that felt we should not resume testing; that we should resume discussions. And he was always a man who was careful to get the opinions of everybody

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before he made a decision. The fact we were ahead, in the opinion of many, in the art, certainly in quantity, may have been one of the reasons why there was some delay. But he made the right decision in the end.

HOLT: You were there again on the 19th of September in 1961 with the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee. Secretary McNamara was also there. This was a period when the question of nuclear testing was active. Vietnam was active. There was also a question at that time about production of B-52's and about whether or not to proceed with the B-70. Was that meeting about one of these things or about something else?

SYMINGTON: I can't remember.

HOLT: You saw him also on the 24th of January in 1962 by yourself for half an hour. Do you remember what that was about?

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SYMINGTON: If I was by myself, it might well have been some problem in Missouri, some particular legislation we wanted passed for the benefit of the state. I would never have stayed that long if he didn't have something on his mind. But to be honest, I can't remember what it was.

HOLT: In May of 1962 you went with the President to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

SYMINGTON: But you've left out a lunch for King Saud there, which... I do remember that.

HOLT: Oh, fine. Tell us about that.

SYMINGTON: A few days before that dinner the President had a delightful small dinner-dance at the White House, and we (my wife and I) had gone. When the Saudi Arabians came in for their lunch none of them could talk English, from the King down. There might've been one or two but nobody near me could and nobody near the President

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could. So the place was loaded with interpreters, in back. It went along all right, but it was pretty labored. About three-quarters of the way through lunch (this is typical, one of the delightful aspects of President Kennedy) I got a message, brought down in very formal

fashion by the headwaiter. He said, "The President would like you to read this, please." And I opened it. It was a note he'd written on a card -- guest card (place card) -- it said "I think we're having more fun now than we had the other night, don't you?"

Eglin Field you were referring to -- that was a tremendously effective presentation of the rapidity with which B-52's could take off. The Air Force had worked out a plan whereby they could leave a field faster than ever before. I think it was about every thirty seconds one took off. For big bombers, that was quite a development. They had all the plans

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for abortion, from the standpoint of ground abortion. They literally had two bombers on the same runway at the same time. It was impressive. In addition, they had a ship up several thousand feet with amplification I had never seen before. A man said from the airplane, "Welcome, Mr. President, to Eglin Field," just as if he was standing by him. That read on one of the apprehensions some of us have had about the control of space. If a man came over Washington in some form of space ship and said, "Welcome to everybody in Washington. There's nothing on here to harm you in any way. We expect to give this message to London in twenty minutes. But we don't like the way you're acting in the Far East," or something to that effect, the psychological impact of such a voice out of the sky would be tremendous. And we discussed, I remember, that possibility, as a result of this breakthrough in amplification.

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HOLT: What was the President's reactin?

SYMINGTON: Interesting. He was always interested in discussing those matters. He felt very strongly the importance of this country maintaining a position in space.

HOLT: Did you go to Eglin with the PResident, or did you meet him there?

SYMINGTON: I can't remember. I believe I went one way with him and one way not with him, but I'm not sure.

HOLT: Do you remember what you talked about with him on the plane?

SYMINGTON: No, I think he was working.

HOLT: A few days later, you and Father Reinert met the President for half an hour off the record. Do you remember what that was about?

SYMINGTON: Father Reinert had wanted to see him and asked him to come out to St. Louis.

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HOLT: Maybe you'd better identify Father Reinert.

SYMINGTON: Yes. Paul Reinert is a member of the order of the Jesuits. He's the President of St. Louis University, one of the great men I've known. He was one of only two or three people (constituents of mine) that I ever asked the President to see alone, knowing his tremendous time problem. And I remember the President was amused that Father Reinert and I had on the same suit, the same pattern. He got a big kick out of it because Father Reinert thought when he bought the suit it was black, yet it had a little blue in it which was not in accordance with the rules. He got it from his father, who is in the clothing business in Denver. Father Reinert is quite a man and the President was taken with him. I remember that the first thing Father Reinert said when he came out was, "I had no idea he

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was that big a man." We had our pictures taken. Father Reinert's a pretty big man and the President was at least as big, and he mentioned that to me again (Father Reinert did) that the President was a much larger man than most people thought. He had a way of stooping, but as evidenced in a bathing suit, he was a well built person, as the saying goes, and I remember Father Reinert was much impressed with the fact, also with his knowledge and charm and personality.

HOLT: Do you remember what you talked about?

SYMINGTON: I think he wanted the President to come out of Missouri. I can't remember. It might have been something else. My mind just doesn't embrace it.

HOLT: The next thing on here except for what were apparently ceremonial occasions was April in 1963 when you saw the President off the record by yourself. Do you remember what that was?

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SYMINGTON: No.

HOLT: What about your meeting with him in June of '63 with True David and Senator Long of Missouri?

SYMINGTON: Well, that was preparatory to True Davis becoming Ambassador to Switzerland.

HOLT: That should be Davis instead of David.

SYMINGTON: Davis, yes. D-A-V-I-S. We were very high on (Senator Long and I) Ambassador Davis, and we wanted the President to meet him. And we had a pleasant talk. The President was impressed with him and several months afterward, offered him that position.

HOLT: Can you remember the conversation at this meeting? What the President said, or what...?

SYMINGTON: No, I can't remember.

HOLT: In July of 1963, there was a social hour for Members of Congress at the White House, after which you and Senator

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Gore saw the President and Secretary Rusk. Do you remember what this was about?

SYMINGTON: I think it had to do with Foreign Relations. I also remember at that meeting that one of the Senators from a state not considered a Southern state, or even a border state, was emphatic in believing that the civil rights issue was going to become a major issue and that it could hurt the Democratic Party. I remember President Kennedy was startled to find this was a problem in that particular state. They had a discussion about it. He expected to have, you might say, warnings of the growing problem from Southerners, but I think he was startled by this state.

HOLT: What state was it?

SYMINGTON: I'd rather not say. I know that presentation was made on the belief in the state in question, a mountain

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state, that property rights were going to be interfered with under the public accommodations decision the Administration seemed to be advancing. The President was extremely interested. You could always tell when his mind began really to close in on a subject; his questions were sharp and he wanted to be sure he understood just exactly what was being presented to him. Afterwards, when Secretary Rusk came, to be honest I don't remember what was said at that time.

HOLT: This was at the time the negotiations for the test ban treaty were coming to a head. Could that have been it?

SYMINGTON: Yes, could well have been. This treaty... it's true it went before both Committees and perhaps that was the reason for the meeting.

HOLT: Did you discuss the test ban treaty with the President at any time, either at this time or some other time?

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SYMINGTON: We talked about it. Yes indeed.

HOLT: Can you remember those conversations?

SYMINGTON: He wanted a test ban treaty as a possible step towards peace; but he didn't want one unfavorable to the United States. That was the nub of the talk.

He was, just as in those magnificent days of the confrontation in Cuba, he was perfectly willing to do what was right, but he wasn't willing to do anything that was unilaterally harmful to the country. That, to me, was his consistent policy as characterized by the confrontation, also by his position on the test ban treaty. The kernel of that, Pat, was that underground testing you couldn't detect anyway, and as I remember it, the discussion went over that pretty thoroughly. You had the question of decoupling, a point Dr. Edward Teller had made, and I thought the President's decision incident to that

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particular point, which was the stickiest wicket, you might say, in the discussions of the treaty -- the position the President finally took -- as expressed in the treaty -- was right.

HOLT: There was another meeting on the 10th of October in '63 with you, Senators Fulbright and Church, which was off-the-record. Do you remember that? Could it have been about the aid bill; could it have been about the wheat sale to Russia?

SYMINGTON: I think that to some extent Frank Church and I were taken to the woodshed a little bit about our opposition to certain aspects of the aid program. I think that our Chairman, bless his heart, Senator Fulbright, thought maybe the President could have some influence on us. As you know, I got what might be called a belly full

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of aid to India at the same time we were being so bitterly criticized by some of the Indians in high office in their government, like Krishna Menon. It might be explainable to some people, especially ultra-sophisticated people on the East Coast, but it was very difficult to explain in

my state. In my opinion it was even more difficult to explain to someone like Ayub Khan of Pakistan. I remember we discussed that, and felt the President had considerable sympathy with our position.

HOLT: Do you remember what the President said?

SYMINGTON: No, I would have to be entirely accurate in reminiscing about that, otherwise I might misquote him. But I did feel that he was sympathetic with our position, and I think that as a result of some of us taking this position, the President helped us a bit with Secretary

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Rusk. To Ambassador Galbraith I would also give credit for pointing out to Mr. Nehru that it just couldn't go on this way. Of course, the biggest of all assistance was the collapse of the Indian Army in the face of the Chinese aggression.

HOLT: Did you ever discuss the wheat sale to the Soviet Union with the President?

SYMINGTON: Not that I remember.

HOLT: What was this shoe industry meeting which took place on the 17th of October?

SYMINGTON: The shoe industry is a tremendously important industry to Missouri. The country has hundreds and hundreds of shoe plants. The average number of works is 180 per plant. Therefore, it's an ideal type and character of operation to put in a small town where low agriculture

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prices had affected the economy; loss to the farms incident to consolidation of agriculture. The shoe people were bitter about the amount of imports that were coming into this country, especially from Japan and Italy. We presented our picture to the President, who came from the largest shoe producing state. Mine is second, incidentally. That was the reason for that meeting.

HOLT: What was the President's reaction?

SYMINGTON: Well, it was guarded. He has the problem, if you leave out foreign aid and tourism and off-shore military expenditures, you still have a favorable

balance of trade for us. But I think he was sympathetic. He said that he'd take it up with the Tarriff Commission and Christian Herter and other people involved in that particular area. It's still a problem. We saw President Johnson about it not too long ago.

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HOLT: The last item on this list is a meeting you and Senator Long and Representative Bolling had off-the-record with the President on the 30th of October. Do you remember that one?

SYMINGTON: My belief is it was a desire to get the President out to talk in Kansas City. I think he accepted.

HOLT: There's just one other thing here. At the end of January in 1962, the President asked for a Congressional investigation of stockpiling, which you subsequently presided over. What were your contacts, if any with the President on this general question of stockpiling?

SYMINGTON: It became clear that the stockpile had been used to maintain the economy, not to recognize our military needs; and that heavy profits had been made, with virtually no risk, by some people. I had refused to conduct this investigation since it came to our attention

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back in 1955, unless the Executive Branch would declassify the papers involved in it. The President (Kennedy) said that he would like to have some of his people look into it -- his own personal staff -- which they did. Then he declassified the papers and said he'd like to see the investigation proceed. I would talk with him periodically about it. We have today an 8 ½ billion stockpile -- billions of dollars more than the agricultural stockpile you hear so much about. Over five billion dollars of that is now considered unnecessary, from the standpoint of our security, which, under law, is the only jurisdiction for having any stockpiles. In the process of piling up billions in what is not wanted, some people made unconscionable profits (which was the President's word -- unconscionable) with little or no risk. After the most unfortunate death of Senator Case of South Dakota it became a

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partisan matter, which it had not been before. As a result of this investigation, which the President wanted, we now have legislation before the Senate unanimously passed out of the Subcommittee and also unanimously passed and sent to the Senate Floor by the full Committee.

HOLT: That's all I've got unless you can think of something else.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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