

**James J. Rowley Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 3/29/1976**  
**Administrative Information**

**Creator:** James J. Rowley

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**Biographical Note**

James J. Rowley (1908-1992) was the Director of the United States Secret Service from 1961 to 1973. This interview covers Rowley serving on Harry S. Truman's and Dwight Eisenhower's security details, the operations of the Secret Service during the Kennedy administration, and the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's assassination, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

JAMES J. ROWLEY

March 29, 1976  
Kensington, Maryland

By William J. Hartigan

For the Oral History Project  
of the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: Mr. Rowley was in the banking business prior to joining the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] in 1937 as an agent and then going on to become a Secret Service agent in 1938 and then became a special agent in charge of the White House detail under, was that under Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]?

ROWLEY: Truman [Harry S Truman].

HARTIGAN: Truman. He became director in 1961 of the Secret Service, retiring from that position in October 1973. Mr. Rowley has served under all the presidents since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Jim, when was the first time you met President Kennedy?

ROWLEY: Well, I really met him through my position as charge of the White House detail and advance works at dinners in Washington, particularly the Gridiron dinner, the White House correspondents' dinner, and then in the course of some campaigns we ran into him. For example, when President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] was campaigning in '56, we ran into him in Iowa. He was scheduled to make a

speech before the farmers out there, and we had just completed a speech and we were leaving and crossed paths there and said hello, and so forth. But I would say because of that I knew him--because of my position, rather--I knew him on those occasions, and he recognized me. More particularly we had an incident in Boston at the Mechanics Hall where President Truman was appearing and President Kennedy was trying to get in very quietly rather than come up on the stage and attract attention thereby detracting from the president's visit, so he came around to the side and most of the agents on duty outside did not recognize him until someone opened the door and said, "We have a Congressman Kennedy here," and I looked down and said, "Oh, by all means, bring him in." At that time--and I didn't realize it--it later turned out his companion was Dave Powers [David F. Powers]. So we came in the side door off the stage and quietly came in and met the president at that time. And from there on we had these, you know, these occasional meetings and so forth. So that I suppose. . . .

HARTIGAN: So you were familiar with him and meeting him at these functions that required you to be there with the president?

ROWLEY: Right. That's right.

HARTIGAN: Jim, when you were traveling with Eisenhower, President Eisenhower, did he ever at any time make any remarks or make any observations with reference to the 1960 presidential campaign between Vice-President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and Senator Kennedy?

ROWLEY: No, I don't recall anything concerning that.

HARTIGAN: Were you on President Truman's detail when the surprise that everybody witnessed, that Truman beat Dewey [Thomas E. Dewey] when he wasn't supposed to, were you. . . . Recollect any experiences about that?

ROWLEY: Well, I was the advance man, and we were the ones responsible for secretly moving him from his residence to Excelsior Springs [Missouri] the night of the election. And we had let him into the hotel. And he got a rubdown there, and so forth. And we had him in a room at the end of the corridor. And we had a room adjacent to him. And we had the door open just in case anyone was curious and so forth. And we could just say we were playing cards there and so forth. Interesting enough a young couple came down and they were curious, and so they wanted to know if there was anybody special. And we said, "No, we're just here," the usual card game and so forth. And so President Truman said to me that he was going to take a nap and if anything important came over the radio to wake him. I guess some time around five o'clock in the morning, their time, it was indicated that Truman was gaining on the Republican candidate, Dewey, in which case he said--I apprised him of that--and he said, "All right, bring the cars around. We're going in; we've got 'im." And we went in to the Muehlenbach Hotel, and, of course, all the things have been published since then about the reporters all being summoned up to the suite and so forth and

the activity from there on. And then, of course, later that morning, the telegram that the president received from Dewey congratulating him on his victory.

HARTIGAN: Can you recall any of the events or conversation that took place that night when you were with Truman waiting for the returns?

ROWLEY: No, not really. He was in the room, as I mentioned, by himself. And apparently he was listening to the radio and so forth. But I must say that he was the most relaxed and confident man that I have ever. . . .

HARTIGAN: Actually, he gave you the impression that he wasn't really worried about . . . .

ROWLEY: No. No. Not at all.

HARTIGAN: Everybody else in the country seemed to be concerned about it but him.

ROWLEY: That's right. That's right. It was remarkable.

HARTIGAN: He had quite a bit of control over himself?

ROWLEY: That's right.

HARTIGAN: During the 1960 campaign, of course, we covered that Eisenhower bit. And you mentioned that he didn't have any remarks to make or observations to make. . . .

ROWLEY: Well, I would say this. I learned, I can't say whether it was during the campaign, or it was sometime after, but President Eisenhower was not asked his opinion at the time concerning the election, by that I mean the debates. There was some mention that if he was, if Ike was, if he was in the position he wouldn't have debated.

HARTIGAN: So actually you're saying that he was not in favor . . .

ROWLEY: Of the debate. Right.

HARTIGAN: . . . of the debate between Nixon and Kennedy.

ROWLEY: That's right. The thinking was at that time by most of them that it gave Kennedy greater exposure, national exposure.

HARTIGAN: And he actually would have not debated Kennedy himself.

ROWLEY: That's right.

HARTIGAN: That's interesting.

ROWLEY: Yeah. And I think too that it's significant that Leonard Hall, who was a master in campaigning, was not called upon to conduct the campaign for Nixon. He might have. I don't think his advice was sought.

HARTIGAN: So, actually Nixon accepting the offer to debate Kennedy was his own. . . .

ROWLEY: Decision.

HARTIGAN: And had he followed Eisenhower's he wouldn't have been on. . . .

ROWLEY: Well, if he had consulted Eisenhower, or had consulted Leonard Hall, I would think that they would have convinced him.

HARTIGAN: And other observations during that campaign that the president. . . .

ROWLEY: No, those are the two principal ones that I recall now.

HARTIGAN: Did Eisenhower track the activity of the campaign while it was taking place?

ROWLEY: Well, I would think, I would think he did, but if you will recall, we went out ostensibly to visit Detroit and make an appearance out there--I've forgotten under whose auspices--and from there we went to Palm Springs [California]. And from Palm Springs we went to San Diego Naval Station and spent the rest of the time in Palm Springs. And then, of course, when we came back we found that they needed some support from Eisenhower. At that late date, the last weekend, we appeared at Philadelphia and I think later at New York.

HARTIGAN: You don't recall that Nixon made many requests of Eisenhower to appear?

ROWLEY: Not until the last week is my recollection at this time.

HARTIGAN: Jim, during the Kennedy administration, I know that personally you made a lot of trips. But before we get into that, how did it come about your first meeting with the Kennedy organization?

ROWLEY: Well, actually Jerry Behn [Gerald Behn], whom we had assigned to run the detail during the period of President Kennedy's. . . . As the president-elect--before the inauguration, of course--he had established a relationship and rapport with most of the then Kennedy staff. And it wasn't until you, Bill, appeared after



inauguration, and we had some questions on the type, the new types of helicopters that the president refused, and I reported to you that I had attended this session up at Sikorsky up in Connecticut. And we were notified that the Navy had selected their own helicopter from an outfit in Philadelphia and I apprised you of what I found out, so as a result you called a meeting at the Pentagon, and so I explained my position of how I was sent up there to look over and consider, you know, the safety. And I attended the session and went through the factory and saw how they, the great precision that was performed there with the introduction of each item that was necessary to construct the helicopter. And which explains, of course, the use of the Sikorsky helicopter for presidential use.

HARTIGAN: Can you recall your first meeting with President Kennedy as president?

ROWLEY: Well, it would have been as a replacement for Jerry when he was on a day off. And I rode in the front seat with him. I do recall one night, one snowy night, when he and Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.] wanted to go to the Earl Theater, I think, because there was a picture that they wanted to see, the name of which escapes me at the moment. It was Kirk Douglas, "Spartacus" it was. And, of course, it was a snowy night. Not too many people were out at that time. And as a matter of fact, the theater was rather sparse as far as attendance went. So it presented no problem for us. But it was a spontaneous gesture on his part.

HARTIGAN: Do you recall any interesting events that took place while you were either accompanying the president on these trips or advancing any of his trips?

ROWLEY: No, and I must say though, I didn't advance any of his trips as you recall. The only trip that I made aside from going back and forth initially when I was agent in charge was to Hyannis Port. I didn't have any conversations with him, but I assisted in setting up the security for him around Hyannis Port. I went along, the advance man on the trip to Europe that time, and, of course, Bill, you recall you and I left early and went to Vienna from Paris. So we didn't stay in Paris very long, and we concentrated on that meeting with Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] in Vienna. So as a result I didn't see very much of the president as you recall.

HARTIGAN: I do recall a humorous incident. I'll refresh your memory. We made a dry run to the . . .

ROWLEY: Oh, yes, the Schoenbrunn Palace. We were waiting to set up the, how we would arrive, and we were held up and they told us we couldn't enter before the Russians came and we had to wait there and we couldn't understand that. But they were so precise about their neutrality that they didn't want anything to affect it in any way. And we couldn't comprehend that. It didn't matter to us. So we said, "Fine, let them run in first if they want to."

HARTIGAN: Do you recall that all the options they had open for the malfunction of the car, and the last one, when we were on that dry run I guess about two o'clock in the morning, that they decided both cars would enter the gate together?

ROWLEY: That's the time.

HARTIGAN: We measured it.

ROWLEY: We had to measure it and so forth. Right. And then we concluded, we said, "Well, it doesn't matter to the president whether he gets there first or not." But they seemed like much ado about nothing. But I guess they were concerned about their neutrality.

HARTIGAN: Jim, as the bulk of your responsibilities during the Kennedy administration was as chief of the Secret Service, which I understand why it kept you on other matters besides the White House detail, but as chief of the Secret Service, in being responsible for the planning of the safety, do you recall any events that would be of interest to posterity, inasmuch as it will be a valid question when these students start to do research?

ROWLEY: No, not off hand. I didn't. . . . I was concerned about developing the organization and getting the money and the budget and so forth. Interesting enough, when I took this position as director, I learned that six months of your year is spent on budget preparations and accumulating all the data that would be necessary for your presentation before the subcommittee. So that outside of the initial period of the first six months of the president, I occasionally went down to Palm Beach with the detail, and then when I was director on the European trip there weren't many others that I had to accompany him.

HARTIGAN: Jim, very recently in the paper while you were vacationing in Florida, there have been some questions raised about a memorandum that you were asked about regarding Chief Justice Warren [Earl Warren] and Hoover [J. Edgar Hoover]. Would you care to comment on that?

ROWLEY: Well, you see, I was away in Florida. So I don't know precisely how it came about, except that the reporter contacted me down there as a result of one of my daughters furnishing the location of where I was. And he apprised me of some memorandums that came out, whereby I had a conversation with the chief justice. Well, sometime in 1967 the chief justice phone me and asked me to come to his office, which I did. And he said that he was concerned because he had some information that he had received from Drew Pearson [Andrew R. Pearson] at that time, in which allegedly Castro [Fidel Castro Ruz] had something to do with the assassination of the late president. So I told him, "Well, that wouldn't be our responsibility; it's the FBI's." And he said, "Well, it was a source," and

the source wouldn't talk to the FBI. So I said, "Well, see if the source would talk to us," in which case we could pass the information on to the FBI, and he said, "Fine. I'll get back to you." And I don't know whether I called him a few days later, or he called me, but in any event, he said the source wouldn't talk to us. And I said, "Well, in that event I'll have to impart whatever our discussion, contents of our discussion to Director Hoover" because it was their responsibility. And he said, "Well, I don't care what you do. As far as I'm concerned, it's closed." So I prepared a memorandum to Hoover, apprising him of this conversation and so forth. And, of course, the other thing was that I got a memorandum back from Hoover thanking me for the information and so forth. And, of course, I didn't hear anything since then until this thing came up. But those were the circumstances.

HARTIGAN: But did that have any bearing on your feelings towards the Warren Commission Report?

ROWLEY: No. At the time of the Warren Commission Report we were investigating the first three days following the assassination and President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] authorized the FBI to conduct the investigation, and, of course, they had the responsibility and we backed out on it, cooperated with them, if we came across any information

HARTIGAN: Is that normal procedure for such an event as an assassination of a president? That the investigation is normally done by the FBI, not the Secret Service?

ROWLEY: Well, at the president's request it would seem, custom and usage, but I think it's been spelled out since then the responsibilities that the agencies and so forth. I don't know what; I can't quote the legislation since then. It escapes me at the moment, but I'm quite sure it's spelled out more clearly today than it was at that time.

HARTIGAN: Then it would be the responsibility of the FBI to investigate the assassination of the president?

ROWLEY: Right, I think that.

HARTIGAN: Jim, what are your recollections about the day of the assassination? You were the chief of the Secret Service at the time, obviously not.

ROWLEY: Yes, right. Well, we were conducting training schools for our agents. And on this particular day there was a luncheon, graduation luncheon at one of the local restaurants. I don't know whether it was O'Donnell's or some other one, but it was down in that area. Just before I was to address the group following the luncheon there was a telephone call for me, and I went to the phone wondering what the emergency was, because they all knew where I was. But when I got on the phone it was Jerry Behn--he

was the agent in charge--and said, "We've just got word that the president's been shot." I said, "What!" and he said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, I'll be right up." At that time Bob Wallace [Robert A. Wallace] was there--assistant secretary of the Treasury--and I told him briefly, and with some of my staff who were present ran all the way to the White House, and we came to the east end of the office where Jerry had his office. And he had an open wire with Roy Kellerman, who was down there at the time and in charge of the detail, waiting to hear what the results were and so forth. So we were not at all. . . . As a result, when we finally got the word, then realizing he was serious, I asked the immigration and so forth to close the border, the Mexican border. We were thinking that it might be something, that someone being in Dallas they could have quick access to the border as a possible escape route. And then, of course, later that evening there was so much pressure that the State Department--that it was backing up all the cars--that we then let it go. And then we had Tom Kelly [?], who then was an inspector in our organization, was just leaving Louisville after completing an inspection. So I radioed my deputy chief, Paul Paterni, and told him to get in touch with Kelly and direct him to proceed immediately to Dallas so he could direct the investigation, the assassination, realizing that they only had a few men in Dallas, in the Dallas office, that they would have such a burden to try to do their normal work and the investigation.

HARTIGAN: Based on the reports that your agents gave to you, what was your final conclusion, in your own mind, of the assassination?

ROWLEY: Well, the only thing. . . . The final conclusion was where this Oswald [Lee Harvey Oswald] was, and even I had gone down there, you know, prior to, a week or so later on a Sunday and, you know, surveyed the area, and where he was and so forth. And at that time it was only, there was no other credible evidence to indicate there was a conspiracy. And we accepted that based on Kelly's interview with Oswald and our own and the information we got from the police.

HARTIGAN: So the reports that you as the chief of the Secret Service got from your agents who were in Dallas with the president at the time and the Warren Report of what happened there at the time, they blended pretty well, they supported the final decision of the Warren Commission. Is that right?

ROWLEY: Oh, yes, but you must recognize, too, that the reports weren't that voluminous, because we were only involved in it for three days, I would say off hand. Another interesting fact because of Mrs. Oswald [Marina Oswald] having come from Russia, and they were concerned about any retaliation or something, the president requested us to protect her, you know, and of course we had another detail to protect her twenty-four hours.

HARTIGAN: How long did that protection last?

ROWLEY: That lasted until after she appeared before the Warren Commission, here in

Washington, and I think shortly thereafter they took off the protection.

HARTIGAN: You, as chief of the Secret Service, are you totally satisfied with the findings of the Warren Commission?

ROWLEY: Well, based on the report itself. After all, they had access to all the information and so forth. We didn't have access to, except what we were requested to compile, and, of course, I had read most of the reports that we compiled and had to sign them before we furnished them to the Warren Commission. But they had the staff and investigators plus the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] reports, you know, which I wasn't privy to, except when the Warren Commission came out in the report.

HARTIGAN: But in spite of all the books and all the articles that are coming out to the contrary, you're still satisfied with the final conclusions of the Warren Report?

ROWLEY: Well, I would say, yes. I haven't seen anything that would indicate to the contrary. I mean there are these things, and, of course, you can imagine them with the different types of television shows today, and the different plots that you see; you know one could easily conjure up a possibility of some conspiracy and so forth. But you got to have, there must be, you must have the hard facts before you can make a definitive statement, you know, to the contrary of what was stated at that time.

HARTIGAN: For example, one of the points raised in recent articles, and books, was the number of shots that were fired. Based on the information that you got from your agents it coincided with what the Warren Commission stated. You didn't find anything contrary . . .

ROWLEY: No, not in that vein, not there, no.

HARTIGAN: . . . and another aspect of the Warren Commission's Report that is being challenged now, is the fact that, they are questioning the fact that he--Oswald-- actually fired the shot from where he was in that building. The Warren Commission Report still holds up from your information?

ROWLEY: Well, yes. Not being a technical man, I would have to accept that, right.

HARTIGAN: Was there any great, major, were there any major changes made in the principles of protecting the president as a result of the Kennedy assassination?

ROWLEY: Oh, at that time, yes, we had to. . . . We surveyed all the, all throughout the country, the possible parade routes for a presidential visit and then we introduced. . . . But let me go back further, earlier. As a result of that, and the fact that we only had from 300, from 275 to 300 special agents handling counterfeiting and

protection, we had to go in for additional manpower and equipment. As you well know from your experience at the White House, we had to beg and borrow from the Armed Services for a lot of our equipment and so forth. At that time we weren't self-sustaining. But as a result of the, unfortunately from the, because of the assassination, we were able to get the additional manpower and up-to-date equipment that would be conclusive for our type of work, you see. So that it did upgrade the whole organization.

HARTIGAN: Which in turn upgraded the extent of the protection you are now giving presidents which you were not able to give. . . .

ROWLEY: That's right. And we have a much more sophisticated operation and, indeed, training courses for these men. And, of course, we train selected men from police departments and sheriffs' offices on protection. So that when we visit a particular city we have the additional ability of these men to accept the type of protection that we find is necessary. And they understand it.

HARTIGAN: Jim, recently there has been a siege, I would say, of announcements, confessions, if you will, of women stating their associations with the president of the United States. Can you make any observations on some of those?

ROWLEY: I never saw or heard anything. Of course, I wasn't at the White House every day, so I would not be an authority on that. But I had never heard or saw anything that would indicate any truth to it, because certainly any agent on the detail that saw anything like that naturally would report it. But I hadn't received. . . . This was all a surprise to me when I read these so-called stories in the paper.

HARTIGAN: What are your opinions on such . . .

ROWLEY: Well, I think . . .

HARTIGAN: . . . actions on the part of. . . .

ROWLEY: . . . you know, who's going to deny and so forth. There's a chance for somebody to make some money.

HARTIGAN: Do you think it is strictly an opportunity. . . .

ROWLEY: Could be or it's something to degrade the memory, I suppose.

HARTIGAN: Jim, from a practical point of view, what are the possibilities of a president even doing these things under the circumstances surrounding his existence in the White House?

ROWLEY: Well, I would think they're pretty slim, you know. Too many people would be involved. By that I mean that parties coming into the White House, the ushers office has to know about it, or if they in turn would apprise us to, whatever agents might be in that area. And then, too, it just has to come, if it's in the executive office, it would have to be, one of the secretaries would have to approve the admission of the party. The party would have to come, the individual or individuals would have to come through one of two gates to the White House, controlled by the White House police. And their name would have to be on the roster. So those are things that would have to be checked.

HARTIGAN: Are there any observations you would like to make in terms of your association with the Kennedy administration during your time in office?

ROWLEY: Well, I would say that they were a very efficient group of men, and one of the things that impressed me most, that if you saw something that might be embarrassing to the president, and I found this with his predecessors--that is, the predecessors in the jobs that the Kennedy staff had--that you could talk to them. And you could say that this would be embarrassing to the president, you know, if somebody, some politicians, had some grandiose ideas of making his visit attractive by introducing some kind of a gimmick, you know, you on advance could see the repercussions if it didn't go off, and it could be embarrassing to the president. And then there were other things that we could apprise the staff of, that we thought likely the best way to handle a given situation. You could sit down and talk rationally to these people. And I was. . . . It made for a very happy relationship.

HARTIGAN: Would you care to evaluate, compare the Kennedy administration with those of the other presidents you served under?

ROWLEY: Well, Bill, it's not that I'm reluctant to compare it. It's just that you got to consider the context of the time and so forth. Now in Roosevelt's time I was just an agent on the detail, but I thought that he had a very efficient staff, and the men being much older than subsequent. Now President Truman when he took office, he had a good staff. And they were young men like Clark Clifford and Matt Connelly [Matthew J. Connelly] and people of that kind, people who were, you know, more of your contemporaries, and you could talk to, you see. And that way they were new coming into the job, and they would listen to you and so forth. Now, when the Eisenhower detail, you had people like Tom Stephens [Thomas E. Stephens] and some of the others that we would normally work with, because he was appointments secretary, and you could sit down and talk with them, and they were concerned. As a matter of fact, there was a lot of things that the Secret Service did in my time, the Roosevelt's and Truman period, that was stopped during Eisenhower's. And that was doing a lot of advance in a political campaign. But Tom Stephens said we can't afford to get involved in politics, so therefore we are going to establish select advance men to go with you. And I thought that was great for the reason that I could see down the road that one day we could be embarrassed by doing things with politicians that we

don't. But when I came on the detail it was acceptable in those days. But then when the Kennedy group came in, now they were. . . . They knew what they wanted. They moved ahead and they had the right men to handle certain areas that we were involved in. And the relationship was excellent. Take your own case. You traveled with us. You knew what we could do. You saw how we worked. You recognized the responsibility and the hours we put in in doing advance work and the preparations and so forth. In fact, you were a great help to us in many areas, that probably we wouldn't have made an imprint.

HARTIGAN: Well, of course, it works both ways, Jim. I think that everybody had job to do and . . .

ROWLEY: That's right.

HARTIGAN: . . . the agents seemed to have a job that is probably the least recognized and the least thanks for. But I think maybe that's because of my living with policemen all my life. And final observations, Jim?

ROWLEY: Well, there was one thing that you asked me earlier, about anything amusing, and I would conclude by saying that I just recalled one. It was our custom to present the president with a gold badge, and so on the occasion that I went in to, as a result of an appointment that Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] set up for us, I and my staff had this appointment, went into the president's office and the ceremony in which we presented the badge, and the president listened very politely and all and looked at the badge. And with a straight face said, "Well, I guess now this entitles me to work the midnight shift at Middleburg." [Laughter]

HARTIGAN: Well, Jim, unless there is any other observations I think we can close this out. If at any time you feel as though you have anything to add to that, let me know and we can come back and retype it. Jim, possibly when you're going through your memorabilia, if you come across anything you feel as though you'd like to donate to the Library, in terms of papers or other articles that would be of interest to researching students in years to come, we would appreciate it if you would give some thought to donating them to the Library. And if you do come across such memorabilia, if you call me, we can have an archivist come out and evaluate it.

ROWLEY: Oh, I'd be delighted, delighted. I can't recall. You know, thirteen years later it's pretty difficult, except for some of the things that have always stood out in my mind, which I just recited to you.

HARTIGAN: Well, we would appreciate your going through your. . . . I'm sure you must have a slew of remembrances in terms of papers and articles that you might feel free to donate to the Library. Thank you very much, Jim Rowley.