

Joseph D. Tydings Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 09/30/65
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

United States Attorney, District of Maryland (1961 - 1964); Senator from Maryland (1965 - 1971). In this interview, Tydings discusses his work for John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign and their personal relationship, among other issues.

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JFK

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By Joseph D. Tydings

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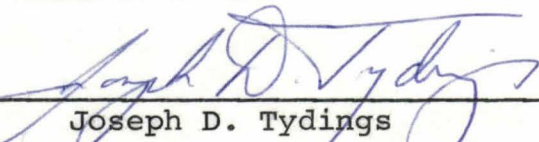
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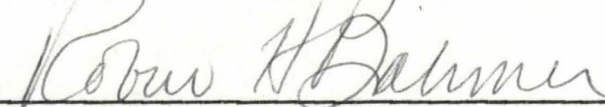
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Joseph D. Tydings – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JOSEPH D. TYDINGS

September 30, 1965
New Senate Office Building
Washington D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey
and
Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Could you tell us when you first became acquainted with John Kennedy?

TYDINGS: I first became acquainted with President Kennedy when he was a young Senator. In 1953 I had been elected President of the Young Democratic Clubs of Maryland. One of my responsibilities, of course, was the promotion and the carrying out of our annual Jackson Day Dinner. We needed a speaker--this would have been in February or March of 1954-- and I went to see Senator Kennedy in his Washington office. He was kind enough to say that he would be our speaker. I met

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him in his office on, I think, two occasions, and then of course, he came over to Baltimore and spoke at our dinner. He was a very dashing young man at the time, a bachelor, and he made an impressive appearance. He read his speech. I remember he came in a whirl, and left

promptly. That was my first meeting with him.

Subsequently I met him again, together with his brother, at the 1956 Democratic Convention when he was a candidate for vice president. At that time I was not a delegate. My father had been nominated for the United States Senate in the primary, but was taken ill. The forces we had defeated in the primary took over the state convention and none of our people were delegates there; we just went along. Nevertheless, I was for Senator Kennedy for vice president, although I had no vote.

There is a possibility that I could have met Senator Kennedy in years past down in Palm Beach where my grandfather, Ambassador Joe Davies [Joseph E. Davies], had a home, as did Joe

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Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy], the Ambassador. Ambassador Kennedy was a close friend both of my grandfather, Joe Davies, and my father, Senator Millard Tydings. Those were the two times prior to Senator Kennedy's running for the presidency that I met him.

MORRISSEY: When you went to that Convention in 1956, did you anticipate beforehand that Adlai Stevenson would throw open the vice presidential nomination?

TYDINGS: No, I did not. It was strictly spur of the moment, I believe.

MORRISSEY: Were you very active that night when they were trying to round up delegates?

TYDINGS: I did everything I could in the Maryland delegation. I wore a big Kennedy button, and I remember that Senator Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] was a little upset because he had been a friend of my father's, you know, and he had also come into Maryland to speak at my request when I was President of the Young Democrats. But I pretty much cast my dye for Senator Kennedy, I would say, probably at that Convention. I

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was impressed, and I think perhaps even more so because he was kind to me when I was only 24 and President of the Young Democrats. He was very courteous and kind to me.

MORRISSEY: How did the Maryland delegates vote in that vice presidential nomination?

TYDINGS: For Kefauver.

MORRISSEY: Both times?

TYDINGS: Yes.

MORRISSEY: After 1956, when did you see him again?

TYDINGS: I didn't see him again, to my recollection, until I had been working for him in Maryland for some months for the presidency as sort of an office manager, which they called Executive Secretary, and then as Campaign Manager, because there was no one else willing to do the work.

I was first designated as the political agency. I set up the Maryland primary organization and campaign itinerary for Senator Kennedy, and I met him when he came into Maryland. We stayed pretty much together for three days,

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almost day and night, during the time he was in Maryland.

MORRISSEY: As I recall, he ran up a pretty good vote in that primary.

TYDINGS: Yes, he did. He ran up a great vote. Those interested in his candidacy had initially met in Baltimore. A meeting had been called by Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] for all persons interested in Senator Kennedy. It was well known that the Governor and the official state organization wished no candidate in the Maryland primary; they wanted an uninstructed delegation so the Governor could wheel and deal at the Convention. Senator Kennedy determined that he was going to file, and a group of us--I guess there were forty people at this meeting in Baltimore--all said we were willing and ready to work in any capacity. It was decided that a very prominent, well known, and distinguished Baltimore lawyer, Bill Macmillan [William Macmillan], an old friend of my father and my father's State Treasurer, should

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be the state campaign chairman. Mr. Macmillan took this with the understanding that he wouldn't have to do any work; they would just use his name. Congressman Macdonald [Torbert H. Macdonald] was responsible for the Maryland primary, and they brought down Joe Curnane, a very effective Boston "pol," to run the office.

About a month went by and nothing happened and nobody was doing any work, except Joe Curnane, who lacked Maryland contacts. Nothing was being organized. I was in the Legislature at the time. Then I received a call at home, and they asked if I would come down to Baltimore for some pictures and if I would agree to serve as Executive Secretary of the campaign. Well, I didn't quite know what Executive Secretary was, but I had stated before that I would serve in any capacity they wanted me to--county chairman, district chairman, state chairman, anything. So I went down, and I posed for the pictures. Then they needed

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someone to be the political agent, and no one quite seemed to want to have his name used as political agent, so I volunteered my name for political agent.

Then I learned that nothing had been done about organizing the campaign, So I stayed that night down in Baltimore. You see, this was billed as the formal opening of a campaign, but I found that there was no campaign, so I stayed there and I made Torby Macdonald over from Washington, and Joe Curnane, and we worked. I got on the telephone for about four or five hours, and before the night was over I had county chairmen in about half of the counties. Then I just stayed there from then on in that office. Joe Curnane was there full time and I was almost full time, and we lined up a state campaign organization in every county in the state. I set up an itinerary; I determined where the President should go, and first thing you know, they named me Campaign Manager. Then, when

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President Kennedy came into the state, with the exception of one morning when I took his brother Robert to my own county because I very much wanted to carry that county, I stayed with the President and he stayed with me. He stayed at my home for the three days he was in Maryland. It was a wonderful experience being with him. I think I got a pretty good insight. I was quite a bit younger than he. He didn't mince any words. He had great ability to judge individuals and to spot phonies.

Oh, one other point: when we initially took this job and got the campaign going, and particularly the last month before the Maryland primary, my hope was that we would be able to build up a big enough vote in Maryland to offset the effect of a defeat in West Virginia. We anticipated that he was going to lose in West Virginia. As a matter of fact, for a time I even considered volunteering my services to go out to West Virginia

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and work, but it was felt I was more effective in my own state, setting up Maryland. So we were going to go all out to try and bring back his prestige after a West Virginia defeat. Of course, when he won in West Virginia, everybody realized that if he wasn't going to be the Democratic nominee, he was going to determine the Democratic nominee, so everything shifted. He came almost directly to Maryland from West Virginia, only a day or so difference. Then the bandwagon was really rolling.

I can remember so well, all of a sudden, when he arrived in Baltimore, all the politicians who hadn't wanted to have anything to do with us were all swarming around, and they all wanted to have their pictures taken with him by the press. I can remember one little room where, literally, they were fighting and pushing and tugging; all of them were scrambling around trying to get in the picture with him. Of course, he was so sharp. I mean he could tell immediately almost the ones you could rely on,

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the ones that worked, the ones who were the phonies, the ones who were the publicity seekers. We had a grand time, and I enjoyed every minute of it. He was up at Oakington the night after we had been in Southern Maryland and Baltimore and prior to our going to the Eastern Shore. He stayed with me up at the farm. I took him to my home town to speak, in Havre de Grace, on the way over to the shore, which was a big thrill for Havre de Grace and for me.

GRELE: Would you say that Senator Morse was any real challenge to the then Senator Kennedy in the primary?

TYDINGS: No. Absolutely not.

MORRISSEY: Somewhere I heard that at the outset of the campaign in Maryland you had a terrible time with the various factions in Baltimore?

TYDINGS: Yes. Oh, here is another thing; we have a custom in Maryland, which unfortunately is the custom in most big cities, of paying what is called "election day" or "walk-around

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money" to the various Democratic leaders. I did not consider Morse a formidable opponent, nor did I consider the uninstructed delegation with the Governor backing it as formidable, and I made the decision that we would not pay "walk-around, election day" money in Baltimore City. And the howls went up! One Baltimore politician, George Mahoney, went all the way down to West Virginia, and called up the Senator, and said that I was throwing the campaign in Maryland, that I was lousing it up, that I was going to lose it for him because I refused to pay out election day money. Well, Mahoney was only interested in keeping his own organization alive. I can remember at the time I was mad enough to... I felt like chewing out Mahoney if I had seen him because he bothered the poor Senator down there fighting for his life in West Virginia with a picayunish, shabby political detail. But they backed me up; we didn't put any election day money in the streets. And when he won in West Virginia

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they all came running. They were all in there.

MORRISSEY: This meeting of the forty people in Baltimore that you mentioned a few minutes ago--what kind of people were these?

TYDINGS: Mainly younger people interested in good government, some members of the legislature. Blair Lee was there, I remember, and Tom Finan.

MORRISSEY: Would you say that many of them were not closely attached to the Democratic Party in Maryland?

TYDINGS: I would say the majority of them were more on the independent line. A few were organization people--Finan was--but the great majority were more independent because it was known that the organization wanted an uninstructed delegation. We finally got Tawes [Governor J. Millard Tawes] to say that if he were voting in the election he would vote for Senator Kennedy over Senator Morse because he was the best of the two candidates, but that was about all.

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MORRISSEY: After the primary and before the Convention in Los Angeles, did you have any dealings?

TYDINGS: Yes, I saw the Senator quite a bit. Almost immediately after our primary Bob Kennedy called me up and asked me if I would go to Delaware and represent them at the state convention and see what the lay of the land was and what we could do. I did go in to Delaware. I then arranged a reception in Wilmington for Senator Kennedy to meet all the Delaware delegates, all the rest of the convention, and all the political leaders in Delaware. This was before the national Convention.

I also went with Bob Kennedy to the Florida state convention and met the people down there. I was in and out of Senator Kennedy's office quite a bit prior to the Convention in Los Angeles.

MORRISSEY: Was the Florida delegation committed to Senator Smathers [George A. Smathers]?

TYDINGS: Yes. We never had any hope for them, really. We did have a hope in the Delaware delegation,

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but I messed it up by permitting a secret ballot. I thought that the critical vote would switch to us, but the vote switched the other way, and we lost the Delaware delegation. It was a bad error of judgment on my part, and I felt pretty miserable at the Convention about it, but that's the way it goes.

MORRISSEY: At the Convention were you a coordinator for some of these states?

TYDINGS: Yes. I worked on the floor. I was responsible for Delaware, Florida, and Maryland on the floor. Maryland was bound by the results of the

primary for the first ballot at least, and for as many more as we could hold them. And I was responsible to keep tabs specifically on Delaware and Florida, and each day we had our coordinators' meeting.

MORRISSEY: Was there any fear that if John Kennedy wasn't nominated on the first ballot that Maryland might split for some of the other candidates?

TYDINGS: Yes, there was a definite fear that way.

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MORRISSEY: Any one direction that they might go in?

TYDINGS: Oh, they would go to Johnson. The Governor was for Johnson, and a number of the big people were for Johnson. They deliberately left me off the delegates' list, and with good reason, because if I had been a delegate it would have been a lot more difficult for them to shift. Fortunately, we won on the first ballot.

MORRISSEY: Were you involved in the ins and outs of the choice for the vice presidential nomination?

TYDINGS: No.

MORRISSEY: I would imagine that your delegation was very happy with the selection.

TYDINGS: Yes. It was the only choice, really. It was the best choice and the only choice.

MORRISSEY: Back in the primary, and also looking forward to the November election, was there much evidence of an anti-Catholic feeling in Maryland?

TYDINGS: No, not in Maryland. We wouldn't have any in Maryland because we have had so many prominent Catholics in Maryland. Maryland was founded

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on the basis of religious freedom, although there was a time when Catholics couldn't hold office in Maryland. That was many years ago. John Kennedy was always popular in Maryland because he had been there a number of times speaking, and he had a great following.

MORRISSEY: I assume, then, that you had no doubts that Maryland would go Democratic in 1960?

TYDINGS: None whatever. I was always confident of my own state.

MORRISSEY: I understand you also worked with Delaware and Florida during the campaign.

TYDINGS: In the general election, yes. I was responsible for setting up the organizations there and the Volunteers for Kennedy, state organizations. I worked a great deal with Senator Kennedy over the problems of Florida. There was an extremely bitter fight between the incumbent governor, LeRoy Collins, and the Democratic gubernatorial nominee, Ferris Bryant, over which group should control the campaign machinery. I brought the entire Florida

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legislative leadership up to Washington in the President's plane, the *Caroline*, and talked to them. I went down to Florida and went all over talking to everyone, and came back to report to the Senator. All this was while the Congress was still in session. He finally made a judgment, based on the facts I brought him, that he would have to go with the more conservative group in Florida, despite his great respect for Governor Collins, because we had a better chance of carrying the state that way. Then I worked in both Delaware and Florida for the balance of the election setting up his tours, coordinating, and doing all manner of work.

MORRISSEY: How well did the volunteers get along with the regular, organizational Democrats?

TYDINGS: Well, it varied. Generally, they don't get along well, but it depends on the areas and who your leadership is, and how they are utilized. I think this campaign did a good job in utilizing the best of both groups.

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Senator Kennedy came into Florida and into Delaware, and made his usual fine impression.

MORRISSEY: As I recall, the margin of victory in Delaware was 3,200 votes, something like that?

TYDINGS: Slim, 5,600, I think it was. It was less than 10,000 anyway. But Delaware is a small state. That is remarkable when you consider that the incumbent Democratic United States Senator, Alan Frear, went

down to defeat in Delaware. Of course, we lost Florida, but we only lost it by about a quarter the number of votes Stevenson had lost it. And when you consider the anti-Catholic feeling in some sections, we thought we did a good job.

MORRISSEY: Did you feel at any time that you could carry Florida?

TYDINGS: Yes. I thought for a while that we could carry it. I thought right up to the end that we were going to be able to carry it by a very, very slim margin, maybe half of a percent, or something. But we took a terrible shellacking in the center of the state, in

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Orange County, and Polk County, and then St. Petersburg lashed us pretty hard. The center of the state, the conservative belt, worked us over.

MORRISSEY: Moving on to the Inauguration, when did you see the President-elect then?

TYDINGS: I saw him a lot during the Inauguration. I was his second marshal. Bill Battle [William Battle] was his first marshal, Marshal of the First Division of the Inaugural Parade, and I was his second marshal. I saw him at many parties.

MORRISSEY: Were you involved in the recruiting drive between the election and the Inauguration?

TYDINGS: Well, a little bit, but not really. I was too busy recruiting myself, so to speak, for United States Attorney.

MORRISSEY: When were you appointed to that post?

TYDINGS: I was appointed in February. I was the second US Attorney appointment in the country. I might say that he appointed me over the opposition of practically every important Democratic political figure in my state. I

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was in the state legislature at the time, exposing the leadership of the state legislature, the Majority Leader and others, in a lot of corruption and fraud, and I was not too popular. Also, I had exposed the then Democratic National Committeeman. There were a whole slew of them. Some of them have since been indicted and convicted and sent to prison--while I was District Attorney.

MORRISSEY: If I remember correctly, the President came over and visited at your house at one time, I think it was the summer of 1963.

TYDINGS: That is right. Shortly before, a couple months before he was killed. We had a going away party; his brother, the Attorney General, was sending me over to represent the United States at the Interpol Conference, and the International Penal Law Conference. This was to give me a little foreign experience and background to run for the Senate. He came out one evening and we had a grand party; all young people and no political people. Everybody had a great

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time. We sang, and we had "Buster" from Rivers Chambers' band, and I even had a few Irish songs mimeographed. He stayed an hour and a half later than he was supposed to stay. He came up in the "chopper." Teddy came up with him, Teddy Kennedy, and Red Fay [Paul Fay, Jr.], the Under Secretary of the Navy, and Mrs. Fay.

MORRISSEY: Did he speak in Maryland at any party affairs during his Presidency?

TYDINGS: He did, but I was never in the state when he spoke. I saw him quite a bit at the White House at parties and receptions, and went on boat trips all during the time he was President.

MORRISSEY: Did you discuss with him your candidacy for the Senate?

TYDINGS: Oh, in detail! Absolutely, yes.

MORRISSEY: Tell us about it.

TYDINGS: Well, we went into the problems of it, whether or not I should run, and whether the fact that all of the state organization was against me

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would make any difference, what role he could play--he couldn't get involved in it, you know--and what my chances were, whether this was the right time, the background I needed, and so forth. And he encouraged me. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't have run without his encouragement--his and his brother's.

MORRISSEY: Mr. Marion, your Administrative Assistant, told me on the phone yesterday that you were at the White House on November 20, 1963.

TYDINGS: That's right. As a matter of fact, I handed in my resignation that night to take effect on Friday, the 22nd at the close of business. They had the annual reception for the judiciary. I wasn't going to go, and then I said, "Well, this will be my last reception as United States Attorney, and we will just drive over." It was a bad night. My wife and I did go over, and we had a wonderful visit. The President was just back from Florida and looked very young, vigorous, healthy, and tan. That was the last time I ever saw him, except that

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Saturday when I passed by his bier in the White House.

MORRISSEY: Are there any specific occasions, incidents, that you recall that you might be able to pull out of the hat and put on the record here?

TYDINGS: Well, I recall that he had a great sense of humor, and had the ability not to take himself too seriously. He had the ability always to see humor in himself, which is an attribute of greatness.

GRELE: Were President Kennedy's political fortunes in any way involved in your Maryland investigations or indictments?

TYDINGS: No. He was above it all. His political fortunes were not involved.

MORRISSEY: Is there anything else?

TYDINGS: Thank you, gentlemen.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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