

Harold W. Graham Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/24/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

(1902 - 1988). Staff member for High Commissioner of Germany, John McCloy, discusses meeting John F. Kennedy in 1951 in Germany and impressions of him, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Harold W. Graham

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Harold W. Graham

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Oral History Interview

with

Harold W. Graham

February 24, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Graham, when did you meet John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

GRAHAM: It was January, 1951, when I was a member of the staff of the high commissioner for Germany, John McCloy [John Jay McCloy]. I had an office—it was called the Official Reception Office. At that time we had many distinguished visitors and it was too much to expect the high commissioner to meet them all so it was my job to do that for him. We had a good many members of Congress and the Senate. On this particular day—I think it was the sixteenth of January of '51—two young men walked in my office, and one of them came to me and said, "Are you Harold Graham?" I said I was. He said, "I'm Jack Kennedy from Massachusetts. I was in Paris yesterday and saw Hugh Scott [Hugh Doggett Scott, Jr.] and told him I was coming to Germany. He told me when I got to Frankfurt to come into the I.G. Farben Building and inquire for your office, tell you what I wanted, and you'd make all the arrangements for me." Of course, I knew that he meant at that time Congressman Hugh Scott

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because he had been there just a couple of days previously. So I asked Mr. Kennedy what he wanted. He said the main thing was an interview with Chancellor Adenauer [Konrad Adenauer].

Well, Adenauer was not yet chancellor because the German government had not come into existence and didn't, I think, until probably '52. I'm not sure of the date, but he was referred to as the chancellor. So I told him that we could arrange the interview for him through our liaison officer in Bonn, and I did that. Incidentally, the man with him was Torbert MacDonald [Torbert H. MacDonald], who at that time, I believe, was a lawyer in Boston.

We had a very pleasant conversation and went to lunch in the Casino in back of the I.G. Farben Building. I noticed as we walked up the steps to the second floor to the executive dining room that Mr. Kennedy had a little difficulty in walking up the steps. I was quite surprised to see an apparently healthy young man who obviously was suffering. I didn't know at that time that it was the effect of his experiences in the war. But it was quite obvious that he was undergoing a great deal of pain in his efforts to climb the steps.

We had lunch, and during lunch he asked me a good many questions having to do with various phases of activities in Germany. It was obvious he was there because he wanted to

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know the answers to these things. I don't know whether he told me or whether I learned later that he was there on his own and not at the expense of the government because he was on a fact-finding mission, and he had definite things that he wanted to learn about. He asked me a good many questions on agriculture, industry, economics, and various other phases of activities in Germany. I had to tell him that I didn't know the answers to many of his questions—my work was mainly in administration—but that I could put him in touch with the people who could give him the answers that he desired.

As he was talking with me, he had a little book about the size of a small address book in which he made frequent notes. I'm sure that years later he could have gone back to that book and have refreshed his memory and probably repeated my conversation word for word. Well, obviously, I was terrifically impressed with this interest, his insight, and his ability to understand things. So I became a great admirer of his at that point, and I continued to be, and I still am.

O'CONNOR: Could you tell anything about his attitudes at all from the way he phrased his questions while he was talking to you?

GRAHAM: I don't recall that I could. If you mean did he have a critical attitude about things that were being done, no, I don't think so. I think he was there because he wanted to know the answers to things, and I don't think it was because

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he was trying to get critical answers or because he had a critical feeling of anything. He wanted to know the truth.

O'CONNOR: This would have been, as you say, in the early fifties. This would have been during a more conservative period of John Kennedy's life. At least he grew more liberal after this.

GRAHAM: I'm sure he did. Yes.

O'CONNOR: And I was wondering if, from his questioning and from his interest, you could tell if there was any great hostility one way or another toward any of our policies or toward certain people in Germany?

GRAHAM: I don't think so.

O'CONNOR: Did you have to do this sort of thing very often for congressmen stopping by? You mentioned Hugh Scott.

GRAHAM: Oh, yes. We had many of them. I remember in November of 1951, when we moved the headquarters from Frankfurt to Bonn in anticipation of the signing of the contractual agreement that it was to be the capital of Germany, that Congress adjourned very late that year. I think it was early in November when they adjourned. During the course of this move, when I was trying to close out my office in Frankfurt and set it up in Bonn, we had seventy-five congressmen there at one time. The Banking and Currency Committee was one, and I don't remember the rest of them. Many of them were there individually, and some were in groups.

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O'CONNOR: Did you notice any specific differences between John Kennedy's attitude and the attitude of the other men that you happened to meet?

GRAHAM: Oh, it was obvious. He was there because he wanted to learn. Many of the rest of them were there because they had a chance for a trip at government expense. A lot of them.

O'CONNOR: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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