

**Laurence E. Tierney, Jr. Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 07/15/1964**  
Administrative Information

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Laurence E. Tierney, Jr. served as a West Virginia political figure and a John F. Kennedy supporter (1960). This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's [JFK] primary campaign in West Virginia, JFK's ongoing interest and impact on West Virginia, and strains of travel on JFK while campaigning, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

LAURENCE E. TIERNEY, JR.

July 15, 1964  
Bluefield, West Virginia

By William Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Also present during this interview is Mr. Tierney's daughter, Miss Ann Tierney. Mr. Tierney, when did you first become seriously interested in President Kennedy as a possible presidential candidate?

TIERNEY: It was quite obvious to me that early in the campaign there were two people who might be candidates for the Democratic nomination. One was Jack Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]; the other was the present president, Lyndon Johnson. We discussed these matters in the fall of 1959, and I then decided that West Virginia should, and I personally would, support Jack Kennedy for the presidency. We went all out for him and we saw to it that he became the nominee here in the state of West Virginia.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, at that time did you urge Senator Kennedy to run in the West Virginia primary?

TIERNEY: I did indeed. He was kind enough to come to my house for luncheon, where this plan was formalized and finalized, and I expressed my opinion that the religious issue meant nothing. We were looking for a positive person, a person of real sorts, and he exemplified that in every fashion. And so I urged him to

do it and he agreed. So then I went on from there in every way that I could, with my friends in every other religion, to further this matter. And we did.

YOUNG: Would you explain to me what your official title was during the primary campaign?

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TIERNEY: My official title was absolutely nothing. I was interested in my good friend, the great senator, then, from Massachusetts, Jack Kennedy -- and, God rest his soul, still my friend.

YOUNG: When Senator Kennedy came to West Virginia to campaign, did you accompany him on any of his trips?

TIERNEY: Of course I did. I flew not only here with him in West Virginia, but I flew with him country-wide in his plane. And we made hay wherever we went.

YOUNG: Some of the reporters have observed, Mr. Tierney, that Senator Kennedy with his Harvard accent and his eastern mannerisms might not go over too well in a state which does not have much of this sort of thing. Do you think that Senator Kennedy was able to overcome any handicaps of a Harvard accent?

TIERNEY: Well, of course. He did exactly what I've done: I've overcome both Senator Kennedy and President Kennedy and his accent, with my Yale accent.

YOUNG: You don't think this was a factor then in the primary?

TIERNEY: I don't think it had anything to do with it.

YOUNG: Do you think at the beginning of the campaign many West Virginians objected because Senator Kennedy was a Roman Catholic?

TIERNEY: I don't think so. Basically, West Virginians are a sound people. They were born here and they've lived in these mountains through the years and their thinking is sound. And so when the conclusion had to be reached about a probable person for the president of the United States, they recognized the great abilities and gentility of this great man who was our President.

YOUNG: When Senator Kennedy was conducting his primary campaign in West Virginia, what would you list as his most effective assets politically?

TIERNEY: Well, politically -- his ability to state his tremendous appeal to people

through his looks.... And I might put this in, if you please: I've got, just recently, his state papers through the years 1961, '62, and '63 to the point that they must terminate. There's a fascinating thing to every American. When the good President wrote a letter to the great former prime minister of Great

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Britain, Mr. Churchill [Winston Churchill], Mr. Churchill was not able physically to come to this country, but he sent his son. Mr. Churchill wrote a letter; it's in these state papers, the 1961 papers. Mr. Churchill's son read his father's letter. The President made his speech. I don't think, in my judgement, that I've ever read or ever will read more prolific and proper use of the English language than was used in this exchange between these two great people. The American people, in my judgment then, should read everything that our late great President had said, his exchange of papers. It would be a great thing for the American people when they do it, for their mentality, for their future usage.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, I understand that both you and your daughter, as well as other members of your family, helped when both Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor Roosevelt] and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. came into the state to help in the primary. Would you say a word about the effectiveness of Mrs. Roosevelt and Franklin, Jr. in West Virginia in the primary?

TIERNEY: Well, there's no question about their effectiveness. The people of West Virginia generally remembered well. Most of them had in their homes pictures of the late great President, who was a friend of mine, too, Franklin Delano Roosevelt [Sr.]. Mrs. Roosevelt's coming and young Frank's words of wisdom, his engaging personality, were a tremendous help; there's no question there.

YOUNG: Do you think the Roosevelts were helpful to any particular section of the state?

TIERNEY: I think it was general. I don't think it was any.... It was certainly in the mining areas.

YOUNG: Most effective there.

TIERNEY: Most effective there.

YOUNG: Would you say a word then about the Kennedy war record as a campaign contribution? Do you think that the fact that the Senator had been a hero in the war won votes in West Virginia?

TIERNEY: I think, of course, one will recall his war record, which was an outstanding one. I don't think that necessarily that was a compulsive thing. On the

other hand, one remembered it, and so did everyone in the West Virginia, that tremendous outstanding record he made. We were proud of him; we are today.

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YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, in the final analysis, why do you think Senator Kennedy won in West Virginia?

TIERNEY: Senator Kennedy, in my judgment, won in West Virginia because of his personality, his interest in people. He met people, he knew their problems, and he looked into them and recognized the problems that they had. He was interested to the extent that if he were elected President, then these people here in our state would benefit by virtue of his deep thinking about their various and sundry problems, which he knew about, and assimilated, and took every cognizance of. He was a great man for the people of the country, not only for West Virginia but for the country as a whole.

YOUNG: You mentioned to me a minute ago that he was pretty good at picking people's brains, that he would stop and talk to people in all walks of life. Do you remember any particular examples of such a thing?

TIERNEY: Of course he did. He did here. He would talk to coal miners, he would talk to laboring people, he'd talk to business people. "What are your problems?" And once they were told him, he didn't forget them. He kept them in mind and planned his program according to the people to whom he had talked, and according to the problems which were most paramount to them, of course.

YOUNG: Well, do you think that the people of West Virginia felt somewhat flattered by the fact that Senator Kennedy took such an interest in their particular problems at that time?

TIERNEY: I think unquestionably the vote in West Virginia shows the interest the people in West Virginia took in his campaign here, and paramountly his interest in their problems -- which he exemplified in so many ways and so many fashions. And so the state as a result, obviously and with good sensibility, was for him in the election.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, do you have any other stories which show the way in which the President was constantly picking the brains of the people that he was with and campaigning with?

TIERNEY: I recall driving from Bluefield to Welch, West Virginia, where he was going to make a speech. He had lost his voice through constant speaking. And sitting in my car, he passed notes back to me asking me why these houses in this coal mining area that we drove through,

why they were vacant, and why this and why that. And we attempted, of course, to answer them. And then, interestingly enough, to supplant him when once we got to the adjoining county seat at Welch, his brother Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] came to make the speech because the President could not talk because of his voice. But it demonstrated then, and he demonstrated throughout his tenure of office, his tremendous interest in people and in things and in doing better for the country as a whole. He did that all the way through; this is simply an example. As a matter of fact, you know, he went into a coal mine -- "What does it look like?" -- so he would know. He wanted to know about people and people wanted to know about him. They met him, they appreciated him, and they liked him, the President of this country.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, in the general election in the fall of 1960 do you think that the local Democrats closed ranks and all supported Kennedy, or was there still a fear, perhaps, that the President might be responsible for a loss of votes for some local candidates?

TIERNEY: Unfortunately, even locally and statewide and countrywide the Democrats did not close ranks, but happily, enough did to see that the President was elected here in West Virginia and in our county. He carried predominantly but with a great deal of effort. Unfortunately, the people didn't think as they should have prior to the election.

YOUNG: Did you have any doubts about the fact that Kennedy would carry West Virginia in the general election, before the election?

TIERNEY: I did not. From the basis on which we had worked with the Kennedy group and with primarily our own thinking and sensibilities, the people of West Virginia had only one course, and that was to vote for Kennedy as they did.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, how did President Kennedy continue to show his interest in the economy of West Virginia after the inauguration?

TIERNEY: Interestingly enough, Mr. Kennedy asked me to sit on a committee which he set up to create the Area Redevelopment Authority. We sat from early December 1960 through New Year's Day in 1961, the only New Year's Day that I have spent with a cup of coffee, which I didn't like particularly but which came at midnight. That's the way we drank in, if you please, the New Year. We came up with a bill. Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois was there and so were we all,

the whole night through. At seven o'clock on January first, 1961, by military plane we sent this bill to Palm Beach, Florida for the President's signature. And so we got an early start in getting things done for the economy, not only for West Virginia but for the whole country. And it's proven itself, in my judgment, in many fashions in many ways.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, you mentioned in private conversation before we started this tape, that the President remained accessible with respect to West Virginia. Would you suggest any ways in which his door was open to the problems in West Virginia?

TIERNEY: His door was continuously open, and not only to West Virginia but to the whole country's problems, which he recognized fully. I frequently was in consultation with him not only in his office but telephonically, and he did everything that one could be expected to do to further the conditions that apparently were here and were called sort of "poverty-stricken."

YOUNG: Did you have any personal contacts with him in these matters?

TIERNEY: Of course I did. I was frequently with him. As a matter of fact, our contacts were such that sometimes they were almost embarrassing. When I was having lunch one day, a Tuesday, at the University Club in Bluefield, I was called by the President himself. "I want you in Geneva on Sunday morning." "Well," I said, "Good heavens, I've got this bad leg." He said, "I took a bad back, you know, to Paris and to Vienna, and so I'd like you in Geneva." I was there. The United Nations -- I was chairman of the United States delegation, sitting with thirty-seven nations that I recall, including all the bloody Communists. [Maybe you want to take that out.]

YOUNG: You mean the President didn't show you any sympathy then...?

TIERNEY: None whatsoever. And so I was there, and it was quite an experience. I'm delighted to have served him and our country, if you please, at Geneva in these United Nations as chairman of the United States delegation.

YOUNG: What problem was that Geneva meeting concerned with?

TIERNEY: It was primarily economic. What do we do about coal from this country, oil from foreign countries,

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coal and oil and wheat, if you please, from Russia -- and the Russians were concerned about that. It was a matter of general economics, and I think, if you please,

the record will show that the attitude of the United States as expressed by us as head of that nation has been substantially carried out to the benefit of our country generally.

YOUNG: Mr. Kennedy had selected you then because of your special knowledge of fuels -- is that correct -- coal particularly, and other areas?

TIERNEY: My first reaction would be he sought me out because of my broken ankle.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, let's turn to some other questions with respect to the West Virginian economy. Do you think that West Virginians particularly liked any special part of the New Frontier? Was there a selection of the Kennedy program which had any particular appeal? You've already mentioned the Area Redevelopment. Do you think West Virginians reacted favorably to the Peace Corps, for instance?

TIERNEY: I would say with respect to the Peace Corps -- and I express my own personal opinion in addition to the thinking, in my judgment, of the people in West Virginia generally -- the Peace Corps is one of the soundest things that's been set up. Its director, Sargent Shriver -- not only because he's a good friend personally of mine -- but I think he'd done a magnificent job, and I think that this matter has been handled in a great fashion and it's a tremendous thing. Back to what the Kennedy administration has done, did do for the state of West Virginia: The Kennedy administration, generally, for the whole country, not only West Virginia... West Virginia would be included because the country has benefited as a result of the sound ideas that our late great President promulgated.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, do you think that, had the President lived, the people of West Virginia would have given him an even greater vote of confidence in 1964 than they did in 1960? Was his popularity up as a result of his program that helped West Virginia?

TIERNEY: Well, you've given me a question which is difficult to answer; it's a political one and one hesitates to do it. But in my judgment, if you please, the great performance of the late President was such that unquestionably the people of West Virginia, the people of this country, the people of the world, if you please, would have given him even a bigger vote of confidence.

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YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, in summary with respect to the Kennedy campaign in West Virginia, what broad contributions do you think Senator Kennedy made to the life of West Virginia and the life of the nation by coming into West Virginia and calling attention to us in the primary?

TIERNEY: There's no question but when President Kennedy made a tremendous contribution to West Virginia, to the people here. He made them aware of their political rights, their ability to speak for themselves, and it resulted in his carrying this state. He went beyond that. He did the same thing with his thinking, his philosophy, his sensibility for the whole nation; West Virginia was included. Obviously, West Virginians appreciate what he did for them, what he made them aware of, the things they could do for themselves, that they realized finally for probably the first time.... It was not a monetary thing; the important thing to me was what he did to the political philosophy, to the thinking, of the man on the street. He made him aware of his responsibilities and his opportunity to express his own wishes toward the sensibility of proper government.

YOUNG: Four years later, after the campaign, do you think any of this has rubbed off and stayed in West Virginia?

TIERNEY: I think without a question it has. Sensibility is still here. Among the people -- I've just been in contact with a great many of them -- the Kennedy philosophy is still here, to the benefit of this great state, to the benefit -- in my judgement -- of the nation.

YOUNG: Do you think that the people that volunteered in the campaign, that any of them have remained active, as such, in politics?

TIERNEY: I happen to know that they have, thinking about those sensible things that the late great President suggested we should follow.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, in our private conversation before this interview, you were telling about an incident with President Kennedy after the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion. I wonder if you would repeat it for me now.

TIERNEY: It just so happens that I was sitting at the President's desk. I didn't quite agree with some of the things that had happened in connection with the Bay of Pigs incident. I have been always one of those persons to whom the President is "Mr. President;" I've prided myself on that. I've known quite a number of them; I've been

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there at the White House, at their desk. But I got myself out of hand, and I said, "Now look here!" -- and pointed my finger -- "Now look here, lad, I disagree with you," and do you know, the President laughed till the tears streamed down his face.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, Senator Kennedy seemed never to tire and never to wear out on the West Virginia campaign. Did you observe with the President any particular strains of travel?

TIERNEY: He had the greatest ability to travel of anyone I've ever known. I had an occasion to fly from Bluefield, West Virginia to Charleston in the middle of the night. It was pitch black. I said to the captain, the pilot of the plane, "Fly high," after I'd asked him, "Where are you from?" He said, "I'm from Boston." I said, "That's flat country. I'd like for you to get up high and stay over these mountains." We landed there at some four o'clock in the morning. And meanwhile, the President sitting beside me went sound asleep. So he rested. And he was equal to the task that we had the next morning of going to mass with my good friend Harry Hoffman, the editor of the *Charleston Gazette*, down to church at half-past seven in the morning, a devilish time of morning to have to get up. But the President as always, as he did then, exhibited this tremendous interest not only in West Virginia but in the country as a whole.

YOUNG: Well, did he ever seem to show signs of fatigue as a result of his war injuries or anything, when you were with him?

TIERNEY: Well, yes. His back would from time to time bother him. But he had the ability, the tremendous asset of course it is, that he could relax and take a nap if it were only five minutes or so, but he did that.

YOUNG: Did you sleep on the trip from Bluefield to Charleston or were you watching the mountains?

TIERNEY: I was watching the mountains. The President was sleeping.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, how do you think the President was able to stand the strenuous nature of the campaign? How was he physically able to cope with the conditions that he had to meet with all of the time?

TIERNEY: Well, his tremendous ability to relax between engagements: he could quickly shut his eyes and take a five-minute nap and wake up completely refreshed and able to meet the problems that would be there

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at hand one he arrived at them.

YOUNG: You mentioned a little earlier that on a trip to Welch he had lost his voice, and as a result of that wrote notes inquiring about local conditions and so on. Did you ever at any other time witness any example of complete exhaustion, or the fact that his voice had vailed and he was unable to carry on in the way that he wanted to?

TIERNEY: Well, it wasn't a matter of complete exhaustion please. He didn't lose his

voice as a result of that, he lost it because of the demands of the public who wanted to hear him. And so he was gracious enough to use his voice to speak to the public generally. It wasn't a matter of political exhaustion or voice exhaustion, it was simply a matter of the nicety of a great gentleman.

YOUNG: Well, there were also stories.... We've heard this about all politicians: they shake so many hands that their hands will get sore and swell; were you ever with Senator Kennedy when this happened?

TIERNEY: Well, of course. Yes, I've seen it happen. And as a matter of fact, even when I'm not running for office it's happened to me. But the Senator did have it happen, and the President, because people wanted to shake his hand and he wanted to shake their hands. He liked people, he loved people, he understood their problems, he wanted to know their problems, and he understood them and found them out. And unfortunately, he didn't live to carry out those sensibilities that were his. The American people saw to it that he didn't live.

YOUNG: Mr. Tierney, there were also stories of the President both as a candidate and then later as President benign mobbed in much the same way that I remember Frank Sinatra being mobbed at the Stanley Theater in 1943. Were you ever with the President when the crowd seemed to almost get out of control, and there was almost a threat that he would simply be trampled or his clothes would be ripped -- that sort of thing, the crowd seemingly going wild over him?

TIERNEY: Well, yes. In Roanoke, Virginia that did happen. Of course, I would not put the President in the same category as someone whom I heartily dislike by the name of Frank Sinatra.

YOUNG: We will not make critical musical judgments at this time.

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TIERNEY: So, please, you've asked me the wrong questions.

YOUNG: What happened in Roanoke?

TIERNEY: Well, simply, people mobbed around; they admired him so strenuously.

YOUNG: What were the details then of the incident; do you remember any of them?

TIERNEY: Well, the President, after he concluded his speech in Roanoke, went to the telephone booth to call his wife to inquire about her health and all. And then he was completely mobbed by the twenty-some thousand people who attempted to surround that one telephone booth. And policemen got to the point where they

were holding children up to keep them from being suffocated, small children. He fought his way through by some means, back to his plane to go on for his next engagement which was in Akron, Ohio.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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