

Francis Keppel Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 09/18/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Francis Keppel
Interviewer: Frank Sieverts
Date of Interview: September 18, 1964
Place of Interview: N/A
Length: 21 pages

Biographical Note

Francis Keppel (1916-1990) was a the Commissioner of Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare from 1962 to 1965. This interview focuses on the creation of an education bill during the Kennedy administration and the internal politics in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, among other topics.

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Francis Keppel, recorded interview by Frank Sieverts, September 18, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Francis Keppel– JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK] at Harvard University
2	Education task force's proposal being released to the press early
3	Sterling McMurrin's brief tenure as Commissioner of Education
4	Appointment as Commissioner of Education
5	Effects of Abraham Ribicoff resigning as Secretary of HEW
6	Drafting an education bill
9	Concern about Catholics' reaction to the education bill
10	Attempts to garner support for the education bill
12	JFK's concerns about school dropouts
15	Meeting about the civil rights bill
16	JFK's utilization of the civil rights movement to expand his plans for education
17	Appointment of John Naisbitt as Director of Public Affairs
18	Young Americans' admiration of JFK
19	JFK's influence on American education

Honorable Francis Keppel

U. S. Commissioner of Education

INTERVIEW OF THE HONORABLE FRANCIS KEPPEL
U. S. COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION
FOR THE
JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY LIBRARY

Date of Interview: September 18, 1964

Interviewer: Frank Sieverts

Frank Sieverts: This is Frank Sieverts. I am about to interview Commissioner Francis Keppel, the U. S. Commissioner of Education. Today's date is September 18, 1964. This interview is being conducted in connection with the Kennedy Memorial Library, Oral History Project.

Dean Keppel, as I'll call you, at least initially, because that's what you were before you accepted your present post, perhaps we could just start very informally by discussing your appointment. How did you first meet the late President, and what led to his choosing you for the office you now hold?

Francis Keppel: On the last point I can make guesses, obviously without facts. My first connection with the President went back to college days -- his older brother, Joe, who was, you remember, killed in the air crash was a college classmate, and I therefore talked with the President as a Harvard student even in a casual way -- the way you'd know someone who's a couple of classes below. I think he was the class of '40 and I was the class of '38. As a matter of fact, when one of the first times I went in to see the President in the Oval Room before we got going with Ted Sorensen, and whoever else was there, the President looked at me and kind of grinned and said, "Didn't you used to run against Joe for Harvard Offices?", and I said, "Yes Sir." He said, "Didn't he beat you?", and I said, "Yes Sir." That was the end of the discussion. The relationship was well established by that time.

F.S.: I see.

F.K.: Then we'd had a casual meeting or two in Massachusetts when he was Senator. I remember once having to kill time with an audience for an hour while he was late for some kind of an educational meeting, which I gather was characteristic, and ran across him then. He was suitably grateful for someone to fill in the space and keep the educators from going to lunch, which was what I was really doing.

F.S.: He was an overseer at Harvard?

F.K.: He was an overseer at Harvard.

F.S.: Did he oversee you at all?

F.K.: Oh, well -- the overseers oversee things in a grand manner. They never got very personal.

F.S.: I see.

F.K.: Then you'll remember the period just after the election and before he became President; in fact, he appointed a bunch of "Task Forces", I think they were called, and there was one appointed in Education, of which President Hovde of Purdue University was the Chairman. I was on that with some other fellows, including John Gardner, who I think was an important figure in the President's thinking about education. We met quite a bit, you know, and prepared a report the way all those committees did, and they all came in to report their results to the President, in our case at the Carlyle Hotel in New York. He happened to be there at the time, and we went in. Unfortunately somebody had handed out our report to the press without anybody getting around to asking the President.

F.S.: This was after the election?

F.K.: Yes, after the election but before the Inauguration. And somebody had given the report to the press, and naturally, being educators, we had a huge program in mind. It cost an incredible amount of money, and the President was a little horrified at the proposals he was inevitably being associated with from the dollar point of view, because the thing had been given out to the press in advance. But I must say it didn't seem to make him very cross for very long, and we sat around and talked. There were half-a-dozen men in the room perhaps. I think the important part of that talk may have been that the report pointed to one educational matter that I think caught his eye to a degree, and was, as far as I know, the only new note in this string of reports about education that were coming out about every 5 weeks and had been for 30 years. This particular report, for the first time at this level, pointed to the problems of the public schools in the cities and particularly in the slums of the cities, and said that this was one of the major weaknesses of the American educational system, that the Administration ought to worry about it, and actually proposed some kind of a formula to get money in there. This was quite apart from the Church-State issue which we'll probably come to later.

F.S.: Yes.

F.K.: But I think this may have had some effect on the President's thinking, as we did poke a finger in there. Then, he became President. I stayed on at Harvard, and what you were asking was what was the connection?

F.S.: Yes.

F.K.: Ralph Dungan of the White House Staff used to call once in awhile about who ought to be the Commissioner of Education, and, as a matter of fact, at that meeting at the Carlyle Hotel the President asked, I think, who we should have as the Commissioner of Education, and we proposed, and the President agreed at that time to James Allen, the Commissioner of Education of New York. We had talked about -- the Committee had talked about who could do this thing best, and we all agreed Jim Allen could.

F.S.: This was because of the emphasis on the problems of the center city?

F.K.: And also because Allen was by far the best of these Chiefs -- you know, State Commissioners of Education -- and a man who, unlike most of them, a man whose personal reputation made him persona grata to the college people as well as the school people -- very few people cross those two boundaries. The President agreed to it, and told us to go try to get him. Incidentally, I remember spending an afternoon trying to twist Allen's arm to do it, but Allen couldn't do it -- there were problems in his personal life as I remember, so after Allen said no the White House search machinery was on, you know, and we suggested all sorts of fellows, and ended up with my predecessor in this office. I didn't suggest his name -- a fellow called Sterling McMurrin--he resigned after about a year or so and I think this is the important point, and this may have something to do with the President's responses to education. You'll remember Mr. Ribicoff was the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. Mr. Ribicoff had apparently taken the position that he'd do the politics of this education stuff if McMurrin would stay inside and be an educator.

F.S.: I see.

F.K.: This didn't work worth a damn. I don't know what happened. I don't mean that those two men fought -- not a bit -- my impression is they get along pretty well, but not much of

anything got through to Congress, and it was really a Church-State problem in good part. The President's program in 1961 and '62 -- you know the first session '61-'62 -- in the first session of this Congress, got up to the very end and then fell apart -- the higher education bill was beaten by a very small number of votes, largely on the Church-State issue, the school fellows were mad at the college fellows -- the college fellows were mad at the school fellows, and the Church-State thing was weaving its way through everything. McMurrin was just plain discouraged, I think. I was told [this is one of the no-good-for-evidence stories] that after McMurrin put in a resignation, at one of the Staff meetings over in the White House [I think Mac Bundy may have told me this but somebody ought to check his memory] the President said, "What's going on -- what's this fellow McMurrin resigning for?" -- and they told him because he wasn't getting anywhere, and the President said, "Well, gosh I never even saw him -- I don't know what he did around here." And Mac is reported to have said, "That's just the trouble, Mr. President." I don't know if its true.

F.S.: That's very interesting.

F.K.: Well then when they went to the second go round, to find another Commissioner, I again was being asked for names and the like, and at this point -- this being a "confidential" Oral History, I will say I tried -- I tried to talk a couple of fellows into it, including Calvin Gross, now Superintendent of Schools in New York, who was one of the possibilities. But he said no, and so did others, I suppose. The usual search party was on, and Allen was being consulted. This is the first time I've said this anywhere, I think. I finally got a curious mixture of bad conscience that somebody ought to do this job and a little restlessness of my own at Harvard, so I sent word to Allen that if the White House wanted to ask me, on a personal basis, I'd be willing to think about it hard. Very shortly thereafter Dungan got a hold of me, and the President in the usual negotiations, and finally the President phoned me and said, "Will you do it?" Well, by that time it was all done.

F.S.: Yes. Well.

F.K.: That's a long answer to your question.

F.S.: Sure, but this is interesting because this is a job, a position which is one of great importance, and the one in which there is always great public interest.

F.K.: Well, there was some at the time. Mostly because Ribicoff had left his Cabinet position as Secretary of HEW, with one of the less helpful statements, which was that nobody could run this department.

F.S.: Yes.

F.K.: Thereby putting his successor in a charming position, and then that kinda got spread over the Office of Education, and there was a lot of stuff in the press about how no man in his right mind would take the job, and I think the President was worried about that.

F.S.: About this?

F.K.: The fact that nobody would take this on, you know.

F.S.: This idea of getting around--

F.K.: This country would sort of worry about education, and that no man in his right mind would take this lousy job.

F.S.: Yes.

F.K.: That -- I got the sense that bothered him a little. He made a big fuss about my appointment. I mean much bigger than he usually would -- swore me in himself and all that stuff.

F.S.: Well I remember, and this is why it's worth getting some emphasis to this whole process, and I think it's interesting to have your thoughts on it. When were you sworn in?

F.K.: December something or the other -- early December.

F.S.: The appointment was announced in November.

F.K.: In late November, and he swore me in personally in December.

F.S.: I see.

F.K.: And must have given some instructions around the Staff, I think, to see that a little show was made of it -- that the head of the higher education group, Logan Wilson, the President of the American Council of Education, be there and some fellow representative be there for the schools. I must say the President was so cross at NEA for having loused up his higher education bill,

he had to be calmed down on the subject of having any NEA man there, and we achieved a compromise, we finally asked the President-elect, I guess it was, of NEA who turned out, Thank God, to be an Indiana Democrat, who is a good fellow, and the White House was willing to have him represent NEA, not because it was NEA, but because he was a Democrat.

F.S.: Not one of their local functionaries.

F.K.: No, this is the reason, this is the evidence I have for saying something had gotten into his mind in late '62 -- that something ought to be done about this education business -- it wasn't working well in the Government.

F.S.: Well, let's home-in now on after you're appointed. What is the first occasion that you sat down with the President and got into substance and -- ?

F.K.: That was within a few days. It was during the December period -- a kind of legislative meeting season anyway -- I was thrust in with no competence at all -- almost I think literally within the first week of coming down here -- in a meeting with Sorensen and with Wilbur Cohen, who works for HEW, about what content of the "Education package" ought to be. I think it was those meetings that started the conception, which is what ultimately came out, that the only way you can get something through the Congress -- and the focus of these discussions was what could you do with the Congress -- was to put together in a package things for all the boys, the lower school fellows, the higher education people, people who were worried about handicapped children, people who were worried about vocational training, and everything else, and put them all together to neutralize the fights between the various parts of the education world. There was a bitter relationship going on, and the President was aware of that, I think, between the school people and the college people on the one side, and between the public school people and the whole Catholic world on the other. He wanted, I am pretty sure, he must have clearly wanted to try to smooth that fight down. One of the first things Ted Sorensen did was to take me off to see the local Bishop.

F.S.: Here in Washington?

F.K.: Yes. I'm sure the President must have been very sensitive about that. So we started off -- then Mr. Cohen, Mr. Celebrezze, and I went down to where is it in Florida he used to go -- Palm Beach, Florida -- and reviewed this "legislative package" again down there.

F.S.: Did he enter into the substance of the issue?

F.K.: He was interested obviously, personally, in the politics of it. Second, I think the thing --

F.S.: But interested in the politics from the point of your politics or from the point of view of getting the bill passed?

F.K.: Getting the bill passed. I don't think there was any doubt about that. Also, of course, I suppose like any skilled artist, he enjoyed looking at the different colors on the palette, but he wanted to get a bill passed, because this Administration hadn't passed a damn thing, and I never had any doubt that Mr. Kennedy wanted to get something on the books. Then substantively, you know, what's education for and the like. Number one -- he clearly was interested in standards and raising standards -- he just wasn't satisfied with the kind of -- now this sounds snotty but I think it's true -- the kind of middle class intellectual standards of the public schools. He didn't get the feel for the arts. I never got the sense the President was personally affected by the arts but he had a kind of feeling he ought to be. He and the rest of Society should. Does that make sense to you?

F.S.: Oh yes indeed. Some of the greatest pieces of the works of art in the world have been paid for by men who felt just that way.

F.K.: Well, I got this sense, and then generally this -- oh a month or so after I got in here he called up one day -- I think he must have called a couple of times in the course of my being here -- damn near frightened the office to death -- the President hadn't called since before Franklin Roosevelt. One of the times was when Rickover had been in to see him, and Rickover had said, "Now look, we ought to have national standards for the schools, and you tell Keppel to do it." Well this would have loused up everything in my life. I had to kinda smooth Rickover, and the President saw the point, I think, but he was interested. This standards business interested him and parts of -- the substantive content of the bill that had to do with raising quality in the arts and social sciences -- perhaps just as much as the sciences -- that interested him. He never had much -- he never did put his mind to it, but I could see him respond to the --

F.S.: And then you -- from there the bill did go up.

F.K.: What we did was put together this so-called omnibus bill, which Peter Frelinghuysen, Republican from New Jersey, referred to as that monstrosity that you are coming up with again, Mr. Commissioner. I remember going over to the President once with Mr. Cohen and some of the others on the message that was to accompany it -- that Sorensen put his hand to. Another example, by the way, of Kennedy's extraordinary memory, I had drafted some of this message, of course, and there was a passage that I felt very strongly about (you know, I had gotten my heart into it) to the general effect that if we are going to maintain the freedom of the institution, particularly of the college, but also the school, it had to be financially strong enough to be free. I got off some glorious line to the general effect that only the strong can afford to be free. The President, flipping through this draft -- his eye would run down the page at this fantastic speed -- came across that one and said, "Who did that?", and I said, "I did", and he said, "Look, it's a wonderful idea; I couldn't agree more, but the language is Wendell Wilkie's -- will you rearrange it?" If I'd known it -- I think it was just one of those phrases that stuck in the back of my memory, you know, and I didn't remember where in the hell it had come from. He had a kind of a grin on his face.

F.S.: He could be wrong in other words.

F.K.: NO, NO! -- he was smiling.

F.S.: Well, but still --

F.K.: I should have known better.

F.S.: Did he deliver any education messages in person?

F.K.: No. He made some speeches.

F.S.: The State of the Union Message had a reference to it.

F.K.: Had some passages and stuff in it. He had a reference to it as part of the package.

F.S.: Yes.

F.K.: And I think that the political side of it was clear enough. We were trying to neutralize the inside fighting in the educational world in the hopes that we would get something through. There's a memorandum, which I suspect is in the file or should be, of one of the phone calls that he made over here

in which he was talking about what the chances were of the passing, etc., and he ran down the list of people -- the members of the Rules Committee -- I remember on the phone, name by name, predicting votes.

F.S.: Was he right?

F.K.: Oh - half and half.

We were speaking about the President's Rules Committee, knowledge about the Rules Committee in relation to any educational program. He telephoned-- I see the note here, from a memorandum in the file -- on the 14th of January 1963, in effect asking how we were making out with this educational package, and one of the questions he asked -- I'm looking at my notes -- the President then asked, "Mr. Keppel", excuse me; the President then asked what Mr. Keppel thought the Catholics would do when the bill goes up to the Hill. At that point it was still being put together, and I replied as shown in the memorandum which is not important. Then the President went on to ask what would happen, suppose the elementary and secondary part of this package doesn't go through because of Catholic reasons, will the National Education Association, which represents the public school side, will they go and jump on the higher education part of this package. There I said I didn't think they would, that they had been kicked around pretty hard the last time for having done this and I had my doubts. Then the President counted his -- my notes say -- the President quickly counted his votes on the Rules Committee. He just went right down that list of names, and the assumption was that Mr. Delaney of New York would vote against elementary and secondary and his influence would be enough to kill it, which was quite right, so it never got up there. It was perfectly clear that the President realized he was sending up a package that would probably get busted up, but that if we could keep the thing fluid enough there was a chance of getting a reasonable part of it through. One of the many reasons why I feel the way everybody else does about his assassination is that I think that he would have gotten real pleasure from the fact that that strategy of his worked like a charm. Congress has passed more legislation on education than any since the founding of the Republic, and it was, I think, this --

F.S.: The package?

F.K.: The package, plus his sense of how you could get moving.

F.S.: But on this point, did he follow-up with individual Congressmen -- I mean, you say he counted off the names -- did he make any efforts to contact any of those names?

F.K.: You're asking the wrong man. I don't know. There were a couple of times, when at the HEW's request, he clearly moved in. One time Mr. Powell, not my favorite leader of the House Committee, was off in Puerto Rico or some place or other and it looked as if the Republicans could gang up in his absence, and at a full meeting of the House Committee on Education and Labor start tearing this thing apart right away -- well, the word got to the White House. Now all I know is that every damn Democrat turned up at that meeting. I can only assume that O'Brien did it on his own or the President told him to get them there. On another occasion we were in a snarl about the medical education bill -- that was a big bill for expanding medical schools. Nobody ever called it education -- the doctors felt that was the best way to kill it, so they called it something else and that got snarled with Mrs. Green, who had jealousies about her subcommittee not being in charge of it. It was being done by another committee and the President moved in on that one and he didn't like it either, but somebody had to tell Mrs. Green to lay off -- which she did -- he didn't like it and she didn't like it. Whew, boy was she distressed! I got the sense he didn't like doing this kind of work at all.

F.S.: Getting hold of Congressmen and twisting arms?

F.K.: Well, he certainly didn't seem to like it. Mrs. Green, for example, who is a very intelligent woman, a difficult woman but an intelligent woman. Obviously, the President wanted to deal with her as little as possible. I remember at some meeting or other, the President turned and said, "Well, now Cohen, you haven't succeeded with her, and Sorensen hasn't, Keppel is a new boy in town, and it's his turn." I got the sense that he was delighted that there was some new boy in town to take her on.

F.S.: Of course she was an important figure in his campaign in 1960 -- I think he knew that too.

F.K.: I got the sense that that existed and that she had a certain call, politically. That isn't to say he enjoyed dealing with her, because I don't think he did.

F.S.: No, that's an interesting point. Well then, the legislation during that year that you were in office when he was President -- the legislation was up there having committee treatment.

F.K.: It had gone through committees, but by the time of his death it hadn't actually passed. We'd gotten maybe one or two little bits of it. But the point was, that at the time of his assassination it had gone through quite a lot of stages in both House and Senate and was actually voted within two or three weeks of his death, so that it was right up there waiting.

F.S.: It really was, but --

F.K.: Well, it just hadn't quite gotten there. You remember what the Congress was like in December of '63. But it was right up there. And I think he had -- I hope he had before he died -- some sense that he was going to get something out of this. And by getting something, I don't think he was going to get much that affected the qualitative thing, which would have distressed him, I suspect. But he was going to get something politically.

F.S.: Is there anything else to say on the Church-State issue in this connection?

F.K.: We talked about it at these several meetings, with considerable frankness, as you would expect. My feeling was that the President saw this as a political issue. I never sensed it -- but then look, I didn't know him that well. I never sensed that he had personal views of the good public policy or bad public policy in giving money to Catholic schools or not. I felt him detached from the issue. It was an issue of how to get something done. I don't think he had very strong feelings as to whether the money should go to the parochial schools or not. I don't think --

F.S.: Would you say that the fact that he was a Catholic himself entered into the calculation very much?

F.K.: Yes, sure it did. It entered in making him more Protestant. He was the most Protestant President I ever saw on this issue.

F.S.: Yes, so one always understands. He delayed the --

F.K.: I didn't get the sense of embarrassment in talking with him. Now, men do, even quite apart from being the President. One intuitively feels, doesn't one, when you're walking on ground in which a man has got some emotional connection. I don't think he had been enthusiastic about the Catholic parochial system. He had never gone to it and neither had much of his family. He himself had gone to Choate, wasn't it --

F.S.: That's right, he had never gone to any Catholic schools.

F.K.: His sisters had gone to one of those fancy schools. He didn't really know much, or feel deeply about either the Catholic side of it. One could talk frankly about this with him. Completely. I never felt any need of withdrawing a little as a Protestant.

F.S.: When you say he was aware of the political side of it, he saw the problem that this could bring up both ways, I suppose.

F.K.: That's right. Both ways.

F.S.: Were there any, shall we say, non-legislative matters that he brought you into?

F.K.: Or that I brought him into?

F.S.: Or vice-versa, yes.

F.K.: There were several that came up. For example, this question of standards of Rickover kind of business. There were two or three of them. Second, he got interested and he, I think, himself -- certainly I didn't have the brains to -- started a concern about dropouts from the schools in the Spring of 1963 -- started pushing around at it, saying, "Why the hell doesn't somebody do something." And we started doing something or other. We got conferences and all sorts of things going on. Incidentally, I asked for some money from Lee White from the emergency fund, and the President unloosed \$250,000 and did some tapes and some TV things. It worked, by the way. He had a kind of instinct that you could make an issue out of this and get some of these kids back in school. Now, what this means to me was that what he was concerned about was that the unemployed youth was social dynamite in this society. Out of school, out of work, between 16 and 20, floating around in the cities. He just wanted to aim at them somehow. And he was personally interested in that. Second, he got personally interested and concerned about Prince Edward County and so did

Bobby Kennedy. And, again I feel ashamed of myself. I did not initiate this. I should have had the sense to realize that four years of a county in the United States without any schooling for anybody was scandalous. And he started that whole business going. He didn't call me about it. I guess Bobby Kennedy really took the ball. I took the position that it would be wiser, on the whole, to have that ball outside the Office of Education because there was a lot of stuff before Congress. If we got the label of running schools, then the whole Republican bunch and a lot of conservative Democrats would say, "Jesus, there goes the Administration itself running schools." And that might be enough to kill what is going on. So we stayed back of the scene on it. Bill Vandeneuvel was the guy that did all the work, raised the money and so forth. But the President was personally interested in that. When the civil rights issue came up, of course, the educational implications were involved. He called gatherings of educators and that sort of thing to talk about it. I thought those were quite successful.

F.S.: Did he make use of your contacts with educators?

F.K.: Yes, but always through the chain of command. Through Ted or somebody like that. And, as I say, Ted worked up that first relationship with the Catholic Bishop here in Washington. I don't remember his name. I didn't see the Bishop much. I was very promptly sent down to the men in the National Catholic Welfare Conference who handle the daily stuff, a lawyer called Consedine and a new charming Monsignor called Hurley. Obviously they wanted me to have -- they being Sorensen, and I'm perfectly sure he was reflecting the President -- wanted me to have a direct communications line with the Catholic Church, which the Office of Education never had before. And that they were conscious of. And I'm sure the President knew that.

F.S.: A word about academic freedom. Did that come up while you were here?

F.K.: No, the issue of academic freedom never arose. It was civil rights that was much more the issue.

F.S.: This was something that was tossed around and sometimes cited against President Kennedy that he had not been fully conscious of academic freedom problems.

F.K.: Yes, I remember that. That was in the McCarthy era.

F.S.: You were at Harvard then.

F.K.: Wasn't that when Arthur Schlesinger said he was color blind on civil rights? One of Arthur's statements that I think he wished he had never made.

F.S.: Yes, I think that's right. Well, one of the things was that while a Senator in his last two years in the Senate, he was more or less in charge of getting a disclaimer affidavit repealed.

F.K.: No, he wasn't. He may have been --

F.S.: He was the principal sponsor of the bill, but it didn't go very far. I remember that.

F.K.: Funny enough, Goldwater was the fellow who was helpful in getting that disclaimer taken off.

F.S.: Was he?

F.K.: So I'm told, to my amazement.

F.S.: Well, he's on the committee.

F.K.: Yes, apparently Goldwater is consistent on this. If you're going to be free, you're free to be wrong too.

F.S.: But that didn't come up while you were --

F.K.: That issue didn't come up in any clear case. The piece of legislation that kind of offended him in education was the so-called impacted area legislation. I guess when he was in the Senate he tried to cut that one back to size. He didn't get anywhere. Eisenhower tried to cut it back to size and he didn't get anywhere. The President tried it before I got down here and he didn't get anywhere, but he was still sore at it. He didn't like the lousy thing.

F.S.: I remember very clearly it was part of a package.

F.K.: We put it in this package and he didn't like it. Look, he understood that we put it in a package because that got us four thousand school systems with a very good lobby. He knew it, he understood that this was a useful part of the over-all package, but that isn't to say he liked the damn thing. He used to growl at it.

F.S.: But for the first time it was, in a sense, put to constructive purpose.

F.K.: If I may say so, I think in heaven he's probably watching with an amused smile now, because we're going to keep on using it. That thing is a political booster. OK, let's hitch some instruments on it.

F.S.: That's right.

F.K.: I think we'll do it next session too. I hope so. But, it's a reverse all right. He didn't like the thing. It struck him as bad legislation. It was one of those reasonably clean pieces of legislation 15 years ago and then the boys started putting barnacles on it, you know, and every fellow had his pet thing. He was right, in theory. But politically, as he well knew, this was a natural and you couldn't beat it.

F.S.: Yes, but the right thing to do, that being the case, was to use it for a constructive purpose and that's what you're doing now.

F.K.: Well, that's what we're trying to do. Don't ask me what will happen, but that's what we're trying to do, and we definitely are using it as the booster that pushes other stuff through the Congress. And we have done it once already and right at the moment you and I are talking, I'm trying to do exactly the same thing right now between the House and the Senate on NDEA reforms. We've got the booster hitched on it on the Senate side. On the House side, there is a conference coming up next week and it will be interesting to see whether the thing still has a little juice left in it. I think it does.

F.S.: On civil rights, did you talk with him at all on the question of withholding Federal aid from --

F.K.: No, sir. I attended a meeting with the HEW people when the new civil rights bill was being put together in the Cabinet Room. Mr. Johnson was there too. I had never seen President Kennedy so nervous as he was at that particular meeting, posing questions. He always was a man with a certain jumpiness, physically energetic, but this was a nervous man, I thought. He came into the room and left with Johnson and, I guess, Ted. There were a bunch of people around. The Cabinet

table was pretty well filled up. And this was a -- I got a real sense of tension in him. What are we going to put in it? How far will that rubber band stretch? Civil rights on one side, support for his whole program on the other side. It was the most nervous time I ever saw him.

F.S.: When was that?

F.K.: I think it was in the Spring. I can have that checked if you want.

F.S.: The Spring of '63?

F.K.: Oh, certainly the Spring of '63, and before the bill went up, and the question was, "What goes in it?" as I remember. Before his version of the bill went up. I got the sense of a very worried man. Then when a decision was made, he started bringing in all these groups from all over the place, including the educators to talk about it. He was quite different then.

F.S.: Well, here's a question that may be related. In June of 1963, Kennedy utilized the civil rights revolution to substantially revise and expand his education requests then pending before the Congress, e.g., vocational education, adult and basic education, manpower development and youth employment. What was the background of this?

F.K.: Well, I think the -- my memory isn't as clear on this as it should be. A lot of the pieces were up there and this civil rights movement brought public attention to some parts of it, the restraining parts of it. By that time it was quite clear that the illiterate Negro was an almost unemployable person in our kind of society and that this adult education would fit in. I think it was just a sense that you had a mood in the Congress, excuse me, a mood in the American people, "God bless me, we've got to do something about civil rights." One of the essential ways of doing it is by training and re-training education and that sort of thing, and I think it just kind of naturally flowed from the public focus of that time. Probably a good deal of that was done -- with some initiation from HEW -- but a good deal by the Bureau, I think, and Ted's office. I wouldn't want to say. How much of it is his, I wouldn't know.

My memory turns to something that is related to the academic world, but really in no sense irreverent. At the time the task force on education, of which Mr. Hovde was Chairman, was going in to see the President in the Carlyle, I can remember that what was on his mind the moment we walked in was that he was obviously trying to sign up Walter Heller as

Chairman of the Council for Economic Advisers. And the problem evidently in getting Walter was that in addition to whatever salary he got as professor at the University, he was also advising every other bank in the State. And his income was fabulously higher than anything the Government could pay. Mr. Kennedy, at that point, had in his mind that he had heard an awful lot about these poor salaries in higher education, but every time he tried to hire one of these fellows, they apparently were making more money than most of the businessmen in town. He was sardonically amused.

F.S.: That's because he skimmed off the cream, the real whipped cream.

F.K.: Yes, well we never got into that. We just smiled and went on with our labors.

F.S.: Let me spring this on you. I remember very clearly seeing in the paper shortly after you arrived here that you suggested to your employees that they dispense with the title "Doctor" referring to themselves unless they were in the medical profession. Did the President take note of this?

F.K.: No, I never heard him mention it. Needless to say, I didn't tell them to stop calling themselves "Doctor." I said, "Don't call me 'Doctor'." But I will confess, with a certain snide pleasure, that now a couple of years later I notice that most of the routing slips in the office are labeled "Mister," whereas they used to be "Doctor." However, those habits won't change and it's unimportant. He never mentioned that. I don't know why he should.

F.S.: Well, it's the sort of thing I think he might of -- I think he probably agreed with you entirely on it. I just have this point briefly about the appointment--

F.K.: Oh, there was a question about the appointment of John Naisbitt as Director of Public Affairs. This was a Schedule C appointment and the routine required White House clearance, and it developed that in this fellow's past he had been the director of the public program or whatever you call it, for the National Safety Council, with headquarters in Chicago. It developed that in his private life, the fire department of Chicago had come to put out a fire and damn near put out the house. They had walked off with the silver and the liquor and various other things. And Naisbitt, as a result, had become -- having protested rather vigorously --

had become persona non grata, underlined five times, to Mayor Daley on account of the whole press took up Naisbitt's side of the argument and there was a big fuss and Daley didn't like it. The news of this proposed appointment leaked. It had been cleared once by the White House people, and Daley made a big protest evidently. I never talked to Daley, but he made a big protest, I presume to Kenny O'Donnell, and it got to be quite a hassle before it was over with. I don't know how difficult a hassle. Kenny would have to be consulted on that, but I made a big row about it because I didn't think I could back down, and it finally came to the point where I was going over to see the President on it. And we walked into the Oval Room, Kenny and I, and I guess maybe somebody else. And I said, "Mr. President, I'm sorry to be obstinate about this, but I think I have to. I would be in terrible trouble with my trade if they thought I was being pushed around by a big city politician," and the President said, "OK, Frank, see if you can answer this letter to Mr. So and So in Atlanta," and that was the whole business. Two months of crisis all through my part of the government and one "OK".

F.S.: Well, that's very good. Is there anything in the last stage? Did you see him at all in the last month or two of his life?

F.K.: I don't think I did. Funny, with a man who lived so much in the public, in the press and other ways, somehow it's -- and I suppose true of all of us -- it's as if one saw him, even if one didn't, but I don't recall having seen him in the last few days. I probably did somewhere.

F.S.: Let me ask you something slightly different. Your field is education and you deal with education systems. Can you say anything about the impact that his personality had, both in life and afterwards, on American education?

F.K.: This is a very good question, a very good question. There's just no question that this man had an effect, particularly, I think, in the higher educational levels. He had an effect simply because he lived and breathed intellectual matters. That isn't to say that he couldn't run down the Rules Committee by memory without any trouble, but he gave that whole aura, particularly to the young. You may recall, that after his assassination, lined up waiting to see him in the rotunda of the Capitol were just miles of young people, including, I might say, my daughter who came down from Boston. He just represented that whole generation and this devotion touched me about it. He caught that generation and he had a real effect, I think, in the mood of the colleges, that being

intellectual was OK. It was a reasonable, a good thing to do. The tone was set for it. I think the question is a very good one because, while I couldn't possibly measure this, or give you any statistics, I just well know that this had an effect.

F.S.: And is it enduring?

F.K.: Yes, I don't think there is any question at all that it has had an effect on that whole generation that echoes and will re-echo to the generations to come. I'm sure of it. And you'll notice that I'm talking, I think, a little more about the student age than I am about the faculty, though I do not mean for a moment that the faculty age was not affected. I was particularly struck by its effect --

F.S.: On the college student age group? Yes, I think that's very true.

F.K.: And until you asked the question, I hadn't realized how clear a sense that could be. You can -- and obviously I don't mean to be critical. These are statements of fact. But you can tell the difference with Mr. Johnson. He does not have that effect on the college students. I don't know what it is, but I'm only saying it's true.

F.S.: Yes, it's quite true.

F.K.: It's just a difference in man. And, what it did, of course, was to make education, or the process of education more exciting to the young, I think, than had been often the case before. And the other thing he did, of course -- this is more Heller's doing perhaps than his, but obviously the President supported it. It was to emphasize the interrelation of education with the growth of the economy. The centers of excellence for new ideas. They bring new business. This is a good thing.

F.S.: This priceless resource.

F.K.: I don't mean that the economic argument was his. But that the idea was his -- I wouldn't say his -- had been assimilated into him.

F.S.: And he spoke for it.

F.K.: I think naturally, just naturally.

F.S.: You're from Boston. I assume you are.

F.K.: No, I'm a New Yorker.

F.S.: Well, anyhow, you spent a lot of time up in that part of the world. Have you been up at all recently?

F.K.: Well, occasionally, because one of my daughters is up there.

F.S.: Did you know him at all, in the Boston context, as a politician up there?

F.K.: No. I used to try to be useful to him when I was a Dean at Harvard. There was a girl, Deidre Henderson, a very nice girl who used to come to my office to ask for help -- I guess that was during the campaign.

F.S.: That was during the campaign.

F.K.: That was during the campaign, and I got mixed up with meetings and that kind of stuff, but personally, no. There's another story. There was a gathering in the White House which had been earnestly staffed by my office to get the superintendents of schools and the college presidents, and God only knows who else in town. I think it was civil rights, but I won't swear to it. I guess it wasn't. Well, anyway, among the people that were asked was the Superintendent of Schools of Boston. The President handled him very easily. He teased me about Harvard, and I teased him back, you know, and everybody was kind of relaxed in one of those White House rooms. The Superintendent of Schools of Boston stood up, wanting to make a case that the city schools were not being adequately supported by the Federal Government. The same case that we've been making for awhile and no surprise to the President. And just to show what the atmosphere was like -- when this old fellow stood up, instead of saying, "Mr. President", which everybody else had said when he called on them, this guy stood up and said, "Now, Mr. Mayor, my view is such and such," and the grin on the President's face was wonderful.

F.S.: Great! Harkening back to his grandfather.

F.K.: That must have taken him back.

F.S.: Great! Very good! Well, Commissioner, this has been a fascinating interview, and I think it does shed light on some of those interstices in the late President's life that may be of interest to future historians, at least I suspect they will.

We've been talking to Commissioner Francis Keppel, the United States Commissioner of Education. Today is September 18th, 1964. This interview is being done for the Oral History Project of the Kennedy Memorial Library, and my name is Frank Sieverts.

JK

Reference Copy 1