

**Jacob K. Javits Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 04/26/1966**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Jacob K. Javits  
**Interviewer:** Charles T. Morrissey  
**Date of Interview:** April 4, 1966  
**Place of Interview:** Washington, D.C.  
**Length:** 18 pages

**Biographical Note**

Javits was a Senator from New York from 1957 through 1981. In this interview Javits discusses first meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK] in 1946; working with JFK in the House of Representatives on housing and veterans issues and in the Senate on different pieces of legislation; the confrontation between Javits and JFK in the Senate on medicare; social interactions with Senator JFK; JFK's occasional "offbeat position;" the 1960 presidential election; and JFK's sense of humor, among other issues.

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**Suggested Citation**

Jacob K. Javits, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, April 4, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

JACOB JAVITS

April 26, 1966  
Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

JAVITS: I first met Jack Kennedy in 1946 in connection with the affairs of the American Veterans Committee which was then facing a challenge by a communist element to take it over. The challenge broke out in a marked way in the middle of 1946, I believe, at the first convention of the AVC in Des Moines, Iowa. Jack Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., and I were natural allies with a chap named

Charles Bolte, who had organized the American Veterans Committee. The AVC was the veterans group that proposed to help the veterans exercise a constructive influence on the nation without super-patriotism or self-seeking in terms of bonuses, etc. which we felt had often plagued the other veterans organizations. We fought that battle against a possible communist take-over, I think, quite successfully and got to know each other.

Then, of course, Jack came to the House from Massachusetts in '47, at the same time as I did. There was a whole crop of veterans in that class of Congressmen, fairly grown-up people by then, having spent the years of the war, etc., just as I did. We had a natural affinity in respect to anything that affected housing because there was a shortage of housing and the

veterans were feeling the brunt of this, especially the newly-married veterans. So we consulted together about housing. He collaborated with me and with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. We brought in Robert F. Wagner Jr., as an outgrowth of our relationship in AVC, to the National Veterans' Housing Conference of 1947. It was at this conference of literally thousands of young veterans where interest was stirred up for the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Bill, which was the leading vehicle for the liberals interested in housing. Indeed, I have a picture in my office showing the then Congressman Kennedy and myself, also as a young Congressman, examining that bill. That was probably the first thing either of us did that got us any public attention. We did help pilot that bill through the House, though

it took a long time. It wasn't until 1949 that it actually passed. But it was a landmark bill.

My relations with Jack Kennedy then were very friendly. I went to his house occasionally for dinner. He was a bachelor then himself. He had a little house in Georgetown -- I remember it very well -- where there was always good cooking. He was a very convivial man, great sense of humor, rather incisive and obviously well-read. I liked him very much. I hope very much he liked me. We didn't have too much to do with each other in the House except for these relationships of a very friendly character and our close collaboration on matters that concerned veterans.

I'm trying to search my mind as to whether -- [Joseph] Joe McCarthy, who was



then a Senator, and was also very interested in housing, gave a Wisconsin cheese party at the Willard Hotel almost weekly in those days to kind of rally the veteran contingent. I went to them occasionally before Joe turned sour -- long before he turned sour -- and I rather think that Jack went to some, too. It was just kind of a rallying ground for people like ourselves.

The only other things about Jack that I remember in the House is that occasionally he espoused some pretty unorthodox foreign policy positions. I remember one speech he made in the House which, I think, he was sorry for, for many years thereafter, which had some faint overtone of not being very happy about what the United States was doing to aid Israel. But I'm sure that, knowing him as I did, it may have represented a deep desire to lay on with

an even hand in the problems of the whole Near East. I'm sure it didn't represent any basic opposition to Israel as a hope for the Jewish people or as a refuge for people who needed it, or anything unfriendly on his part.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall the uproar when he commented on the House floor about the leadership of the American Legion?

JAVITS: No, I don't recall that; except as you refresh me on it, it comes back to me. . . . Then my recollections are a little dim until we got to the Senate. I was here, of course, after he was. I came to the Senate in 1957 having been elected in '56. He was then on the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. He grew in seniority in that Committee and was looked to tremendously in regard to labor matters in that Committee. Of course, I

saw a great deal more of him than I ever did before. His difficulty with his back troubled me. I remember coming over here when I was still in the House and he was in the Senate, and seeing him hobble around on those crutches and it just distressed me terribly. He knew it distressed me. Somehow or other that just had a very bad effect on me. I just felt it was so terrible that so good looking and bright a young man should still be plagued with a war injury at such a late date.

Well, anyhow, my sharpest recollection of Jack Kennedy was working with him as he worked on the revision of the Taft-Hartley Law and the so-called Landrum-Griffin Bill and on medicare. My principal recollection, most vivid recollection, is on medicare. That's where we really confronted each other in a very real way. On Taft-Hartley

revisions and the Landrum-Griffin Bill, we were very much on the same side. I think he rather looked to me as a very competent lawyer. Whether I am or not is immaterial at this point. That's the way he felt about it. He had a great deal of confidence in my legal judgments as to what would and would not be constitutional, what particular provisions did and did not mean. I did some redrafting which was very agreeable to him and I remember he sat in on a series of meetings in connection with the Landrum-Griffin Bill when we settled something called the McClellan "code of ethics," which was incorporated in the Bill. We had adopted that and he and I were both very dissatisfied with it. By working very hard and convincing our colleagues, we were able to change it notwithstanding that it had already

been adopted as an amendment before the Bill was passed. It was quite a signal achievement. I remember the satisfaction we both felt in working on it.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me a little more on the confrontation over medicare?

JAVITS: Senator Kennedy, then Senator Kennedy, was very convinced that we ought to have a government medical care program for the elderly concentrating on hospitalization supported by social security. I became the leading exponent -- and this goes back to 1959 and '60 just when he was sharpening up for the presidency -- of a program which heavily depended upon government contribution and the contribution of the beneficiary together, and a much more expanded program, including physicians' services as well as hospitalization. He sought to label his bill as the "liberal" bill. In a debate on the Senate floor after

he had been nominated for the presidency in, I think, August, 1960 . . . . He sought from me as, " a leading liberal," as he put it, support which he felt would be sufficient to pass his bill because there were a number of Republicans who were supporting my position. I refused to give it to him on the grounds that his bill was unsound, that ultimately we would get a sound bill, and that I didn't think this was the time that I ought to compromise, and that he couldn't take me in by labeling the bill liberal. If I didn't consider the package liberal, I wouldn't buy it. This didn't change our friendship, but it was quite a confrontation. His bill was defeated by the very absence of the Republican votes which he sought from me. Subsequently, of course, working with him when he became President, we

worked out a medicare bill. Indeed, the last time I actually saw him was when I presented to him, with a very distinguished group, the report on the National Committee of Health Care for the Aged which incorporated the plan which ultimately became the basis for the law which passed after his death. He issued a glowing statement, saying it would be the basis for the law and he welcomed it. By then he and I were very much on the same side. But unhappily for all of us, that was in November of 1963.

I remember Jack Kennedy outside the Senate chamber as always having a twinkle in his eye and a kind of a shy grin and always rather busy socially and politically and always seeming to enjoy life very much. He was a "politician about town," if I can coin a phrase. He was very friendly with George Smathers, and they sort

of coupled in my mind. There was so much of the two of them together.

My wife and I knew Jackie and him. We had lunch with them occasionally. We were not close social friends, but I had the warmest feelings for him. I remember the first time I saw him when he was President -- on something or other. I said, "Mr. President." He kind of looked abashed and half-grinned and kind of said, "Oh, cut it out," you know. I said, "No, you're Mr. President to me. It's the way it must be and will be." I think he understood but he didn't like it. But he understood it.

Although one could always rely on him to take, on the whole, a liberal position, he occasionally took an offbeat position. I remember hearing him make his famous speech on Algeria, which was a real bombshell. I didn't agree with him,



though he turned out to be right, in the sense that Algeria had to be turned loose. At the time I didn't see it. I thought it was rather important to keep a free state, not to let it go sharply to the left -- to make a settlement which would produce a free society -- instead of letting it go down the drain. But he espoused that, as far as I knew, practically out of the blue. So that from that point of view, he surprised me as he did in the House with his slightly anti-Israel speech. When I campaigned in the Nixon campaign in 1960, I said I liked him and admired him and I did; but I said I thought he had a quixotic quality and I wondered how it would work out in the presidency. Well, the answer is he didn't show it in the presidency. Somehow or other he shed it in the process of getting to

the presidency. He was a very impressive President. Much to my satisfaction, though I didn't necessarily anticipate it, he got rid of a good deal of the quixoticism when he became President.

One interesting political aspect about then Senator Kennedy -- I was the chairman of the principal rally of the Republicans -- the Nixon ticket -- in New York in 1960. It was at Hearld Square. In order to prepare for that rally, I scouted Jack Kennedy's rally in Rockefeller Plaza which preceded it by a few days. He had a smaller audience but it certainly filled up the place. It was a similar type of rally. It was his big New York City rally. When I came back I reported to those with whom I was working that this was a race of a big city man against a small town man. Subsequently, after the campaign

I concluded that for the first time in history Americans had elected a big city fellow over a small town boy. It was the juxtaposition of these two great rallies, one of which I scouted and the other of which I chaired, that brought that out very clearly to me.

I did work with Senator Kennedy in lining up support on civil rights. But he was not nearly as much of an activist in civil rights as the rest of us. He was a member of the group but not an activist and was often represented by someone rather than there himself. But I think in all fairness to him this came in '57, when he was already beginning his campaign for the presidency. He was not in the Senate as much as the rest of us.

Other recollections of President Kennedy

that I have were mainly social. He was a great kidder. He gave a tone to the situation any time we went to the White House, which was extremely attractive. My wife and I were so very pleased that he maintained a demeanor of kind of half kidding -- especially to her, as she was always kidding everybody. There was nothing stuffed shirt about Jack Kennedy at all.

Finally, I have only one other vivid recollection. That is his relation to [Kenneth B.] Ken Keating, my colleague who gave him a rather hard time over the Cuban crisis. Ken is also a great fellow for humor and a joke, a practical joke or kidding attitude. The President responded fully even at the worst moments. He always kept his sense of humor and always kept the lightness and gaiety and spoofing

quality in his approach to Ken, though he did complain to me on occasion. Sometimes I visited him upstairs in quarters. One time I sat on a rocking chair and we had a drink. But he thought that Keating was not giving as much weight to the facts as even his opponent would give. He was rather critical about that but it was all substantive and not at all any impairment to their friendship either. So I would say that he sustained throughout his life a rare capacity for separating his friendship and the reasons for his friendship from the differences which would arise in the course of work that he pursued and that we pursue. One didn't seem to affect the other at all, as if they were really two different worlds. Those are my highlight recollections.

MORRISSEY: Anything on aid to education?

JAVITS: Well, I thought his position was very bold and very correct in seeing to the fact that public education had the top priority. As a matter of fact he went further on that than I did. I favor, and I did favor then, giving help in academic subjects to parochial and private school children directly, not to the schools. But he felt he had to hold that line very sharply. But I never had any real confrontation or discussion with him about it. I have no vivid recollection of any feeling on that with him except that he did take that attitude long before he was President as well as after.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

JAVITS: You're very welcome.