J. Bernard West Oral History Interview – 1967

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Biographical Note

West, assistant to chief usher (1941-1957) and chief usher (1957-1969) of the White House, discusses his close work with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy on projects including her redecoration and renovation of the White House, and state dinners, among other issues.

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J. Bernard West

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Oral History Interview

with

J. Bernard West

1967 Washington, D.C.

By Nancy Tuckerman and Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: How long have you been at the White House, Mr. West?

WEST: About twenty-five years.

TURNURE: And how many administrations have you served in that period?

WEST: Well, that started with Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt], Franklin

Roosevelt, Truman's [Harry S. Truman], Eisenhower's [Dwight D.

Eisenhower], and Johnson's [Lyndon B. Johnson].

TURNURE: Were you always an usher or the chief usher?

WEST: Not always the chief, no. I started as the low man in the office of five

and worked my way to the top.

TUCKERMAN: And when did you become chief usher?

WEST: In about 1955, I think.

TURNURE: It's an unusual title and very confusing to most people. How would

you characterize your job?

WEST: It's a little difficult to characterize it. I mostly do what I'm told.

TUCKERMAN: But in so many words...

WEST: It's somewhat like a manager. The White House is a little bit like a

hotel, you know. Somewhat management.

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TUCKERMAN: How many ushers are there under you?

WEST: Four working under me.

TURNURE: And you specifically look after the needs of the family and residents?

WEST: And keep the house in order, hire and fire the servants.

TURNURE: And take care of the actual budgeting, in terms of entertainment or

food?

WEST: Unfortunately, yes.

TURNURE: Well, you had a particularly close relationship with the Kennedys. Can

you start at the beginning and tell us the first time that you met Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]? I believe this was before the

inauguration.

WEST: Oh, yes, she came to see Mrs. Eisenhower [Mamie Doud Eisenhower].

It was just after John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] was born, and she came in. Mrs. Eisenhower had called her and told her to come down and

in. Mrs. Eisennower had called her and told her to come down and

take a look at the house. And she came in. I think they were leaving for Palm Beach [Florida] that afternoon. Mrs. Eisenhower took her around the house, and then as she left, Mrs. Eisenhower was also leaving, so she left first, and I had a couple of minutes to give Mrs. Kennedy the plans of the house and some pictures and things of the rooms so that she could...

TUCKERMAN: Did she ask a lot of questions then?

WEST: Not of me at the time, no. She was waiting for the car and was ready to

leave. She had just gotten out of the hospital, as a matter of fact.

TURNURE: That was the afternoon that she actually left the hospital.

TUCKERMAN: Were you with Mrs. Eisenhower and Mrs. Kennedy throughout their

tour?

WEST: No, Mrs. Eisenhower took her around by herself.

TURNURE: So she really had to do most of her planning from the plans that you

gave to her?

WEST: Yes, that's right. She took the plans to Palm Beach with her, and then I

sent her a book of pictures of all the various rooms and what they were

like at the time. She had taken this book while she was in Palm

Beach—I mean, I learned this later—she'd taken it while she was down there and written in everything she wanted done and sent it to the decorator, how she wanted to change the rooms around. So it did

[-2-]

help her, I think. As a matter of fact, she wrote me a lovely letter and told me that she appreciated the help.

TURNURE: But did she start that early in sending you memos about things she

wanted?

WEST: That's right. That was before she even came to the White House, and I

was delighted to receive it because you never know whether you're

going to be received by the new people coming in or not.

TUCKERMAN: But there was no problem ever with her? You got along well from the

beginning?

WEST: Oh, we got along very well. Of course, I have with everyone, as far as

that's concerned, but you never know.

TURNURE: But there certainly was a great deal of changing to be done in this

particular case with the two young children and to have to build in a

nursery.

WEST: Yes, considerable. As a matter of fact, after that, then the main contact

I had prior to inauguration was with her first social secretary, Miss

Letitia Baldrige.

TURNURE: Oh, Mrs. Hollensteiner.

WEST: Well, now, the present Mrs. Hollensteiner. "Mother" Hollensteiner.

[Laughter]

TURNURE: When the Kennedys first moved in after the inauguration, was that the

first time you met the President [John F. Kennedy], when he came in

from watching the parade?

WEST: Yes. When he came in after the parade, that's right. Mrs. Kennedy had

come in earlier in the afternoon and went upstairs. At that time I went

up with her, and she went around through a few of the rooms. They

were staying up at the east end of the house on the second floor in the top guest suite at the time because she wanted to do the other rooms over. I recommended that they stay there in those rooms.

TURNURE: It would be interesting to know what the house looked like at the time.

When one occupant moves out of the house, does the house get

virtually stripped of its furnishings? Is it empty?

WEST: Oh, no, the house is completely furnished, but it wasn't furnished in

the way that Mrs. Kennedy wanted it to be. I mean, she was able to see

this when she came in on her first tour.

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TUCKERMAN: Yes, so she brought a lot of her own furniture in.

WEST: Right.

TUCKERMAN: But also kept some of the furniture that was there.

WEST: Well, a considerable amount of it. Every room is completely furnished,

but it had just been done over at the end of the Truman administration,

and it was filled with a lot of reproduction furniture which was not to

Mrs. Kennedy's liking.

TUCKERMAN: Did she have the place repainted also?

WEST: Inside, yes, inside.

TURNURE: And then there was the work on the children's nurseries.

WEST: Well, as a matter of fact, on inauguration day—no, the day after, on

the Saturday, which was the twenty-first of January, she had her

decorator in at 10 o'clock in the morning. And at that time, prior to her

seeing the decorator, she had me bring all the staff before her, and she met every person on the staff and asked them their name and tried to figure out something about each person that she could remember their names, which with about thirty people; it's a little difficult to remember each one.

TUCKERMAN: But both the Kennedys were that way, weren't they? Wanting to know

who they were dealing with and having this personal contact?

WEST: Right. Of course, there were quite a few of the staff that she probably

never saw them again after that first day—except when they had a

party or at Christmastime or something of that sort.

Then after she met the staff, she worked with the decorator, I think, most of the rest of the day. And then we started in immediately doing over the west end of the second floor, the family living quarters.

TURNURE: Was the decision made to put the kitchen in right away then, because

this was a real innovation and something which had been needed?

WEST: It was done at the same time. There was not a kitchen or a dining room

on the second floor in the family quarters. As a matter of fact, when

the Eisenhowers were there, if they wanted to eat upstairs, they ate off

trays in front of the television set. So we took what was a former drawing room and made a dining room out of it. Mrs. Kennedy had a little difficulty deciding where she wanted the kitchen, but I was able to convince her that it should be in the corner room, where it was put because the service elevator goes through that area, and it was the most logical place for it to be.

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And we had to do over the rooms for the children. That was the main thing she wanted done first because they were staying in Palm Beach at the time with their grandparents, and she wanted to get them up as quickly as she could. So we finished the children's rooms first, and they were able to move into their rooms. And then the President and Mrs. Kennedy, it was a little bit later, I think, before they were able to really move back into their end of the house.

TUCKERMAN: Before that they stayed in the Queen's room and Lincoln's [Abraham

Lincoln]....

WEST: And the Lincoln Room, yes.

TURNURE: And were you involved.... And I can recall that the President and Mrs.

Kennedy spent a lot of time those first weeks really exploring the

White House themselves. Were you often asked to go with them and

show them around, or would they go on their own?

WEST: Oh, yes, most of the time. As a matter of fact, well, when she first

came down, I mean the first day, she had Mrs. Parish [Sister Parish] as the decorator. And then after we finished everything, about three or four weeks, another decorator came in, and we started changing it again.

TURNURE: Yes. Well, that can happen. It does happen. So the house really

underwent a number of changes before it was finally settled into.

Would you say that Mrs. Kennedy was willing to try new things, or if

she wasn't satisfied, she would turn to someone else?

WEST: Oh, she was constantly trying new things. As a matter of fact, one

method of her operation is that she would call in numerous people and,

an expression that she used, "pick their brains," and then we would do

things the way she wanted them.

TUCKERMAN: Who was the second decorator that came in?

WEST: Monsieur Boudin [Stéphane Boudin].

TURNURE: Who was an old acquaintance of hers.

WEST: Old acquaintance. As a matter of fact, he had helped her with the

Georgetown house. He later had told me that he had been called in up

at the Georgetown house where they'd lived and had helped to

rearrange it and redecorate and so forth. And then he came in, and as I say, some of the things that had been started at first had not arrived yet. So the orders were immediately cancelled, and we started a complete new method of decoration. She was very much pleased with Monsieur Boudin, felt that he had an architectural feeling, and his arrangements are, well, superb and probably the best. This was the main thing she was interested in, getting the best things in each room, and then from that we went on to the state rooms where she....

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TURNURE: How early in the administration did she decide to undertake the fine

arts committee [Commission on Fine Arts]?

WEST: Oh, immediately, right away. I mean immediately. As a matter of fact,

Mrs. Parish assisted her at the beginning in setting up a committee on

preservation. Mrs. Kennedy had asked me what had to be done, I mean

what you had to do to change anything and, of course, found out all the names of the members of the Commission on Fine Arts and when their terms expired.

TURNURE: But there hadn't been a fine arts committee....

WEST: Well, actually the Fine Arts Commission has no power to do anything.

They're only....

TURNURE: More concerned with exterior changes.

WEST: And they have no authority to say that something can't be done or can

be done. I mean, they're only advisory. They have no...

TURNURE: But it is nice to have them on your side.

WEST: Well, you pretty much have to, except that other times people there

have done things that the Fine Arts Commission did not approve. For

instance, the Truman Balcony. There was quite a furor over that. And

she wanted to avoid anything like this.

TURNTTRE: So you worked extremely closely from the very beginning with Mrs.

Kennedy?

WEST: Yes. As a matter of fact, she was working in all angles. She was

looking for a new French chef, and she was working on everything.

TUCKERMAN: The flowers.

WEST: The flowers, Mrs. Mellon [Rachel Lambert Mellon] came in.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know which, I was in on all of

these things.

TUCKERMAN: Also the entertainment changed quite a bit, too, and she was more

interested in getting...

WEST: Right. Changed entirely the way of entertaining. I think at the

beginning we had maybe one or two state dinners that were done the

old way—that is, with the old horseshoe table—and then after that we

put in the round tables and had dinners that way. I'm sure that we did have some with the horseshoe table at state dinners.

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TURNURE: Small luncheons occasionally were served...

WEST: Well, I think we even had a dinner or two, because I remember that I

had to set up the table one day for she and Boudin to see. At that time,

prior to this, the table had always been the opposite way with the

closed end of the U at the east side of the room. Oh. no.

TURNURE: The west side of the room.

WEST: Right. And then we turned it around for a better feeling in the room.

TURNURE: Yes, which did make a difference.

TUCKERMAN: Was it her idea to have the round tables?

WEST: Yes.

TURNURE: But when she wanted to make these changes after the first few dinners

of doing it the old way, how did she let you know? Did she call you up for a meeting or did she send you a memo? There were so many details

to be taken care of.

WEST: Mostly memo, probably, or telephone. Or, as a matter of fact, in the

beginning she would come down to the office quite a bit. She'd get off the elevator on the first floor, and she and I sat on the marble steps and

talked, and we sat in the ground floor corridor on the floor with papers spread out. And whenever she might be going out for a walk or returning from one, if I had something to ask her, I knew that was the time to reach her. She always had a list for me. She had a tablet, a big yellow pad, each person that had any authority over anything, she had their name, and under it there would be all the things that she wanted to discuss with each person.

TURNURE: Isn't that interesting. She really was very organized.

WEST: Oh, yes, she did that all the time. I mean even after memos, she kept

this big pad. She'd think of things at night when it was quiet and no

one around, and she'd jot down so that the next day she'd call you up,

and she'd go down the list and scratch it off.

TUCKERMAN: She was quite well organized in that respect, wasn't she?

WEST: Extremely well, yes.

TURNURE: You found her easy to work with?

WEST: Oh, very much. She had a marvelous sense of humor and was easy to

work with. I enjoyed it.

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TURNURE: In terms of state dinners, there were many innovations, so perhaps you

could do a little chronology on that first year because that's when the

changes were really being made. What do you think was the first big

change?

WEST: Well, of course, the first big change was having a state dinner away

from the White House, which was at Mount Vernon. Mrs. Kennedy

was at Glen Ora over the weekend, and we got a call from Miss

Baldrige [Letitia "Tish" Baldrige] that we were to meet Mrs. Kennedy at Mount Vernon with then the director of Mount Vernon on Monday. So I told Tish that I thought it would be great, that as long as we had to go down, we might as well ride down on one of the boats. So we commandeered the *Honey Fitz*. We had lunch, several of us. I mean, there was Tish and, well, maybe the head aide, social aide, and five or six other people that would have had anything to do with the dinner. So we had lunch on the way down to Mount Vernon. And after we got there—Mrs. Kennedy had driven up to Mount Vernon—we met her and went over the place and discussed what things might be done at a state dinner down there.

Well, of course, it was decided you could not have a dinner in the house because its being of a museum character excluded this anyway, and not only that but the house was not suitable for a dinner. There are no kitchens or anything of that nature.

TURNURE: No proper electricity.

WEST: Nothing of that sort. So it was decided that it would have to be in a

tent out on the river side of the estate. While we were in the director's office, I remember that Mrs. Kennedy saw a photograph of the Old

Guard who performed at Mount Vernon and at other places at various times. It's a detachment at Fort Myer, I believe. She saw this picture and said, "Oh, wouldn't it be great to have them?" So they were incorporated into the entertainment.

TUCKERMAN: But she could just get ideas like that.

WEST: Well, of course, she got ideas by looking or seeing pictures or

anything. Then on that day she rode back on the *Honey Fitz* with us to

Washington and talked with various people on the way back. I

remember her saying to me especially, "Mr. West, please don't jump off the roof of the White House until after this dinner." I said, "I promise you I won't." So then, of course....

TUCKERMAN: The logistic. I mean, first of all, let's take the food. How did you plan

to cope with that? Have it cooked at the White House?

WEST: Well, you see, everything was taken from the White House. All of the

china, glassware, the gold vermeil flatware, linens. As a matter of fact,

we used round tables at the Mount Vernon dinner

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and the tent, which was the first time they'd been used. We purchased the cloth at that time. As a matter of fact, the tent was lined with the same material and color as the tablecloths. And the White House florist did take the flowers down there under the supervision of Mrs. Mellon. He was working with her at that time; she was working with him, in other words.

And we borrowed the banquet chairs from Mrs. Mellon that time, carted them over from her estate. Then afterwards, we had the chairs copied which were used at the White House and still are.

The food, we cooked everything at the White House. We got refrigerator trucks and heated trucks from the army, and the things were loaded into the trucks and taken to Mount Vernon where there was a tent kitchen set up or a warming kitchen and so forth. And last-minute cooking was done there, but not any great deal.

TUCKERMAN: But the menu couldn't be too elaborate just because of this?

WEST: Well, it was just as elaborate as any state dinner at the White House.

TUCKERMAN: It's incredible to think that they could do it and have it transported.

WEST: We didn't change the menu any, just because it was being done there.

We did everything the same way. As I say, we took the Monroe

[James Monroe] vermeil flatware and everything: china, glasses,

everything was taken down to Mount Vernon.

TURNURE: Was everybody terribly surprised when they heard the news that the

party was going to be there?

WEST: Well, of course, after we heard the news, why, you didn't have time to

be surprised or to think anything of it because you were too busy

working on all the things that had to go into it.

You see, the night of the party, all the guests came to the White House where we had limousines. From there they were driven to the navy yard where they got on the various presidential boats and so forth, and a PT boat even; one was used. And they had cocktails and music on each boat on the way down. Then they docked at Mount Vernon, and there were another fleet of limousines there to take them from the dock up to the front of the house. The driveway was lined with marines who came to attention as each car drove by. Then, as all the guest assembled out in the front of the mansion, we served them mint juleps, and at this time the Old Guard performed. Then the guest of the President and Mrs. Kennedy....

TURNURE: General Ayub Khan [Mohammad Ayub Khan].

WEST: Who is the president of Pakistan, and whatever her name is....

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TURNURE: And his daughter who is his hostess.

WEST: Is that who it was? I thought she came in. But anyway they went inside

the house and stood on the porch that faces the river and received the

guests as they came through and went out to the tent which was to the left of the house where dinner was served. Then after dinner they walked across the lawn where we had set up a band shell and had entertainment by the National Symphony Orchestra. And all the people were...

TUCKERMAH: It's lucky it was a good evening, wasn't it?

WEST: Delightful. I should say it was. Well, of course, that was one problem

we had to worry about. And also Mount Vernon is open to tourists and

it doesn't close until 5 o'clock, so we couldn't really do much of

anything until after 5 o'clock, other than the tent was set up and that type of thing were put in ahead of time. It naturally had to be.

TURNURE: But other than that, the real work had to be done between five and

shortly after eight.

WEST: All of the food was brought down after that and everything and so

forth.

TUCKERMAN: And don't they have a bit of a problem because Mount Vernon's on

the

river and in the summer in July it gets very...

WEST: Well, yes, we had.... And, of course, there's quite extensive grounds,

shrubbery, bushes, et cetera.

TURNURE: Mosquitoes.

WEST: We had sprayed numerous times, as a matter of fact. The last spraying

was after 5 o'clock before the dinner so that they wouldn't have....

TUCKERMAN: Was there ever any criticism afterwards for such sort of lavish

entertainment?

WEST: I didn't hear it. I didn't hear it, but of course you'll always get

criticized...

TURNURE: If you try to be different.

WEST: ...or praised. Anything that we...

TUCKERMAN: I was just thinking it must have been very expensive.

WEST: You can't please everyone. Well, what is expensive? I don't know. It

depends.

TURNURE: Would you like to do it again?

WEST: Yes, I think it would be great. It was a challenge.

TUCKERMAN: Was it the most exciting, I mean, in respect...

WEST: It was a challenge, and that's one reason I got along as well as I did

with Mrs. Kennedy because she's the idea girl, and I enjoyed trying to

carry out things.

TURNURE: The ideas.

TUCKERMAN: Was that about the most spectacular of the entertainment that you had?

WEST: I think it was. Pretty much, except that after Miss Tuckerman came as

the social secretary, we did have fireworks after one dinner which was

quite spectacular. As a matter of fact, it woke up the entire city of

Washington at the time.

TURNURE: Let's get back to the restoration program for a minute. Can you recall

what rooms presented a particular challenge to Mrs. Kennedy in

redoing them?

WEST: Well, of course, the main one which presented any challenge, I think,

was the Blue Room, which you know the walls are white now and not

blue, and there was some thought that there might be criticism from

changing. It ended up that we put enough blue in the room that it could still be called the Blue Room.

But the President was also very much concerned about it. I remember one day he came from the office and asked me what I thought about the Blue Room. And I said, "Well, I think it's fine." I quickly gathered the little mock-up thing that had been made and took it up to him and showed it to him, and he was a little more satisfied then.

Then after the room had been finished, Boudin was here making the last changes in the room. It hadn't been opened up yet, and Mrs. Kennedy wanted to come down and see the room and see Boudin in the room. So we stopped the tourists for a period so that she could come through, and when she got off the elevator, she said, "I think I'd like to go out and take a walk first. Can I come in later?" So we'd held up the tourists for a half-hour anyway, so I said, "Certainly, go ahead. And I'll let the tourists go on, and you can come in the door off of the porch." So she and Clipper came into the room, climbed through the window into the Blue Room.

TUCKERMAN: Oh, no. Clipper was the....

WEST: The big dog.

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TUCKERMAN: Was he a German shepherd?

WEST: Right, I think so.

TUCKERMAN: With muddy feet and the white-walled room.

WEST: Right.

TURNURE: Was she pleased with the room when she saw it?

WEST: Oh, I think so. She was a little—I don't think she was as pleased as she

thought she was going to be, but it was too late then.

TUCKERMAN: And then she was nervous because...

WEST: And she was nervous because of the President's reaction to the room.

So he stopped in on his way from going back to the office, I think. In

the afternoon he came down into the room, and he said to me, "Can't

you get a big blue rug and cover the floor with it?" [Laughter]

TURNURE: Anything to....

WEST: Well, as it ended up, he was the one who ordered that the floors be

darkened, which he thought would help even, too, in that area. We did

hunt for a rug, but there was nothing suitable at the time until we

finally found one that was a gift which had considerable blue in it.

TUCKERMAN: And then when the room was...

WEST: When there was the blue table and everything else. Of course, at the

opening, to perhaps draw away from any criticism because of color, we stressed the theme that in this room were hanging paintings of the

first seven presidents, which gave it a historical character. And the room hadn't always been

blue anyway. It'd been various different colors.

TUCKERMAN: It had?

WEST: Oh, yes. I remember when Mrs. Kennedy was first going over it with

Mrs. Parish and they called me into the room, she wanted to know

what I knew about the history of the room. Well, I got it out of a book and took herein a typed sheet: it'd been robin's-egg blue and everything else, and she made some classic remark about she could have it Mamie pink or something if she wanted to. [Laughter]

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TUCKERMAN: But there wasn't any criticism, was there?

WEST: Not really. No, none at all. Absolutely none. It was accepted extremely

well, no criticism of any kind.

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