

Kenneth M. Birkhead, Oral History Interview, JFK#1 – 7/1/1964; 12/4/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Birkhead was finance director for the Democratic National Committee from 1958-1959 and assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture for Congressional Liaison from 1961-1966. In this interview, he discusses his interactions with John F. Kennedy (JFK), during JFK's years in the U.S. Congress, the 1960 presidential campaign, and the evolution of JFK's knowledge of and views on agriculture, among other issues.

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Kenneth M. Birkhead—JFK #1

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First of Three Oral History Interviews

with

Kenneth M. Birkhead

July 1, 1964; December 4, 1964
Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C.

By George A. Barnes; Layne R. Beaty

For the John F. Kennedy Library

This is an interview for the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Project, with Kenneth M. Birkhead, Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture for Congressional Liaison. The interviewer is George A. Barnes, Assistant to the Secretary, and the place is the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

BARNES: Mr. Birkhead, can you tell us the time and circumstances of your first acquaintance with John F. Kennedy?

BIRKHEAD: My first recollection of meeting Kennedy was in Washington, D.C., in 1946. It happened at the Interdepartmental Auditorium of the Labor Department on Constitution Avenue, between 13th and 14th Streets, at a rally I attended in connection with housing, Veterans' housing in particular. I was associated with the American Veterans Committee at that time, and we were one of the groups participating in this rally in Washington to try to get action in the Congress on housing. Kennedy was at the meeting.

BARNES: Was he a Congressman at that time?

BIRKHEAD: No. He was not at that time. I don't remember exactly the purpose of

his being there; he was not associated with the American Veterans' Committee. He may have represented some other group, or may have been there solely on his own. There were a lot of people at the meeting, but I met him because he was a close friend of some of those who were active in the American Veterans' Committee, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Oren Root, Jr., and others. They knew him and in the course of the rally and the visits on the Hill, I ran across him. I was then living in New York City. I went back to New York City after this, and stayed there until I came to Washington in 1948. During that period, from '46 to '48, I don't remember having any contact with him. In 1948 I came to Washington and was assigned a

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to work with President Truman [Harry S. Truman] in his 1948 campaign. Basically, I did speech drafting for the President in the field of human resources.

BARNES: Were you at this time associated with the Democratic National Committee?

BIRKHEAD: Yes. Actually, I was on the payroll of the Democratic National Committee, but assigned to work with the President under the direction of Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford] and Charles S. Murphy, who were on the President's staff. I do remember one contact during that time with Kennedy. President Truman made a swing through the Northeastern states and I did some work on his speech for Boston and as we did with preparing many speeches, we contacted local politicians, persons that might have some idea of what the President might say when he was in their area, and in the course of working on this speech I do remember calling the then-Congressman Kennedy and we talked a little bit about what the President should say in his speech in Boston. Frankly, I don't remember too much of the conversation. I sometimes made 20 to 30 telephone calls a day during that campaign to get background information and ideas, so it's a little difficult to remember who may have said what in connection with speech material, or ideas for a speech. I remember talking to the now-Speaker John McCormack [John William McCormack] in Boston, and others, in connection with the Boston speech, and I can't sort out in my mind any particular comments or ideas that Kennedy made then. After the '48 campaign I went back to Missouri, worked on my Master's Degree, came back to Washington in 1950 for a brief period, and then went back

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to Washington in 1950 for a brief period, and then went back and ran Tom Hennings' [Thomas Carey Hennings, Jr.] campaign for the Senate in Missouri. I didn't get back to Washington until January of 1951. From early 1949 to 1950 until January of 1951 I don't remember having had any contact with Kennedy. In 1951, however, I did have quite a bit of contact with him. I was working as an Assistant to the staff director of the Democratic Congressional campaign committee, which is the organization of Democrats in the House concerned with trying to help in re-electing Democratic members of the House of

Representatives, and for a while during that spring, under the direction of the Speaker, I was the staff man for an activity called the Minute Men. The idea of this was to take a minute, as they are allowed to do in the House of Representatives at the beginning of each session, and make comments about various matters going on in the world. McCormack's idea was that the Democrats were not using this permission to speak for a minute and that this ought to be organized. The Republicans were doing a good job with it, and were using these minute speeches to get in political barbs at the Democrats or to promote the general cause of the Republican party. So under his direction, and with Hale Boggs [Thomas Hale Boggs], the Congressman from New Orleans as primarily the day by day handler of the operation, I was supposed to come up with several 1-minute speeches each morning on current political matters or ideas I had on what was good about the Democrats and bad about the Republicans, or what Democrats in the House were accomplishing.

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And then I was supposed to try to get members, or Mr. Boggs, or Mr. McCormack, to get members to use it. One of those who participated was Kennedy, then a member of the House. During this time I had many contacts with him and we got to know each other fairly well—in fact, to the point that from then on until he became President he was "Jack" to me, and I was "Ken" to him.

Actually, I don't remember that he ever used one of the statements I prepared. Either I didn't prepare anything that would suit him, or for one reason or another he didn't want to participate in this project. However, I tried out many ideas and used to appeal to him to try to come up with some ideas on which I might prepare remarks. I do remember one that he came mighty close to using, but Congressman Mel Price [Melvin Price] of Illinois ended up using it. Got a lot of reaction out of it. I had written a 1-minute speech on the importance of foreign aid, and one of the reasons for its importance was that there were many historical churches around the world that ought to be protected. And if many of these churches were located in countries where foreign aid had an impact, in countries that foreign aid was trying to protect from Communist intrusion, and, actually, you could say that one of the reasons for supporting foreign aid was to keep these countries strong so Communists wouldn't move in. If the Communists moved into the churches, the historical churches might well go because of Communist aversion to religion. And I know the Senator—then Congressman Kennedy—was interested in this. But I remember Congressman Mel Price did use it, and got a tremendous reaction from religious

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people all over the country and it even got picked up and got some comments from overseas. This is the closest I remember Kennedy ever came to using one of these. Then after serving on the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in the House, in 1951, later in that year, I went over to the Senate side and became Staff Director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which is the counterpart of the operation in the House and in the 1952 campaign again I was in touch with Senator Kennedy. Mainly, my contact at that time—well, the Senate Campaign Committee's purpose was the same as the House Congressional

Committee's, was to try to help elect Democratic Senators. Senator Kennedy, of course, was running for the Senate that year, and we tried to feed information that might be useful to Democratic candidates, not only about what the Democrats were accomplishing, particularly as it related to the Senate, but also the record of Democratic candidates' opponents if their opponent happened to be an incumbent Senator. Of course, Kennedy was running against Henry Cabot Lodge, who was an incumbent Senator. We had many contacts about Lodge's record. I combed the Congressional Record for him to try to find comments about what Lodge had said on many and various issues and we were in touch from time to time mostly by telephone, but occasionally when he was in Washington I would see him.

Also, an interesting sidelight to this was that a lot of people wanted to be in touch with Kennedy, wanted to help him some in the campaign and many of them went to Massachusetts to talk to him about various facets of the campaign and they used to come back to Washington and

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complain to me that the Kennedy campaign was not very well organized, that it seemed it was nothing but the family sort of running around in a disorganized way, that the key person in the campaign seemed to be Kennedy's brother, Robert [Robert F. Kennedy], and he was just a kid out of the Virginia Law School, and had little or no knowledge of how a campaign ought to be run and that Kennedy was going to be defeated badly. And this being 1952 when Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] was running for the Presidency, Lodge had brought Eisenhower into the campaign and Lodge was going to benefit from the great Eisenhower victory, and on and on and on, and they wanted me to call the Senator and tell him how this campaign ought to be run.

I remember one person had an idea that he wanted to sell the Kennedy campaign some folders and billboards, and one thing or another, and he was terribly disturbed by it. Obviously, I didn't call the Senator and tell him how he ought to run his campaign, nor did I call Bobby Kennedy or anybody else. But after the campaign was over I saw the same guy and reminded him of this conversation, as I had similar conversations with others. He said, "Well, I just don't know how it works, but he got elected this once and this will be the last time he gets elected to any office. This was just sheer luck, and Jack Kennedy, Bob Kennedy and the rest of that family has no political future.: This was in 1953. I haven't seen the gentleman since to find out what his later reactions were about the Kennedys. Of course, when Kennedy was elected to the Senate and came to Washington, again I had a chance to be with him quite often because in 1953, in addition to my work with the Democratic Senatorial Campaign

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Committee, I took over a job as assistant to the Democratic Whip in the Senate. Then the whip was Senator Earl Clements [Earle C. Clements] of Kentucky. It was my job to assist Senator Clements in his various duties as Democratic Whip in the Senate. One of the major problems was to keep track of all the Democratic Senators, to try to find out what their positions were on various pieces of legislation coming up, and to try to keep the Senators

informed of what the leadership position was on various upcoming issues. In this capacity I had contacts with many Senators, working with Clements and, of course, with the then Senator Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] of Texas.

I think one comment I might make—certainly during this period I found Jack Kennedy to be one of the best listeners among the Senators and he would ask me about the leadership's position, which wasn't in the administration's position then because Republicans were in the White House at the time. He would ask if I knew what the administration's position was, and I usually did because this was part of my job. He listened with great interest every time I talked to him about anything, and asked, I think, some of the most intelligent questions that I got from any Senators about various pieces of legislation that were up.

[Continuing the discussion with Kenneth Birkhead. The date is December 4, 1964 and the interviewer is Layne R. Beaty.]

BEATY: Mr. Birkhead, would you continue your monologue here as you were doing when you were interrupted.

BIRKHEAD: Well, I did have continuing contact with the Senator, as I have said. Early in 1951 I had done some special work for the Democratic National Committee, and also for Senator Bill Benton [William B. Benton] on the matter of Joe McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy]. I had done some special research, made a trip to Wisconsin to look into the Senator's background, etc., and after Sen. Kennedy came

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to the Senate and found out that I had looked into McCarthy's background, he used to get in touch and ask me about various things. He asked me to come up and talk to him about McCarthy, and if there were a new McCarthy charge, he would ask if this fit into anything I knew by way of background. From time to time I gave him material that I had collected or passed along some new material that I may have found out about because some people around Washington knew that I had been collecting material on McCarthy. I had quite a few contacts in connection with this.

Senator Kennedy was very interested in McCarthy, but I never got much reaction from him. I don't think there was any other member of the Senate who spent as much time contacting me about McCarthy as did the then-Senator Kennedy. Our daily contacts on the floor in connection with the routine of the Senate continued, and I don't remember any other special events that occurred during the time I was with Senator Clements in the Senate.

I left the Senate in late 1955 and went to work as Rational Director for the American Veteran's Committee. During that period from 1955 to 1957 when I was with the American Veteran's Committee I did not often see the Senator. He was confused about why I had gone to work for the American Veteran's Committee. He had never joined although he was eligible, and, as I'd pointed out earlier, a lot of his friends had been active in the American Veteran's Committee. I did see him occasionally, though. I was on the Hill in the job with the

American Veteran's Committee lobbying on legislation of interest to the American Veteran's Committee and we had broad interests. So I used to see him from time to time they, but my contacts from 1955 to 1957 were limited.

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Towards the end of 1957 I left the American Veteran's Committee and went to work as Finance Director of the Democratic National Committee. In this capacity I began to see more of the Senator. Of course, he was up for re-election in 1958. He had little or no problem in the election, it was assured that he was going to be re-elected, and the only question was how big the majority would be. In my capacity at the National Committee, I used to be in touch quite often about problems of finances and what the National Committee was doing. The Senator would have questions, and since we had been friends in the past, quite often he would call me in connection with the questions, or to get answers to them. So we did have some political contacts during this period. I know on some of them he began to talk to me about the possibility of 1960, who the candidates were going to be, what was I hearing from around the country, about other candidates about the possibility of other candidates developing organization around the country, what contacts they had, etc.

I must say that through all of this the Senator was as fair as any of the people who were in touch with me. Obviously, as an official of the Democratic National Committee I had to be as impartial as possible and he appreciated this fact. And I always appreciated the fact that he didn't try to press me in any wrong way or ask me things that were not within the province of a paid official of the National Committee to do. I must say that I think some candidates, or potential candidates, probably wanted me to do things that you can't honestly do and keep the impartiality that a member of the National Committee should keep. I also remember during this period that the Democratic National Committee was having financial troubles. The Democrats had

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been out of office for some time and they had not done terribly well in 1956. We had a big debt on our hands and the job of finance director was sometimes tough. We had a weekly payroll to meet. It was a large payroll and I was always struggling to see if I couldn't find some money here, there, or some place to try to meet this payroll. And I can remember on several instances when we were quite short, I would call the Senator and he would put me in touch with Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] or somebody in Massachusetts and we would get some help. It was always appreciated and, I think, there were two or three times during 1958 and 1959 when I was finance director of the National Committee when possibly we were able to meet the payroll because the Senator was willing to use such influence as he had with the Massachusetts Democrats to come forth with some money for us. But I must say through it all he never asked, as sometimes some did, to make sure everybody knew that the payroll was met or some money came in because Jack Kennedy was willing to use his influence to get it for us.

BEATY: Did you get the idea, Mr. Birkhead, that this might have been some of

Senator Kennedy's own money that was being contributed to meet the payroll?

BIRKHEAD: I honestly don't know. The money came to us from the Massachusetts State Committee, and it could well have been some of his money. He never said, "Well, I will give the Committee some, they'll send it down to you," or it never came in the form of a personal contribution from him. It came, my remembrance is, at all times from the Massachusetts Committee. We had in the National Committee then quotas for each state; in other words our budget for the year was divided up among the states and they were supposed to try to meet this quota and it could well have been his money, or money from members of his family. I never

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knew. It came from the Massachusetts Committee. It's possible.

BEATY: What were you doing during the time Senator Kennedy was entering the state primaries and then on, convention time, and then on to the campaign?

BIRKHEAD: In 1960? Actually, in 1959 I left the Democratic National Committee and went to work as a consultant for the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation. So, in a sense I was out of politics for part of 1959 and all of 1960. Although Mrs. Lasker [Mary Lasker] is one of the important Democrats in the country, and much interested in the Party, I was not handling any part of this interest for her, so that I really was not much in contact with the Senator at this time, or much a part of it except I was a consultant to the National Committee in relation to trying to develop plans for the 1960 campaign. The then-Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Paul Butler [Paul M. Butler], set up a group of individuals, we had a title. I can't remember what we were called, but we were people who had been active in politics, associated with the National Committee, etc., and we met from time to time to discuss how much television should be purchased for the campaign, what should be done in connection with billboard advertising, how big a staff the National Committee should have, whether the staff arrangement should be different than in the past, whether we should keep the National Committee in Washington during the campaign, or whether it should be located some place else. Lot of things like this. Each of the potential candidates had a representative that sat in these meetings with us as we discussed plans for the convention. Ted Sorenson [Theodore C. Sorensen], I remember,

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was the Kennedy representative. Of course, we did not in any sense get into the pre-convention activities. This was a National Committee activity, and we were supposed to be completely impartial. We were trying to do some pre-planning for the campaign in the fall, rather than waiting as usually is done until the convention is over, and at the last minute then suddenly having to do planning to figure out how many hours of television you're going to

have to buy, etc. I did not see the Senator much during this period, although it seems to me I do remember he attended one of these sessions we had discussing the campaign.

During the campaign of 1960 itself, I saw the Senator a couple of times, but only briefly. Mrs. Lasker in the Foundation gave me a leave of absence and I went to work under the direction of Charles Murphy working on the Johnson campaign with a little group that Mr. Murphy had gotten together. Some of them were people who had worked in the 1948 campaign for Mr. Truman in preparing speech material, and so that I spent most of the campaign working and thinking more in terms of Senator, the then-Senator Johnson's campaign for the Vice-Presidency rather than the then-Senator Kennedy's campaign for the Presidency.

BEATY: This Murphy is Charles Murphy?

BIRKHEAD: Charles Murphy, now Under Secretary of Agriculture. And so I had a strange situation in that campaign. I was part of the campaign, but most of my waking hours were in terms of what Senator Johnson was doing, and what ideas we could get for speech material and campaign activities for him rather than thinking in terms of the President. I

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guess I had a rather strange view of that campaign. Most of the people were thinking about Kennedy, and we were thinking about Mr. Johnson. So I did not see him much during that campaign.

BEATY: Did you see Senator Kennedy after the campaign? Did you have much contact with him during the time he was President?

BIRKHEAD: Actually, during the time he was President I did not see him often. In fact, after the campaign I immediately went back to the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation and stayed there until February 1961, when I came to work in my present position as Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture. I saw the President just briefly a couple of times during that period, and then while he was President I saw him very seldom. The Congressional Liaison Officers of the various departments—my job with the Department of Agriculture is Congressional Liaison Officer—have periodic meetings at the White House where we discuss legislation, how legislation is moving, and what can be done to help get ideas from other liaison officers about what they're doing in connection with legislation. These meetings were run by Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], the Congressional Liaison Officer for the White House. From time to time the President used to stop in on these meetings, or after the meeting was over we might meet him in his office for a moment about some particular problem. But, from February 1961 until his death in 1963, I don't think I saw him more than 5 or 6 times. Oh, maybe more than that—maybe a dozen times at the most, and in nearly every case it was in connection

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with some immediate problem we had, mostly relating to agricultural legislation. Nearly every time I saw him he kidded me about being in the Agriculture Department. He just had no thought that I would ever be associated with agriculture. He used to kid me about knowing as little about farming as he did. He couldn't see how we could even discuss agricultural legislation.

BEATY: Mr. Birkhead, you just hit on something here that I think is of some interest. Obviously, you knew John F. Kennedy over quite a few years, and had an opportunity to observe change in him—call it change, call it growth, or whatever. Here was a young man with an urban background in Boston, New York City, London, and here he developed an interest in rural affairs. Now this represented quite a change, and I wonder if you would comment on that? Did you observe this change coming on gradually or could you comment on what might have happened to interest the Senator in these things, or what was it?

BIRKHEAD: Well, I think in the early days when I knew him he had the thought that many urban members of the Congress, or those from the urban areas in politics had, that agriculture was a big mess and it was off there same place. He wasn't much concerned with it, no more concerned with it than most urban members. Frankly, in the early days of his time in the House and even in the Senate, he very often opposed the legislative proposals that were propounded by farm organizations and by farm groups. There was quite a bit of comment in the 1960 campaign that he had a poor agricultural record, in the minds of the Democrats, at least. He had voted against many programs

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which Democrats had supported. Very often in votes on the Hill the majority of the Democrats had voted one way on a particular piece of legislation and Senator Kennedy had voted in the minority, or with the Republicans who generally opposed Democratic farm proposals. I think that if there was a time when it came I would have to say that it came after the 1956 convention when, I guess, he began to get the idea that he might run for national office. There are few farm problems in Massachusetts, but I guess he began to think about the possibility of national office and to think more in terms of national problems. And I think it is safe to say that probably he started to think more about agriculture at that time. Then as he got closer and closer to the 1960 situation and began to move around the country, I remember once in 1958 when I happened to be in Denver, Colorado, for a Democratic National Committee function, Kennedy was there with Ted Sorenson. They were out at that time talking to the people, and he spoke at a breakfast there. I went to the breakfast—we didn't have anything else scheduled at that time. Kennedy was speaking to these people in Denver and he talked a little about wheat at that breakfast. I was a little amazed to hear him talk about wheat, but he had some fairly good thoughts about wheat and the problems of wheat, wheat production and how we might control wheat production so that it didn't get out of

hand. We had a big surplus and he was beginning to make some comments about the then-Secretary of Agriculture Benson [Ezra Taft Benson] and his failure to

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deal with some of these things. So he was beginning to think about this. Certainly in the 1960 campaign he gave a lot of thought to it, and had given thought to it before this, and had made sane excellent speeches. I, for one, have a feeling that possibly Dr. Willard Cochrane [Willard W. Cochrane] of Minnesota had as much influence on him as anybody in agriculture. I know from some things that I've heard that he did spend some time reading Dr. Cochrane's material. I know he visited with Dr. Cochrane some during the campaign and I think some of these ideas came from Dr. Cochrane and some of his farm thinking. I must say that my contacts with him during the time he was president caused me to be—well, I guess I should not have been because was a tremendously brilliant person who gave a lot of thought to many things and he knew about so many things and thought about them in depth—amazed about his knowledge of agriculture, and things that he had learned as he had gone along in his willingness to think in terms of the farmer and the farmer's problems, and his willingness to delegate the responsibility to the Secretary of Agriculture and his staff, but at the same time keep on top of things. Very often, or in some of the contacts I had with him during the time he was president, they were on matters which I really had thought he might not have had much chance to do any thinking about. But, frankly he knew as much about them as anybody that came over from the Department to discuss them with him. I think this came about from his tremendous appetite to read, and Secretary Freeman [Orville L. Freeman] and others did a good job in feeding him material.

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Secondly, he had the ability to listen and absorb when people talked to him. And he had good people talking to him such as Secretary Freeman. Consequently, he understood agriculture.

BEATY: As I recall, Mr. Birkhead, President Kennedy was heard to say on more than one occasion that he was no authority on agricultural matters, and yet when he spoke on them, did you get the feeling that what he said had the ring of understanding? That he really understood what he was talking about?

BIRKHEAD: Yes. I think he did. I think he had a great depth of understanding of agriculture. I know that during the time he was ill—when was it? In 1956 or 1957, or anyway when he had his serious back illness and an operation, there was some question about whether he would recover. But during his period of recovery he is reported to have done a tremendous amount of reading. Dr. Cochrane once told me that he thought the President did a lot of reading in the field of agriculture during this time. He was thinking more in terms of the national problems he eventually might face. The questions he asked when I had contact with him, or in memos, or questions relayed to me

from the Secretary saying, "The President asked me about this. Would you look into it," obviously came not from ignorance but from understanding, and from somebody looking a little deeper into an issue and wanting to know more about it. The first major action he took as President—essentially a matter which directly related to agriculture—was the establishing of pilot projects of the food stamp program, and he continued to press hard for agricultural

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legislation during the years he was President and I was marking in behalf of legislation on the Hill. Agricultural legislation would get close to a major vote and sometimes if we did not have quite enough votes the President would call and urge members to vote favorably on a particular piece of legislation. I had members on the Hill tell me that his calls were not just calls saying "This is the President, I hope you vote for this bill," but, "This is the President and you ought to be for this bill because of the following reasons." And he would give them some pretty good reasons and he would also relate it even to their own constituency and why it was important to their constituency, and if they asked him some questions about them, he knew the answers. Now he could be briefed on saying why the bill was good, why it was good for a particular constituency, but when they began to ask questions about it he couldn't be briefed on the answers to the questions, and the members were intrigued that he knew the answers. So, obviously, he did pick up a tremendous amount of information and thought a lot about the agricultural program.

BEATY: First, President Kennedy always seemed to be perfectly at ease wherever he was, but it's well-known that he shrank from gimmickry such as having his picture made with hats on, in Indian headdress, and this sort of thing. Did you get the feeling, Mr. Birkhead, that he had genuine feeling for rural and agricultural affairs and yet he wanted to have this relationship sort of at arm's length?

BIRKHEAD: Yes, this is true. He was not one to put on, as you say, Indian headdresses or to be shown milking a cow, or anything like this. This was just foreign to his personality.

BEATY: But to him this was phony?

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BIRKHEAD: Yes. I really think he felt it was phony, but I think he had genuine concern. And, certainly, in my few contacts with him and all of the contacts that others had with him, I think there was every evidence that he had genuine concern. As I say, with people that he called in connection with particular pieces of legislation, or people that visited with him at the White House, there was no question of his concern, of his deep concern. I think he probably was as hurt as anybody about the results of the wheat referendum held in 1962 which, you remember, was defeated. He followed the results of the voting that day with nearly as much interest as anybody in the Department of Agriculture. I remember that evening when the votes began to come in the

Secretary talked to the President two or three times. The President was interested; he had some feeling about why the voting might have gone one way or the other in certain places. He had talked to the Secretary about the votes and I think he had Lou Harris [Louis Harris], who had done a lot of polling for him, look into the possibilities of what might happen in the wheat referendum election. He evidenced real sincere deep interest all the way through. There was never anything, or I never had any feeling from conversations I had with those who were in touch with him on agriculture that this was just something that was there and because he was President he had to deal with it. He was sincerely interested in it. He realized that you couldn't get the economics of this country moving as he wanted to try to get them moving without some strength in rural America. So he had an interest in what was happening.

[-19-]

BEATY: Mr. Birkhead, getting back to his being sincerely interested in rural affairs and so forth, and yet not going in for gimmickry. It is seldom that anyone appears on the American scene who captures the fancy and gets the enthusiastic interest of so many people, as those who identify with this man. Now, this was going on before the President's tragic death. Of course, he was young and attractive and all this, but would you say this feeling that he really was genuine and honest, was this a major part of the attraction that he held for people?

BIRKHEAD: Yes. Well, I think this is right. In the 1960 campaign he did as poorly in the rural areas of the country as any Democrat had done for many years, and he did this after eight years of Secretary Benson, who had become at least in some rural areas reasonably unpopular and under certain circumstances you might think that the Democratic candidate would have gained some popularity in the rural areas. I think the problem was probably a religious one. There was some feeling that there was somewhat more fundamentalism, as far as religion is concerned, in rural areas—there are probably less Catholics in rural areas—and I think this had some effect on that vote. But I think after the election and the evidence of his sincerity, people in rural America began to take to Mr. Kennedy. And one of the trips he made, I think it was in 1963, not too long before his death, to Minnesota and Wisconsin, a stop in North Dakota—brought forth tremendous crowds and real enthusiasm to these meetings. And the one in North

[-20-]

Dakota, if I remember correctly, was in a rural area and you had the sane kind of adulation and warm genuine feeling for him that you had when he appeared in New York City, or Chicago, or any of the urban areas. So if there were any resistance as evidenced in the vote in 1960 in rural areas, it was gone after he had been in the White House for a couple of years.

BEATY: What were you doing at the time of the assassination, Ken?

BIRKHEAD: At the time of the assassination I was in my office. I remember I got a

call from a secretary of a friend of mine in the White House saying that they had just received a report that the President had been shot. I can't remember specifically what I was working on, but at that point everything stopped.

BEATY: Do you remember what you did or what thoughts you had?

BIRKHEAD: Frankly, I had a radio in my office and as soon as she told me this I turned the radio on. The word quickly began to spread around the Department and before long there were 10 or 15 of us sitting in the office listening to the bulletins as they came in on the radio. Not much was said. I have to admit I cried a little bit. This guy was quite a winner as far as I was concerned. We just sort of sat there stunned most of the rest of the afternoon listening to the radio.

BEATY: Well, that's about what everybody else seemed to be doing.

BIRKHEAD: I guess we were not unusual.

BEATY: Well, thank you very much Kenneth Birkhead, Assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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