

Michael J. Kirwan Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/01/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Michael J. Kirwan (1886-1970) was a Congressional representative for Ohio from 1937 to 1970. This interview focuses on the 1960 Democratic presidential primary in West Virginia and John F. Kennedy's interest in conservation while in office, among other topics.

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Michael J. Kirwan– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

MICHAEL J. KIRWAN

March, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Tristram Coffin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

COFFIN: When did you first become aware of John Kennedy?

KIRWAN: I noticed him when he first came to Congress. He was quite a serious young fellow -- a little thin, quiet, and most alert. Wherever you saw him, he was listening very hard, taking in what was going on. I thought, "That boy is going places." Certain people strike you that way -- a very few. I have a theory that John Kennedy was put on Earth for a purpose, and given a fine education

and experience as a reporter and an author. He was able to break down, as no one else could, the foolish barrier between people because of religion. The Catholics have faced this barrier since the first boatload arrived as laborers. [Alfred E.] Al Smith lost the Presidency because the voters were told, and believed, that he would take his orders from the Vatican. John Kennedy told the people no church or foreign office would dictate to him, and he proved it. Now, taken from the Earth, he has become a symbol of all that is great and fine in life. Millions of people from all over America will visit his tomb.

COFFIN: When did you become better acquainted with Mr. Kennedy?

KIRWAN: I became fairly well acquainted with him in 1959. He had decided to try for the Presidency, and he attended several regional conferences

of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. You may remember that both in 1956 and 1958, he was an extremely popular campaign speaker. The one glimpse the people had of him at the 1956 Democratic Convention was most appealing. We were very glad to have him at these conferences because his presence brought a good audience, and whatever he said was thoughtful. As I watched him I thought, "That young man isn't going to be stopped. He's on his way."

COFFIN: Did he talk to you about his pre-Convention campaign?

KIRWAN: Not at that time, but he did the next year at the annual St. Patrick's Day party. He always came to these parties. He told me that if he lost the West Virginia primary, he would retire from the race, convinced a Catholic could not win. West Virginia is, as you know, a state with only a small

Catholic population and is heavily working class. His opponent was Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, who has been a liberal favorite and is Protestant.

At the dinner I gave Senator Kennedy a good introduction and put him next to [Thomas] Tom Kennedy, the President of the United Mine Workers, but no relation. The miners are the most important segment of West Virginia. I told Tom what a good friend of labor I had always found Jack Kennedy to be, and that I figured he was a winner. As a result of the conversation then between Senator Kennedy and Tom Kennedy, Tom sent word down quietly to the mine leaders that Jack was the boy; he was confidence^t in him. The reporters from Washington who were in West Virginia, of course, did not know this, and they were writing stories that Senator Kennedy would be badly beaten by

Senator Humphrey. This was a pretty bad guess. Towns that didn't have a single Catholic in them went solidly for Kennedy, thanks to Tom Kennedy's endorsement. The miner is the most loyal soul in the world. I know because I've been one. You work in the darkness underground, and you must depend on your mates.

Senator Kennedy won the West Virginia primary and so destroyed the myth that a Catholic could not win in Protestant territory. He worked terribly hard in West Virginia and won the respect of a good many politicians who had thought of him as a wealthy aristocrat -- charming, but without the capacity for hard work he showed there.

COFFIN: Did he ever discuss with you his strategy for winning the nomination?

KIRWAN: Yes. He had a great deal of popular support.

The problem was how to transform this into delegate strength at the Convention. Very often, large blocs of delegates are controlled by individual political leaders. The controlled votes are held for favorite sons or other devices, and this enables the leaders at some point to get together in a hotel room and trade votes and nominate their candidate. Jack Kennedy was not the favorite of the political leaders when he began his campaign. His technique was to prove he was so popular with the people the leaders could not afford to ditch him.

COFFIN: Did other candidates have opposing tactics?

KIRWAN: Lyndon Johnson was the major rival. In 1959 I spent a week at his ranch, and I told him, "I know what your game is. You have Senator Humphrey out there running against Senator Kennedy. You figure the Convention will be deadlocked; Sam Rayburn will make a stirring speech nominating you;

and you'll sweep the Convention. But that won't happen, Senator, and I'll tell you why. Jack Kennedy is working too hard for it. If you want the job, you'll have to work for it, too. Otherwise, it will be Kennedy on the first ballot."

COFFIN: Was Senator Kennedy worried about the opposition of other Irish political leaders?

KIRWAN: Yes, he talked to me about this. I had one former Governor argue with me right out here on the Capitol steps. He said the the Irish had reached a point where the voters tolerated them as Governors and Senators, but that if one ran for the President so much anti-Catholic sentiment would be stirred up, particularly in the Midwest, that a good many lesser offices held by Catholics would be swept away. They were afraid of another Al Smith campaign. Jack Kennedy asked me to keep an eye out for such reactions and

do what I could to calm their fears. You had to admire him. This didn't stop him. He set out to prove to them by winning in places like West Virginia and Wisconsin and Oregon.

His style was terrific. He won people over by his youth and vigor and intelligence. I saw him completely win the hearts of an audience in my home city of Youngstown, Ohio, during the pre-Convention campaign. The political leaders just couldn't stand up against this kind of enthusiasm that he created. They wouldn't have dared go back home after voting against him at the Convention.

COFFIN: You mentioned in one other conversation we had that you believed the Kennedy family contributed a great deal to the character of the President.

KIRWAN: Yes, they backed him up. What makes them a great family is that they all speak to

one another and stay together and help one another. This gives a man a great deal more heart and courage.

COFFIN: Was John Kennedy interested in conservation?

KIRWAN: Oh, very much so. I can tell you of an incident. He invited me to fly with him in 1962 to a dinner in Washington honoring Senator [Warren G.] Magnuson. He sent for me during the flight and said, "I hear you've been out in the South Pacific looking over my old island of Palau. What did you discover?" I told him I had been to a number of our islands in this year and found them badly neglected. The schools, for example, were in terrible condition with no desks or chairs or books. The children on one island were forced to spend the whole school season on another island only three miles away. I told the President with all of the small ships in mothballs and the sailors standing

around without enough to do, couldn't the Navy fix up a daily ferry system for the school kids? He listened very intently and told me, "This will be changed." Three schools were built and equipped as a result of his promise. He was greatly interested in the conservation and development of our human resources.

COFFIN: What about physical resources?

KIRWAN: Well, I think of him as the logical successor of President Theodore Roosevelt who was responsible for the Reclamation Act. John Kennedy saw that far-reaching steps were taken to conserve our wildernesses, our play areas, and our water supply.

The last time I was with President Kennedy was flying with him to Arkansas to dedicate a huge dam and reservoir in Arkansas on September 24, 1963. He spoke of how important water was for our future,

and as usual had a host of facts and figures at his finger tips.

COFFIN: Congressman, this is quite an unusual picture. There must be a story behind it.

[The picture referred to was a photograph of Mr. Kennedy sitting at his desk looking up at Kirwan with a delightful smile. The Congressman looks down at the President enigmatically, half smiling.]

KIRWAN: Yes, there is a story. The President was signing the Aquarium Bill, to establish a national aquarium here in Washington on Hains Point for visitors and scientific research. He invited me to the White House for the signing. I told him, "That won't be necessary, Mr. President. You're busy and I'm busy. You just send me the pen you signed the bill with, and I'll give it to a grandchild." I did not want to go down there and be subjected to his powers of persuasion.

COFFIN: Why was that?

KIRWAN: When the Aquarium Bill passed the House, Senator Wayne Morse made a speech attacking it very severely. He has since told me this was a mistake, that he was not thoroughly familiar with the aquarium. At any rate, my Appropriations sub committee had taken all of the Oregon projects out of the appropriations bill. The Senator had appealed to the President to get them back in. So I knew what John Kennedy was up to. I told him it wasn't necessary to have a ceremony that would require my coming to the White House. He called Speaker [John W.] McCormack, though, who asked me to go to the White House.

That photograph was taken after the signing of the bill. The President was grinning at me, and I was trying to think of some way to put him off. President Kennedy asked me then to restore the Oregon projects.

I told him, "Mr. President, I don't think I can do that."

He smiled at me that wonderful, boyish, Irish grin of his and said, "Mike, you son of a gun, anyone who can ride that Aquarium Bill through Congress can get those projects back in."

He won. He was a man it was almost impossible to say no to.

COFFIN: What about his relations with Congress?

KIRWAN: They were far better than any idea you would get from the newspapers. You must understand he came into office at a time when Congress was terribly independent because of eight years with a weak president. John Kennedy knew its mood because he had been a Member during this period. It would take persuasion of a very high order to get his program through. His naming of [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien as his contact man with Congress was shrewd because

Larry had been on Capitol Hill and knew its operations and its personalities.

COFFIN: Did the President ever come to you for help?

KIRWAN: He called on me a few times. I don't want to give the impression that he called me every other day because he did not. I can think of a few times when he was in a real jam -- once during the farm bill fight. He knew there were a good many members of the House who wanted me to help them with their projects, and that in a real emergency I could exert some pressures. John Kennedy was reasonable. He wouldn't say, you must do this. He would say, "I'm in something of a jam, Mike, and I'd like your help if you can see your way to do it. Here are two key people whose support I need." Something like that.

He worked very hard at trying to understand

Congress, to get along with it, and to get his program through. The job was far more difficult because of the independent spirit of Congress he inherited.

I think one important fact to remember about John Kennedy was that although he was wealthy and highly educated, he knew there was no easy road in life. He always worked hard for what he got. And I know at times his old back injury pained him as he stumped across the coal towns of West Virginia or labored to get Congress to move. I think people understood this -- understood that he was thinking not just of today, but of tomorrow. The young people and the women were very strong on him.

COFFIN: Did Mr. Kennedy talk to you about the 1962 Congressional races?

KIRWAN: Yes, but he had a pretty good idea of the outcome and was not worried. He felt we

would keep a good majority. He loved politics, and loved to talk about it.

COFFIN: What do you think he left behind?

KIRWAN: He left a program that will go on, a program of conservation, of a better life for all, of peace. It has so much momentum, people have so taken it to their hearts it cannot be stopped. He has become one of the great martyrs of history.

Appendix I
to the
Oral History Interview
of
Michael J. Kirwan
For The John F. Kennedy Library

Congressman Mike Kirwan, D. Ohio, had an interesting human and political relationship with President Kennedy. It might be compared to that of a tribal elder toward a favorite young warrior. Kirwan is Irish, and he has an immense, sentimental pride in John Kennedy, and was able to help him, particularly in the pre-Convention fight in 1960.

The Congressman remembers vividly the time when an Irish-Catholic belonged to the working class (he was himself a breaker boy in the mines as a child, later worked on railroads) and were discriminated against

in employment and politically. He is, in his own right, a powerful, although little known, figure in American politics and Congress. He is chairman of the Congressional Campaign Committee; he raises money and helps direct the strategy for the House races every two years, and knows intimately Democratic Party leaders in every section of America. He is also a key member of the Appropriations Committee, controlling a host of conservation and public works projects known as "pork barrel." (The Congressman indignantly denies the "pork barrel," saying the projects are all badly needed.)

There are many signs in his office that his affection for John Kennedy was reciprocated, photographs signed not in the formal "John F. Kennedy," but simply "John Kennedy," and with such lines as "To my fellow sustaining member of the Democratic Party . . . To Mike Kirwan from his old friend."