

Esther E. Peterson, Oral History Interview—JFK#1, 5/18/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Peterson was a legislative representative for the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO (1958-1961); Assistant Secretary for Labor Standards (1961-1969), and Director of the Women's Bureau (1961-1964) in the Department of Labor; and Executive Vice Chairman of the President's Commission on the Status of Women (1961-1963). In this interview, she discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) work on labor-management issues during his years in Congress, organizing labor support for JFK in the 1960 presidential campaign, and her appointment to the Labor Department under JFK, among other issues.

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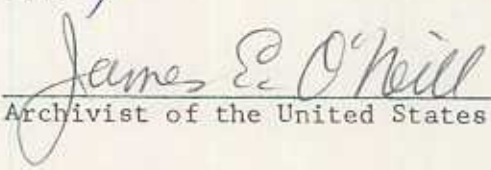
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Esther E. Peterson—JFK#1

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First of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Esther E. Peterson

May 18, 1966
Washington D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mrs. Peterson, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

PETERSON: Yes. It was after he had been elected to Congress in 1946. I was then working as legislative representative for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers [Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America]. I was assigned to call on him as one of the new congressmen to work on the minimum wage question at that time, and we were very anxious to increase the minimum. I recall meeting him, and being impressed by this young man. The thing that I liked about him so much was the honesty of his questions. He asked me some fundamental questions about the differences between various pieces of labor legislation, for example. And I recall becoming a teacher again, and discussing these with him. He had such an uninhibited, wonderful way of getting at the kind of information he wanted. And right then and there I knew I was going to enjoy working with him because of his nice, clear way of focusing on the issue at hand. And it was rather “unpolitical” which was kind of nice for me because I had been going around to other members of his committee, and I’d always had to deal with the political issues. I am sure these issues were very high in Mr. Kennedy’s mind but first he wanted the basic issues of the legislation itself. He kept coming back at me very hard. “But why? But why?”

GRELE: Do you recall any specific...

PETERSON: Well, we were discussing the Wagner Act and the organization of workers and we were discussing whether or not the additional minimum wage coverage would cause unemployment. I scold myself now for not having kept a diary of all of it. But I have a very warm recollection of an extremely interesting time, and a time when I felt that here was a good man with a very bright mind. I remember coming home and telling my husband, "Here is someone who is going to go places." I continued to work with him a good deal because he was on the Labor Committee and had a

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good deal of responsibility. And, of course, I was lobbying in that field.

GRELE: Was this when he went to the Senate?

PETERSON: No. This was in the House,

GRELE: How would you describe his comprehension of the whole field of labor-management relations?

PETERSON: Well, he was very new to it. He was very new to it at that time. I was impressed with him because of the kind of information he'd ask for. It was definitely a learning period, but he didn't pretend to know what he didn't know, and you knew always that he'd make up his mind for himself on a lot of these issues. He certainly understood the nature of his district, and the political background behind his battle in getting there. He was not well versed in the labor field at that time but he was certainly learning.

GRELE: In terms of his voting position, would you characterize him as pro-labor, anti-labor, or independent?

PETERSON: At that time, I'd have to review.... I would think certainly not pro-labor, and it wasn't anti-labor. At that period it was independent, I would think.

GRELE: You don't recall any particular issues that you discussed with him at that time?

PETERSON: Well, it was always the minimum wage issues, and also unemployment insurance. I remember we were discussing that too. And I recall we were beginning to talk a good deal then about federal standards. Of course, he was a very good politician. When you're talking to a labor person, you're not going to take an anti-labor position, but you're going to argue and you're going to present points of view. His door was always open. There was always a very friendly atmosphere and he'd call from time to time and ask for information. I always appreciated the kind of association I had with him.

GRELE: As a congressman from Massachusetts, did he talk to you as a representative of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers about the problems in the textile mills in the South?

PETERSON: Oh. Yes, I remember we did discuss that a good deal. That's very true.

GRELE: What was his position?

PETERSON: Well, I think at that time he was concerned about it, but I think he also was protective of his own constituents.

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GRELE: In 1958 you became the legislative representative of the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization].

PETERSON: That's right.

GRELE: Do you recall Senator Kennedy in those days when he was very actively involved in labor affairs?

PETERSON: Very definitely. I had left in '48 to go abroad with my husband [Oliver A. Peterson] on his Foreign Service assignment. One of the days that I remember—it doesn't add a great deal to the factual information, but it's something that meant a great deal to me because I had worked with him in '46 as you know. I came back and took a position with the Industrial Union Department, and I'll never forget, I was over on the Senate side one day and all of a sudden I heard someone say, "Esther, where have you been?" And I was so pleased that he remembered me after more than ten years. And then at that point we began working again. The first thing I worked with him on then, and I'll just have to check my records a little bit to remember, but I think it was on the federal standards for unemployment insurance, when we picked this up. And that was one of my major assignments. He was splendid on that issue, just splendid. He had grown so much. I mean he was so different from when he first came to Congress. Now he had full and mature comprehension of the issues. He had extremely good, competent people working with him. This is when I first worked with Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman], and with Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] and people on his staff—and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen].

GRELE: Would you say that his comprehension of the whole field of labor-management relations had increased?

PETERSON: Oh, very much. No question about it. A tremendous amount had happened during that period, while I had been away.

GRELE: Did he ever discuss with you the labor legislation which he introduced in

that year, 1958, the Kennedy-Ives bill?

PETERSON: Well, that was the big subject of course. He did. Sometimes when I was with other people; sometimes alone. But I was part of a team, then, of lobbyists who were working for the AFL-CIO position on this matter.

GRELE: What do you think was the genesis of that bill? Or his reasons for attempting to get labor legislation at that time?

PETERSON: Well, I think he definitely felt that there was a need in the country for something of this kind. And I don't think it was an anti-labor move either. I think he was in touch with many people who were trying to help labor see some of the changes that many felt labor had to accept.

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GRELE: How much of an effect do you think the McClellan Committee [Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management] hearings had on him?

PETERSON: Oh, I think they had a marked effect on him. Very definitely.

GRELE: Did you ever discuss this?

PETERSON: No. I didn't discuss the McClellan hearings with him. Of course, these things were all tied in so closely together, and my memory isn't terribly clear about the very sharp distinctions in a lot of these areas. I'm aware of them as part of a difficult political period. This is when labor began to feel very much concerned about the position he had taken. Which in many cases I felt was not quite justified.

GRELE: Do you recall who was critical of the position he had taken, and why you felt it was unjustified?

PETERSON: I've got to think that out carefully to remember why and to mention names. It's true. They were. Very definitely. It was a difficult period for all of us.

GRELE: I have interviewed a congressman who was very deeply involved in some of that legislation when it finally got to the House, and he has told me that he has never quite understood what the labor position was. Do you recall what the labor position was on the Kennedy-Ervin bill?

PETERSON: Oh, I should remember.

GRELE: This was the bill...

PETERSON: That was the bill, I know. But I'm just trying to remember specifically what the provisions were, and I'll have to refresh my memory on that. I'll do that and I'll try to look up what that was. That's when we were really having our problems, really having our problems. And I think labor was very reluctant at that period to accept supervisions that maybe later they have felt they could have and maybe should accepted.

GRELE: The original bill, as I understand it, did not contain any amendments to the Taft-Hartley Act. Were the amendments that were encompassed in Article Six or Title Six of the bill, as amendments to the Taft-Hartley Act, were they introduced at the behest of labor?

PETERSON: I don't remember.

GRELE: Maybe when you get the transcript you can fill in here.

PETERSON: Yes, I will.

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GRELE: If you want to look that up.

PETERSON: You know, these things you have to be terribly accurate about, and I just don't want to—I haven't thought about this for fifteen years.

GRELE: Did he at any time discuss with you the strategy of passage of this bill?

PETERSON: Yes, I think we all worked pretty much together on that. I was working with the labor people of course.

GRELE: They were for the Kennedy-Ervin bill?

PETERSON: For the Kennedy-Ervin bill. But then a lot of changes had been made in it. There were changes as the bill moved along and it's very difficult to make a blanket statement without reference to specific periods. You see it was one thing in 1956, it was different in Committee; it was different after the action in the House.

GRELE: Do you recall that period of time when the conference committee was meeting on the Landrum-Griffin bill?

PETERSON: I certainly do. We parked outside the Supreme Court room. I remember that so well. But I'll have to think about that and refresh my memory a

little bit on these issues. Some of the points affected unions that we were concerned with in the matter of industry-wide bargaining and some of the disclosure points. I'd probably think that out for another interview and get my mind straight on that. I'd hate not to discuss that without having it clear in my mind, because those are rather sensitive points, as I'm sure you're aware.

GRELE: Do you recall John F. Kennedy's temperament at this time in talking to him?

PETERSON: Yes, I do. I do know that it was very tense a lot of the time. And you could feel the tension. As to my relations with him, I guess because I'm a woman [laughter]—he certainly never showed anything like anger. I'll never forget when he stopped me one day, and said, "Why are they feeling this way about me? Why are they saying things about me?" I can still see him asking that and standing on the Senate steps. There was some difficulty in communication sometimes between him and some of the labor people. Of course, a lot of this developed in the tension of the time. Although he did feel very strongly about many of the points, I was much impressed by his calm evenness. But I think there was sort of a feeling of "why?" his not understanding, because he had always made a great effort to be reasonable.

GRELE: How heavily do you think he relied on Archibald Cox?

PETERSON: I think a great deal.

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GRELE: Were you satisfied with his reliance on Archibald Cox?

PETERSON: At times, yes, and then there were times, no. And you were never sure whether it was the Senator or whether it was Archie. And then the question of which way a matter would go; you'd have to figure—it was an awfully fluid period; but yes, he did rely on him.

GRELE: Do you recall at the time your reactions to Senator Morse's [Wayne L. Morse] criticisms of Senator Kennedy?

PETERSON: Actually, I was not as close to him as I was on some of the other issues. I must say I was not one of the very close ones. It was Mr. Biemiller [Andrew J. Biemiller] and a lot of the others who were on kind of day-to-day footing with him. I was on the fringe to pick up some of the odd jobs in relation to the bill. It was not my major assignment. But it was an extremely tense period, I do remember that. A lot of it was caused, it seems to me, from a resentment of this young man.

GRELE: As a young man?

PETERSON: Yes, I think so. I remember some of them speaking as if he wasn't even dry behind the ears. You know, the kind of things that are said about a young, bright person. I always felt very sympathetic because it seemed to me that he was trying to approach us and get us to understand the political realities of life, it was quite understandable that there would be these feelings of resentment toward him.

GRELE: Did you have any contact with him on the various minimum wage bills of those years?

PETERSON: Yes. I did.

GRELE: When he was chairman of the subcommittee on the minimum wage, how could you characterize his work on these bills?

PETERSON: He was good on that. I remember I was working to get Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] to come in. And one thing that I do remember was that...

GRELE: Came where?

PETERSON: What?

GRELE: Coming...

PETERSON: Coming to testify. And things were rather tense between Mrs. Roosevelt and Kennedy at that time. And I remember her giving extremely good testimony and I also remember that he didn't come down and speak with her, when almost always this would be done.

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And I remember saying to myself, "Oh, Senator." It bothered me.

GRELE: Did it bother Mrs. Roosevelt?

PETERSON: You wouldn't know it. She didn't show it. And this time I felt she was the bigger person. Things were tense, but she did give splendid and moving testimony, I remember feeling that distinctly. But there was certainly feeling there—the political overtones were present.

GRELE: In 1959, Senator Clark [Joseph S. Clark] was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying, "If Sonny Boy gets back from the cricks and hollows"—from his campaigning obviously—"we'll get a minimum wage bill this year." Do you feel that this is a fair representation of John Kennedy's work on the subcommittee?

PETERSON: Well, yes. He was campaigning. There is no doubt about that. We did have problems with it, but not only were we having those problems; we were having problems with lobbyists who were putting other stumbling blocks in the way. I mean it was a combination of a lot of things that were happening at that time. But he certainly was going around, heavily. But we all know the legislative process enough to know that a lot of these things can move, in spite of the forces that set us back. I'm thinking of the loggers's exemption, for example, and some of the others, where he did very well. Oh, a lot of the times, I know I can remember...

GRELE: The loggers's exemption?

PETERSON: The loggers, yes.

GRELE: Exemption from...

PETERSON: From the minimum wage provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act. It was one of the exemptions that seemed, really, extremely sad as far as I'm concerned because a lot of people in the South were making nothing and the big paper companies were just saying they couldn't afford to cover them, and at the moment they were exempt, yet they made out pitifully. But in this case, I'll have to check that out, but it was Kennedy or Morse that really finally came through and helped us get that testimony. I'll check that out because it is an extremely interesting little thing. But as I look back on it, and I do remember then that I would have liked to have a little bit more attention, but I also know that there was tension between the others within the committee because a lot of them couldn't move on with it. I didn't like them all pointing the finger 'cause a lot of them were guilty too. It was not just one area.

GRELE: Were you ever approached in 1959 or sounded out about the candidacy of John Kennedy for the presidential nomination?

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PETERSON: Well, there was talk all around about that. That's when all the line-ups were sort of being formed and there were questions on all sides. Are you going to be with Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]? Are you going to be with Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]? Are you for Kennedy? Symington [Stuart Symington II]? For anyone who was around the corridors in those days, certainly there was a great deal of this talk. Yes.

GRELE: Where did your sympathies lie?

PETERSON: Mine quite early rested with Kennedy. And I recall—oh, I wish I had a diary and kept the dates of this. I'm trying to remember the time when he

was beginning to send people around, and when I was feeling that he needed people to work on his labor situation much more than he had. I talked with...

GRELE: Why?

PETERSON: Well, he had nobody really organizing the labor support for him, and there was a great deal of reluctance on the part of a lot of them, and nobody wanted anybody to get in on the primaries. Whenever I talked about it I'd be told, "Oh, Esther, stay out of it until after the primaries." You know. But even at that time, I was feeling very strongly about him, and I did not line up with anybody else.

GRELE: Who told you to stay out of it until after the primaries?

PETERSON: Some of the union leaders. J.S. Potofsky [Jacob Samuel Potofsky].

GRELE: How would you describe his relations with the top leaders of the labor movement at this time, say George Meany and Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther]?

PETERSON: It was tense after the labor bill. It was tense for quite a while. But then it began to get better. Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] helped a good deal in those days, as I recall. And I remember once, just before the minimum wage bill was passed, when we were in a rather difficult period, and Kennedy came to one of the little dinners that we had. I remember then thinking that things were better. I could feel it. You know, it's a sort of a third sense you have. But I do recall at that time a rather nice, friendly feeling as we were having a cocktail and at the dinner. And again what usually developed and which I admired was an extremely good basic discussion of the realities of the situation. I always liked that. He said, "Well, let's see what that one says. Let's see what this one says." This was one of the things that was a real joy as far as I was concerned—to work with him because essential points would really come out.

GRELE: Was this about labor legislation or about...

PETERSON: This was about the minimum wage bill as I recall. And then, I can't remember the progression of events along that time, but I

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certainly was letting him know and Ralph Dungan was the one I worked with the most. Different people with whom I came in contact across the country were in his corner or going to be in his corner. So I helped incidentally as much as I could along those lines. And I remember talking to him about trying to get someone to handle the labor end of his campaign which I felt was necessary. I remember arranging a luncheon for him with Al Barkan [Alexander E. Barkan] and Jim McDevitt [James L. McDevitt] in Kennedy's room to

have lunch with him one day to see if I could begin to get these fellows to sit down and talk together.

GRELE: What was their impression of him?

PETERSON: They were pleased to be invited but McDevitt didn't come.

GRELE: He didn't?

PETERSON: He didn't come. I always felt that he was a little uncertain about being identified, but Al Barkan did come. And I was pleased to do that, and then also, I remember very well one day when he called me up and I had about an hour with him discussing the situation as I saw it in a number of the states.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the advice you gave him?

PETERSON: Yes, I remember then discussing specifically a number of people I thought ought to be contacted, and we brought up...

GRELE: Do you recall who?

PETERSON: Some of them were from the western states, and some of them were labor federation people.

GRELE: I asked this because we'd like to eventually follow this up, to see if they...

PETERSON: If they did. Yes. Well, I think Al might remember a good deal about it. I think he—in fact I believe that I had that long talk before and then we set up the luncheon and a few things like this that we did. I certainly didn't play any major role. I think I was kind of on the edges.

GRELE: Where were the sympathies of organized labor at that time, before the...

PETERSON: They were pretty divided. They were really pretty divided. An awful lot with Humphrey, of course. A lot with Symington. And some with Johnson—not as many with Johnson, but some here and there—largely there, I think. You know, some of the friendships sort of thing essentially. But it was beginning to take shape.

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GRELE: Then?

PETERSON: I think a little bit more.

GRELE: During the primaries were you called upon to contact people or give advice?

PETERSON: Well, I was really asked and offered a job to go full time on his staff at that time and do some of this work that I recommended be done. I questioned—"I don't know if you want a woman for one thing." This is another reason why I want to set the record straight, because a lot of them said that he did nothing. I always felt that I was accepted with him as a person and it wasn't, you know, like "I've got to have a woman around to, so that it shows that I'm fair." Just like you have to have a Negro around—I never felt that way with him, ever. I have felt it with many others with whom I have worked, but never with him. And it's one area where he's been criticized a lot—that he didn't do much in this area. And I feel that he fundamentally, in a lot of ways, was more easy to work with on this basis than a lot of others, who were conscious of it, thinking, "Now I've got that ticked off." You know what I mean. And that's one reason why I wanted to set the record straight in this area. For personal reasons I could not join his staff at that time, but it wasn't that I wouldn't have because I was committed to him very definitely. I did everything that I possibly could at that time. I was not in a position to travel and do that work because of personal reasons. And that was the reason I declined the offer. I'll never forget the day that Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] called me and we sat over at the Lafayette Hotel discussing whether I could or not. I wanted to very, very much, and I felt very pleased that I was asked and I wished at that moment that I could have accepted. That was just about when they were getting ready to move in Wisconsin and West Virginia.

GRELE: Did they ask you for contacts that you knew in Wisconsin?

PETERSON: I gave them—well, they had a lot of these names, but I would, you know, tick off the various ones, and various kinds of things to do too. I kind of helped to outline some of the approaches that might be used, and that sort of thing.

GRELE: There has been much discussion about the role of union labor in the Wisconsin primary, and especially, I think it was the Steelworkers [United Steelworkers of America]—oh, no, the auto workers—whether or not there was pressure from the UAW [United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America] in Detroit to back off from endorsing any particular candidate in Wisconsin. Do you know of this?

PETERSON: I know of that. I know a pretty good deal about that. And I think that is the truth.

GRELE: Would you say that this was more helpful to the Kennedy forces or to the Humphrey forces?

PETERSON: I don't really know. I didn't get up there. If I would have known anything, I would have.... Isn't it terrible, I'm so ashamed how I've forgotten. I thought I'd never forget these things. Do other people forget things like I have?

GRELE: Yes.

PETERSON: Really?

GRELE: That's why, one of the reasons, why we send it back for editing so the people can pencil in the margins, or...

PETERSON: Or might remember other things. I just—isn't it terrible I can't remember.

GRELE: In the West Virginia primary, what were their relations, like with the Mine Workers [Mine Workers of America]?

PETERSON: I—it's so different in different places, I wouldn't say that right now. Let me think about that one.

GRELE: When did you announce your support of John F. Kennedy for president, formally?

PETERSON: I don't know if I ever did it formally. I think it was just known. The Humphrey people came to me and I said no. And the Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] people came to me. A lot of labor people, by the way, were very strong for Stevenson too. I should have put him in that other list. And I had even a nibble from LBJ at that time, to which I said no. So, it was sort of known. I had different people come to me. So I don't know if there is any announced time. I guess it just kind of got known. It was just that I did not accept any other work. All I did was toward Kennedy.

GRELE: Did you ever discuss with Mrs. Roosevelt her reservations about John F. Kennedy as the presidential nominee?

PETERSON: No, I didn't. I was very well aware of her feeling about this, but no, I tried to keep away from the political end of it, and in any relationships that I had with her on the other projects that I had. It was known where I stood, as far as Kennedy was concerned during all that period.

GRELE: Did you attend the 1960 convention?

PETERSON: Yes.

GRELE: Did you work at the convention?

PETERSON: Yes.

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GRELE: Who did you work with?

PETERSON: I worked with the labor people in the western delegations.

GRELE: To swing them...

PETERSON: Largely with the Utah delegation. Yes.

GRELE: For Kennedy?

PETERSON: Yes.

GRELE: By that time, had the labor people generally come out for Kennedy?

PETERSON: Quite a few. Yes, quite a few, but not all.

GRELE: What were some of the problems you faced with the Utah delegation?

PETERSON: Well, there were—with Moss [Frank E. Moss], especially. I had worked very hard in his campaign. He was committed to Johnson. I think, by the way, that this—I do have some records on this. I have my own score sheets when they changed back and forth. I'll try to find those. I'm quite sure I have them.

GRELE: Was there a lot of support for Johnson in the Utah delegation?

PETERSON: Yes. We had—again, I think I can give you the actual count, and how those changed. There was some for Humphrey too.

GRELE: Did they change to Kennedy?

PETERSON: They didn't all change, and this was the problem. I remember at the end working like mad to try to get them to come over. We did move over a lot of them. We had a very hard time. I can remember so well. I was working with Claude Desautels [Claude J. Desautels]. We were kind of handling some of these western ones together. Trying to get them to come. Trying to put over the idea that they would be the ones that would put Kennedy over. As it is, it was Wyoming. I remember saying, "You could be it." You know. I remember trying every possible device at the end.

GRELE: What were some of the devices that you used?

PETERSON: Oh, I mean that for example. And we were trying to show them definitely

that it was *going to be*, and how foolish it was for them not to go along. But of course, here also, was the matter of Johnson's power in the Senate, including some of the things that Moss had been through with Johnson before, relative to his position on committees and things of this type. So, I certainly could well understand the political facts of life.

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GRELE: Was there any question about his religion in the Utah delegation?

PETERSON: If anything, I think that that helped.

GRELE: Helped?

PETERSON: In a lot of them, because the feeling was that if it could be broken for a Catholic, it might eventually be broken for a Mormon. And it was very interesting in the discussions. I didn't feel that that was as much of an obstacle as many people have felt that it was. When I really sat down hard with some of those delegates, the idea developed that maybe we could eventually have the kind of tolerance permitting a Mormon to be president.

GRELE: That's a twist that I had never heard considered, really.

PETERSON: I think that that was a very real one. A very real one.

GRELE: What other delegations did you work with?

PETERSON: Oh, I did a little bit wherever I was assigned. A little with Arizona, and Idaho, and Vermont a bit, because I had worked there. And some with Michigan, and anywhere I had contacts. A lot was in states where there were clothing workers unions and some of the other unions I had worked with. Also some places I had done some campaigning. But I did concentrate on the western area.

GRELE: Was the Michigan delegation.... Do you remember, whether the Michigan delegation was as committed to Kennedy as Governor Williams [G. Mennen Williams] was?

PETERSON: Pretty much, I think. It seemed like it, as I recall.

GRELE: I had heard that at one time his civil rights position was questioned?

PETERSON: It was questioned very much, but I believe they came around. That was the thing, I think, that Mrs. Roosevelt was so concerned about too.

GRELE: How would you characterize the functioning of the Kennedy organization

at that convention?

PETERSON: Smooth. Very fine. Very fine the way it was done. It was an extremely fascinating lesson for me in political organization.

GRELE: Had you been at earlier conventions?

PETERSON: This was the first convention that I had attended, except up in the galleries. And I really worked right with it.

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GRELE: Do you recall feeling at the time that the Kennedy people were in any ways unique or different from the other committed delegates?

PETERSON: Oh, I don't know. They're different now. They're all committed.

GRELE: I mean, could you say that the old pros were for somebody but the young people weren't, or the other way around?

PETERSON: Oh, I think he did attract the younger ones more, not the old pros as much—not the machine people as much as the new people. Maybe this is through my eyes at that time, but I think that's true.

GRELE: After the convention, did you join his staff?

PETERSON: After the convention, I went over and started working right at Democratic headquarters, yes.

GRELE: For the National Committee [Democratic National Committee]?

PETERSON: At the National Committee.

GRELE: Under Mrs. Price [Margaret Price]?

PETERSON: No, I worked under Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Ralph—I worked really with Ralph Dungan.

GRELE: What was your assignment?

PETERSON: I handled most of the labor things. I handled, oh, just jack of all trades. One of the things I did was to be sure that there was word from him at every possible labor meeting. I did messages for every convention. And there was a terrific run of conventions. I worked out with the advance men who they would see in the labor area as they would go out. I worked with the materials, getting the bumper

stickers and all the rest of it. And things of this kind. I did some speaking. Toward the end, when we got organization in shape, I went out and did speaking. But before that I just did mostly organizational work.

GRELE: Do you recall if there were certain unions that you had problems with?

PETERSON: Yes, we had to deal carefully with some of them.

GRELE: Which ones?

PETERSON: The glassworkers [Glass Bottle Blowers Association of U.S. and Canada], Lee Minton [Lee W. Minton].

GRELE: Why?

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PETERSON: Well, I think they were a little bit more Republican oriented. We had a little trouble with Suffridge [James A. Suffridge], as I recall it.

GRELE: Suffridge?

PETERSON: The Retail Clerks [Retail Clerks International Association]. Of course, they came out for Lyndon. That healed that. Yet, pretty much with some of those who were on the other side, who were somewhat more Johnson supporters. And I think I've got those records pretty much, as to which unions worked to some extent.

GRELE: Were there any problems because of the vice presidential candidate?

PETERSON: Yes.

GRELE: With what unions?

PETERSON: Well, with that it was largely with the old CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] unions. I myself was very bitter for a long time.

GRELE: Really, why?

PETERSON: I was very disappointed at that time.

GRELE: What was there in his record?

PETERSON: Well, I had worked on the Hill, Rule 22, many of the items, the oil depletion, a lot in the civil rights area, many of those things. So I had

lobbied on the other side. And I shall never forget Helen Gahagan Douglas telling me not to feel that way, that once Johnson would have a bigger base, we'd find really what he was. And actually, I think he proved her words true, which is an extremely interesting thing. I'll never forget the day it was announced. I'll be very frank with you. I was quite upset. Kenneth Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] caught me and said, "Esther, you're wrong. Don't feel that way." But I'll be very frank with you. I was upset.

GRELE: Did you ever discuss this with any member of the Kennedy organization?

PETERSON: Oh, I think they knew what I felt like. I think, yes. I discussed it with Ralph. I was closest to Ralph. I began to understand why but it was a hard thing for me to swallow at that time.

GRELE: When you were working with the unions who were also having reservations, how did you overcome your own reservations to convince them that they should...

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PETERSON: Well, I became convinced, you know. You move along with history on these things, and you begin to sit down and—and Galbraith really helped me a good deal on that. And when you sit down and count votes and count noses and see these areas, it makes a lot of sense. And at the moment I had been—that moment I was so completely absorbed with him, and to get...

GRELE: You mean John Kennedy?

PETERSON: Yes. To get Kennedy through, and I remember running into Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker] so many times trying to get Senator Johnson through. And then suddenly to have this come, just when I had been arguing so strongly and working to get those people away from him and over to Kennedy. It was quite a switch for some of us, really an emotional switch. And I had to go back to a lot of these people I had persuaded to put their votes on Kennedy, and not on Johnson. I had to go around and say, "Look. Now, work for us as a team." Why, it took some work on our part.

GRELE: Do you feel that there were reservations that were politically significant all the way up to the time of the election?

PETERSON: Now say that again. Let's see...

GRELE: Do you feel that some of the resentment over this nomination lasted until the election?

PETERSON: I think it gradually worked out as he began really revealing himself warmly. I remember some labor meetings that I had where I had a hard

time selling it to them. I'm trying to think which southern states I went into. I really had to work hard to get them to accept him—to get some of the labor people to accept the team as such.

GRELE: Would you say that it was more difficult in the South than in the North?

PETERSON: Well, I just happened to remember that one very hard board meeting that I had with some of the—it comes back to me—of.... I just have to say what I believe. It's hard for me; you know, I'm not one for putting on anything. I had to become convinced myself, that it would work, that it was the right thing for our country at that moment of history. And, I did become convinced that it was a wise decision that Kennedy had made. But I do remember, it was hard there. I just remember that very tough meeting that I had, that comes to me very strongly.

GRELE: When you were doing the advance work and arranging for him to appear at certain union functions, were there certain functions or certain unions where he just would not go?

PETERSON: I don't recall that. No. Because there were so many places that wanted him, you know, that it was just that you sent whole lists

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over. Oh, I remember there were some areas, Teamsters [International Brotherhood of Teamsters]....

GRELE: Did you deal at all with the problem of the Teamsters?

PETERSON: Well, I dealt with some Teamsters who quietly helped us, think...

GRELE: They weren't just written off?

PETERSON: No.

GRELE: A significant number helped?

PETERSON: Well, I can't—well, they were not all written off, I'll tell you that. But a significant number, I'd have to check out with a few of the others. I know in my area I think there were some of the places where I touched base, I....

GRELE: Were these dissidents within the union or were they...

PETERSON: Not completely. Not completely.

GRELE: Was there any attempt to deal with any of the left-wing unions such as the Longshoremen [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] on the West Coast?

PETERSON: I didn't have any contact with them. I remember we had quite a time with some of the, well, they're not left-wing unions, but the Maritime Unions [National Maritime Union of America] on the East Coast.

GRELE: You had some...

PETERSON: I'd have to look through my records and I think I could do that, I believe I have that—to see if I had any requests from what I did with any of those unions out there.

GRELE: What were the problems with the Maritime Unions in New York?

PETERSON: Well, they seemed to be terrifically possessive. I was never quite sure whether they were using it to help themselves or to help him. I had to weigh these things very carefully when I'd advise his appearance or the kind of work wanted.

GRELE: Did anyone ever mention to you any of the resentment between the Maritime Unions and Ambassador Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] when he was head of the Maritime Commission [United States Maritime Commission]?

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PETERSON: I do remember some of that but I don't recall now, that that ever entered into the discussion.

GRELE: I was wondering what Joe Curran's [Joseph E. Curran] position was.

PETERSON: Yes. I don't think that spilled over to Jack, but I don't—it just doesn't ring a bell with me.

GRELE: How does labor work with the Democratic Party in a typical election, say the election of 1960?

PETERSON: Well, they work very closely. They did then. I worked with Jim McDevitt and Al Barkan, and we arranged meetings when we were over there, because these were the troops, these were the real troops. And it was marvelous the way they came around after all the difficulties to be as strong and supportive as they were. Of course, this is where George Meany's endorsement and all of this helped a tremendous amount. But we worked very closely together. I think there was some resentment

in cases where the labor people didn't work, but they did not get much of the credit, nor did they get on the bandwagon and the kinds of things when actually they're the ones that delivered in many cases. And one of the difficulties of course was, that some of the labor-appointed people are only "show people," but there are always the back-up men who do the work. And there's always a certain degree of friction in some of these situations. But there was extremely close work, and I think labor did a splendid job in the whole COPE [Committee on Political Education] operation. My goodness gracious when I think of the work done, the organizing and the real basic things, at least where I had some contact and could see what was done.

GRELE: Was there ever an attempt to coordinate the work of COPE and the Citizens [Citizens Committee for Kennedy and Johnson] under Byron White [Byron R. White]? Or were they pretty much separate?

PETERSON: No, they were pretty much separate, but this depended on the arrangements of the local committees. Sometimes, when Byron's work took the lead they worked very closely with him. The point is that you want to get different groups involved and not always have the same people. This required close working relations, to be sure that we had the emphases correct.

GRELE: I had been told that you would also come to the office occasionally with suggestions for the Women's Division.

PETERSON: Yes, I used to do that a good deal. I didn't have much time to work with them though. I was absorbed with this other work that I was doing, but I did help with that from time to time. We organized on the side a women's committee—Labor Women for Kennedy. And Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] helped us get this launched. We put out a brochure, and were trying to get other labor women—I think we called it, I don't know whether we called it Labor Women for Kennedy or

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something. And we got prominent women to help. I did organize that, yes. And that was another little job on the side. But I think it was helpful. But we needed to give a feeling of recognition for women who were really doing an awful lot of the work and I think this was appreciated. And I helped a bit in trying to get through in the Women's Division the kind of issues that the women want. So they could discuss the content rather than just the frills or run around doing the dirty work. And this is one of the things that is terribly important in a women's campaign, to give them some of the content work to do.

GRELE: You made the suggestion that in the campaign women be appealed to on the basis that they are workers and consumers. Was this suggestion ever taken up?

PETERSON: Yes. A good deal of that was used in the literature and in speeches. And we outlined a lot of the content things for them. I'd forgotten all about that but now it begins to come back to me. We did organize a good deal of that in the fact sheets and things of that kind to put out. And that's where Esther Murray was extremely good, and some of the COPE women, and then we went over and organized a little committee under Eli Oliver with some of the labor groups on the side. I'd forgotten all about that little operation.

GRELE: What was this about?

PETERSON: I think I'd forgotten all about it. We helped organize a lot of people who were found outside the COPE organization. Some of the railroad people and some who were not in the mainstream of the COPE activity but were still labor people we needed to involve. And it was to involve that whole segment. You know what you do. You sit down and say, "Where are the people? How do you get 'em?" It's just as simple as that. Well, you get this group here and you get that group there. You get this group over here, and you organize whatever is the meaningful mechanism for your purposes. I remember now how that was. And it worked very well because it meant a good deal to a lot of the women. They received some recognition and were happy.

GRELE: Was the campaign organized as smoothly as the convention?

PETERSON: It was rough. But this is the only campaign I've ever worked in when I worked at headquarters. I've worked on state campaigns and things of that kind. I would think for a campaign it was smoothly organized, but we had an awful time, simply a terrible time about such matters as materials and bumper stickers. I think that was the biggest headache I had. The unions would call me from all over. I'll never forget I had three telephones and I was besieged with the calls of people not getting delivery. There were real, real problems. But this is where Bobby Kennedy was marvelous. He really tried to cut through and get results.

GRELE: Did you come into contact with him during the campaign?

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PETERSON: Oh, yes. I'll never forget he bumped into me one day, and asked, "How's it going?" I said, "It's lousy." "What's wrong?" And I said, *this* and *this* and *this*. And he took me by the wrist and pulled me into a meeting with the others and said, "Now say to them what you said to me." It was hard, but I did. It was a matter of lack of coordination in the distribution of the materials and we worked things out. I just love people who are direct and call a spade a spade. To me it involves recognizing everybody's competence or else not having them around at all and to heck with all the falderal. I liked that. This is a real joy to me. And I'll never forget we sat in that room and slugged it out until we had a new system and it worked. And this is the kind of thing that Bob

would do, which I think is marvelous. I love working with him. I like that very, very clear, direct way.

GRELE: Who advised John Kennedy on labor problems during the campaign?

PETERSON: Well, Arthur Goldberg largely.

GRELE: Did he have an office with the National Committee?

PETERSON: No. But he was right around the corner. And Arthur is the one I worked with all the time. Actually Arthur was the labor person. I was one of the assistants. I guess I'd put it that way.

GRELE: How effective was he in marshalling labor support?

PETERSON: Very good. Just superb.

GRELE: Any particular reasons why?

PETERSON: Well, he has in the first place, he's competent and had done enough for labor and had a labor record and one who has proven himself in this area. He stood up to Kennedy when he needed to stand up to him, during the labor debates. I think it was quite normal that he was the one who had this very constructive way. And he is the one person who could kind of talk to Walter, talk to Meany, and the others. He was a kind of a catalytic agent, with all of this group. I went to him with almost every problem I had. He was the one I worked with most closely. The nice thing about him, you could get broad directions and go ahead and work.

GRELE: Do you remember anybody you worked with in that special committee?

PETERSON: Well, she was the secretary to Eli Oliver, and it was...

GRELE: Her name was Frances?

PETERSON: Frances Cushman. There was the labor wing of the railroad organizations. Harrison [George MacGregor Harrison] was head of it, you know.

GRELE: I have been told that you were the person who suggested to John Kennedy that he speak in Mormon Tabernacle in Utah.

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PETERSON: I'm one of many I suppose who did this. Yes, I certainly did.

GRELE: What was his reaction when you brought this up or when you suggested it,

yourself?

PETERSON: I didn't get to talk to him personally about that, but I talked to Larry and I talked to—oh, you know, the fellow who's back in Massachusetts now.

GRELE: Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue].

PETERSON: Dick Donahue.

GRELE: Why did you feel this was important?

PETERSON: Oh, I just thought it was terribly important for Utah. Extremely important, and it was with that whole Mormon thought. I just felt convinced in the first place, there was a certain endorsement if you appear in the Mormon Tabernacle. That in itself means a great deal. And then I wanted it not for the state of Utah only, but for the Mormon voters throughout the country—formidable leadership group. I think of California for example. And I think that this meant a very, very great deal.

GRELE: Did you travel at all with the candidate during the elections?

PETERSON: No, I didn't. I wish I could have. I was too busy. It's just too bad. That's the trouble—you don't get some of the fringe benefits sometimes.

GRELE: In the 1960 campaign, were the labor finances kept separate from the Democratic National Committee?

PETERSON: Yes.

GRELE: There has been much criticism of the.... I asked the question because there has been much criticism of the alliance of labor and the Democratic Party.

PETERSON: There are certainly some unions that make contributions directly to the campaign, but it was not as a labor contribution. They would send in a check for materials, you know, which, of course, is the normal thing.

GRELE: How effective was labor when it came right down to the election?

PETERSON: It was effective, depending on where. In some places extremely effective, and in other places not, depending on the kind of organization they had. But there's no question in my mind that the women, the labor women, did one of the most effective jobs in the country.

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GRELE: After the election, when were you offered a position in the new

administration?

PETERSON: Oh, I remember Ralph Dungan talking to me about it first, sometime probably in November. Then, I remember him asking me whether I wanted anything, you know, I hadn't thought about that exactly. Then, there was nothing about it until Arthur talked with me about it, Arthur Goldberg. Then, it was Arthur who finally called and told me what they had in mind. And frankly, I remember saying at that time, "Well, why not the Women's Bureau?" And I remember Ralph saying, "Is that what you want, Esther?" I hadn't thought about those things particularly, to tell you the truth. I didn't work in the campaign for a position. I had a good job.

GRELE: Was there any conflict over your nomination?

PETERSON: I'm not aware of any. No. I think Mr. Meany endorsed it and Walter Reuther.

GRELE: The Professional Women's Clubs of America supported Mrs. Katie Fitzgerald [Catherine V. Fitzgerald] for the position to which you were appointed. Did this amount to any kind of serious opposition to your appointment?

PETERSON: I was aware of that, but I don't think it did, no. And I was hoping to help her find something. I felt awfully concerned about that.

GRELE: Oh, you knew.

PETERSON: I had heard about it, yes. I did hear about it. But that group, I don't think had worked a great deal in the campaign. I know she is a good Democrat and had worked, but that group is not known for its political activity.

GRELE: Why did you chose to come to the Women's Bureau of the Labor Department?

PETERSON: You know, I have no idea. I just thought this is labor on trade unions. I hadn't thought a great deal about it to tell you the truth. I'm afraid I'm not very good at promoting myself. I enjoy these things and I had—people don't believe me—but I really had no ambitions.

GRELE: When you came to work in the Labor Department what were your plans for the Women's Bureau?

PETERSON: First, I wanted to do something to benefit the women with whom I had come in contact in my political campaigns and in my work in the trade

union movement, the disadvantaged women, those with the low wages, and who have a lot of kids, who don't make enough money, the people in the laundries, and the industries that have just not kept up with our times,

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where women really have the most difficulty. And I was hoping to kind of give some visibility to their problems. And then another thing that intrigued me a great deal was the question that we had always had before Congress on the equal rights amendment. There had always been a long battle as to whether or not we should pass an amendment to the Constitution declaring women equal. It has always bothered me, the position that we took in the trade union movement, that we did not want this amendment, and we didn't want it. But the reasons were that it would throw out the special legislation for women, and I always wondered if this was the right approach to this, although I accepted this. This is one of the problems I had discussed with Kennedy and with Arthur Goldberg in one of the conversations we had with the President shortly after I took the job. I hoped we could find a new approach to this problem and come up with something sensible. Both of them asked that I explore this a bit, and it was around that time that I came up with this idea of having a commission on the status of women, and asking Mrs. Roosevelt to be chairman. Arthur said it was a very good idea, and I talked with Mike Feldman, and drew up some plans. And then the President said yes, that he liked the idea because they'd had trouble always with these women's groups that keep swarming the Hill with demands for equality. So the reason we got this commission on the status of women going was to see if we could come up with some more constructive answer to this question of equality, legal equality for women in the country.

GRELE: Before we get on, right to the report, and your activities, I have one or two other questions. When you were appointed director of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, a special bill was passed to make this a position of assistant secretary?

PETERSON: No. I was appointed director of the Women's Bureau, and there was statutory authority for that. And then, literally, I got a telephone call one day from John Leslie [John W. Leslie], Secretary Goldberg's public information director, and he said, "Esther, Arthur told me to call you and tell you that he's just made you an assistant secretary." That's really what happened. I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "He's just come from a TV program where some women asked him some questions, and he said that he was proposing this." Well, he had proposed it, I found out afterwards, to the President, to create another position. But it was not for an assistant secretary for women; it was to create an assistant secretary for labor standards and would include women's questions. So, it was really another assistant secretary since the Labor Department was growing, and since the labor force was growing. A bill was put through to create another post, another assistant secretaryship, that's correct. But it was not exclusively connected with women.

GRELE: Was there any opposition to this?

PETERSON: Well, there was some very interesting debate on the floor, and I'll never forget Representative Clare Hoffman [Clare E. Hoffman] said—oh, I should get that and put it in the record—it was something to the effect that what they're trying to do is put another one in—this isn't just a woman, this is a skilled politician, [laughter] and what they're doing is

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adding another political something-or-other to the rolls. You know, there are some of those. But the thing I was very pleased over is that I had very good support from both sides of the aisle, Republican senators and Democratic senators both applauding it, and in the House I got both sides too. But there was Clare Hoffman, for example, and people like that who went after me.

GRELE: Excuse me for a minute. I want to change the tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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