Myer Feldman Oral History Interview –JFK#2, 2/27/1966
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Biographical Note
Feldman, (1914 - 2007); Legislative assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy (1958-1961); Deputy Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964); Counsel to the President (1964-1965), discusses speeches during the 1960 campaign, the organization of the office of coordinator for research, and the research team's debate preparation, among other issues.

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Myer Feldman – JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

MYER FELDMAN

February 27, 1966
2828 Ellicott St. N.W.
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Do you want to tell me about the background of the speech to the Houston ministers?

FELDMAN: Well, in the very beginning of the campaign, we never quite knew but knew we would have to decide sometime during the campaign what to do about the religious issue. We always felt this was one of the handicaps that John F. Kennedy faced in his campaign for the presidency and indeed in his campaign for the nomination, too. At first we

kind of rocked along on the assumption that other people could answer questions dealing with religion. But it became apparent that this was a factor that was influencing so many people that we decided we would have to adopt a new approach.

There were a number of consultations as I remember. I attended some, Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] was involved in all, Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] was involved in all of them. Each time the question was just how you handle the religion problem.

MORRISSEY: By consultations do you mean meetings among staff members?

FELDMAN: Meetings among staff members and with the President. One large meeting I remember at Bobby's house was not attended by the President, but – and I don't remember everybody who was there then – but there

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were about 6 or 8 people and one of the subjects we discussed was this. This was typical. At other times, there might have been just a conversation on the telephone between Ted and me or, in one instance, a conversation with the candidate. But this was an important problem and everybody recognized it as such.

I was not present when the final decision was made to confront it in Houston. But I was present during the discussions as to whether or not we should accept the date to speak in Houston. I don't remember what John F. Kennedy said, indeed, whether he said anything. My impression is he didn't say anything at first. He said that we had this invitation and what did Ted think and what did I think – I think we were the only two present at the time – about the invitation.

I think I was inclined to feel that

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it was dangerous and I voiced that opinion that perhaps it might concentrate the discussion on the issue where we were weakest, rather than serve as an opportunity to hit the issue once and for all and kill it. Ted, on the other hand, was always for having a speech that dealt with the religious issue.

As I remember it, I learned about it in a telephone call. I don't remember whether I've discussed where I was physically located during the campaign. I was physically located in an office on L Street on the second floor. Ted had one office, I had the adjoining office, my staff filled the rest of that floor. There were maybe, at various times, between 30 and 50 people who were assisting me. Ted very seldom occupied his office. I think he was only there two or three days during the entire

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campaign. He usually traveled with John F. Kennedy but he was on the phone all the time – either the candidate, or Pierre Salinger, or Ted, or somebody from the campaign plane was on the phone to the office almost all the time.

In one of these conversations, Ted told me the candidate had decided to make the speech in Houston and that we were going to devote it to the religious question. At the same time he told me that there was another speech the following day at the Alamo, or some time right around then. I don't remember whether it was the following day or two days later but I think it was right at that time there was a speech at the Alamo. I remember saying, "Wouldn't that be a better time to talk about it?" He said, "We may talk about it then, too."

I did not prepare anything for that

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speech. I think that speech was drafted by Ted entirely. My only connections with it were the conversations prior to that speech and the notification that it was going to be given.

I did have a good deal to do with the Alamo speech because I remember being awakened in the middle of the night – I think it was about 2 a.m. I believe Ted was probably in California at the time so in California it was a much earlier time. Ted told me he was working on the Alamo speech and he asked some questions. Oh no, Ted could not have been in California. He must have been in Texas. This must have been just before the Alamo speech and he said he was going to talk about religion a little bit in the speech at the Alamo. The question he asked me – he asked me a number of questions – but the particular question he asked me was

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did I know how many Catholics had been killed at the Alamo? That's a hell of a thing to ask me at 2 o'clock in the morning! [Laughter] But I had had a list of the people who were involved in the action and by going through the list, we got names which were obviously Catholic. From that, then, Ted could make the statement and the candidate did, in the speech, point out that there were McCarthys and O'Briens and so on at the Alamo to illustrate the fact that in the great battles in our nation's history, religion was not a factor.

This illustrates our general method of operation during the campaign. As I say, I think my title was coordinator of research for Kennedy and Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. As a practical matter, practically everything went through my office other than the speeches.

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To come back to the religious issue before I get into what I did during the campaign, I think it was just after the Houston ministers' speech – it was either just after or just before – that I remember the candidate saying that we were going to have a separate office that would deal with the religious issue. I think that it was Ted Sorensen who informed me that Jim Wine [James W. Wine] would be down to see me. When Jim came in, he told me that Ted had called him and he assumed Ted had called me. He wanted to know just how the campaign machinery was functioning and how he could fit in because he was going to, from then on, handle all questions that came into the campaign office dealing with religion. He also was going to assume the duty of maintaining a liaison with various religious groups. Jim and I then

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worked pretty closely together throughout the rest of the campaign.

Jim, I think, had a very small staff. I don't think he had more than one or two people with him but he handled, he took care of the mail that came in – and it was voluminous – dealing with religion. He prepared statements dealing with the religious issue. He got in touch with the leaders of the fundamentalist sects, the people in the South who seemed to be

antagonistic to Kennedy because he was a Catholic. He, I think, developed form letters and one brochure dealing with the problem. I think Jim conducted a very effective office devoted solely to the religious issue. That issue from then on wasn't much of my concern. All the other issues were.

We took care of everything from the need for user taxes on intercoastal waterways and

canals, to the need for more classrooms and more teachers, to the defense posture – everything went through my office.

This might be an appropriate time for me to describe how the campaign organization was set up. In this office on L Street – it was between Connecticut Avenue and 17th Street, on the third floor – as I say, there were between 30 and 50 people. Under me was the Research Director of the National Committee, Bob – what's his name – Bob something anyhow. Anyhow, the Research Director of the National Committee was at one end and he, with a very small staff, took charge of keeping congressional candidates informed, senatorial candidates informed, and sending out mailings to Democratic leaders in all of the states dealing with: 1) what the candidate was saying, 2) the candidate's record so they could defend it, 3) challenging the record

of Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], 4) making suggestions concerning radio and TV, and other things the candidates could do to enhance their particular possibilities of election.

Next to him, was an office which prepared what we called the "Nixopedia." The "Nixopedia" was a book about 18 inches high, I suppose, -- and it had supplements during the campaign – which contained every statement we could find that Nixon had made, indexed according to subject. From this book, it was easy to pick out what he had said dealing with taxation, or what he had said dealing with missiles, or what he had said dealing with education, and so on. We could prepare lots of campaign material showing inconsistencies between various statements, showing outrageous positions that he had taken, and so on. It was a valuable book. We had two people working on the book and very supplementary

books that came from it. You see, it had to be kept up to date with his current statements.

From this book was prepared a brochure which said, "Nixon versus Nixon." I think that Arthur Schlesinger when he wrote his book on Nixon drew heavily from this volume. Lots of material that we wrote for magazines and publications came from this volume. It was a valuable piece of machinery and I think it has become standard in American political life now because in '64 then we had an encyclopedia dealing with what Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] had said. I suspect in '68 we'll have one dealing with what the next Republican candidate has said.

MORRISSEY: Who were the two people responsible for that?

FELDMAN: There was a Mrs. Evans, as I remember, who had been a research assistant to Bill Costello [William Costello]. Bill Costello had written a book on Nixon and

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his research assistant was Mrs. Evans. We employed her to develop this. Of course our files under our librarian, whose name was Kline – our files had a wealth of material but it needed organization and that what she did, basically. Of course she couldn't have done it herself. She had 5 or 6 people helping her, people that we drew from senatorial offices to help her put together the initial book. It was done very quickly. We had helping us and putting together that book I remember Bill Welsh [William B. Welsh], who's now with Senator Hart [Philip A. Hart] – that time he was earlier with Senator Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman]; we had the assistant to Senator Gruening [Ernest Gruening]; we had a number of people – we had a couple of people who are now with Hart who worked on it – but we had about 5 or 6 people who worked literally day and night to put it together initially. It had

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to be done quickly. Then we had Mrs. Evans with one assistant who just kept it up to date.

Next to that office, was an office in which we had what I called my idea man. In that office was Milt Gwirtzman [Milton S. Gwirtzman] and Frank Sieverts and Bob Wallace [Robert Wallace] and Ben Stong and several other people who would prepare answers to questions that we would receive. One of the functions of my office was to answer questionnaires for the candidates and in the name of the candidate. These people would help me with those answers. I would also assign them radio and television scripts. They would draft one minute spots or five minute spots which we would then give to the agency. We'd also prepare articles if articles were necessary during the campaign. This was kind of an "idea group."

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It was from this office, for instance, that I derived the material for the answer to the so-called Nixon White Paper. At one point during the campaign, Nixon issued a White Paper challenging Kennedy in which he asserted that Kennedy had made some 15 blinding errors. He charged him with saying things that were very foolish and that were untrue. One of them, for instance, was that Kennedy had said that 17 million people go to bed hungry every night and others. Nixon issued this paper and the candidate called me and said that we ought to get an answer to this out right away. Now, the paper was issued at 6 p.m; we wanted to get the answer out by 8 a.m. Well, I had my group work on these papers and they completed their work long about – oh, I don't know – midnight or 1 o'clock. Then I got the plane to take me to New York where the candidate was. I worked in New York

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until about 6 a.m. By 7 o'clock when John F. Kennedy got up, I had another paper, the answer to the White Paper, ready which he looked at. By 9 o'clock we had given it to Pierre to release from New York.

This group was essentially the people on whom I relied to do the research and to get the material ready for the candidate. Next to that was an office for Solis Horwitz. Solis Horwitz had been active in the defense area. He had been Counsel to first the preparedness Subcommittee of Lyndon Johnson, then he had been Assistant Counsel to Lyndon Johnson when he was majority leader. So, I guess his title was Assistant Counsel to the – I don't know – Democratic Conference Committee, or something like that. But he had concentrated on defense questions. Largely he, but he sometimes

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was assisted, would develop for me: 1) position papers on defense issues; 2) answers to the defense problems that would be raised during the course of the campaign. He was a volunteer and he didn't have a source of income any place else. It was wholly a labor of love for him and he did a very good job. He later on became one of the Assistant Secretaries of Defense. I think that's where he is right now.

Then, Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] had an office there, too. But Dick was largely out with the candidate most of the time, so he very seldom occupied that office. Ted Sorensen had an office there but, as I said before, he wasn't there more than two or three days during the entire campaign.

Then, of course, on the other wall of this floor – the floor was divided into

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cubbyholes rather than into real offices. When I say offices, the only offices in the – the way we understand an office with four walls – were Sorensen's office and my office. We were the only two relatively secluded places, although there was so much noise there all the time, there was no place where you could get any quiet.

On the right hand wall, we had mostly files, secretaries, documents, kind of a research library, and all the materials we would have to use in the campaign. Also, there were a lot of desks and chairs that would be used by volunteers who would come in briefly for a short period of time. Sometimes, when we had a large mailing, there might be a hundred people on that floor. Almost all of them were volunteers mailing out campaign material.

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Associated with the office, also, on the floor below, was another branch of the campaign headed by Archie Cox [Archibald Cox]. Archie Cox was a Harvard Law teacher who would come down to Washington to help us during the….He taught labor law so he came to help us during the fight for the labor-management act, the so-called Landrum-Griffin

[Philip Mitchell Landrum, Robert P. Griffin] Bill. John F. Kennedy acquired an affection and admiration for Archie Cox and he asked him to come down during the campaign to supervise a group of what he called speech writers. Initially there were six of these – Bill Atwood [William Atwood], Bob Yoakum [Robert Yoakum], Bill Wilson [William P. Wilson], two others – who were supposed to prepare speeches on various subjects. This would relieve Sorensen of a good deal of the burden, it was thought.

This operation was not entirely successful. Ted had to write almost every major speech

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and had to write it out in the field. He got a little bit of assistance from these people but not a great deal. So Archie and I would confer often on policy positions but the effort to have a speech writing team didn't develop very well.

MORRISSEY: Why?

FELDMAN: I guess it was because you can't develop a speech writer in a short period of time. To write a speech for a candidate, you have to know his style, his way of thinking, his background, how he would approach an issue, and of all the people we tried – and we tried a great many – nobody, just nobody seemed to work out well. Perhaps the standards were too high. I've often thought that the greatest political writer, or speech writer if you will, that this country has ever known was Ted Sorensen. Well, Kennedy's standards were very high.

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He was used to Sorensen so everybody else was insufficient by those standards. Maybe that's the reason. It may have been that Sorensen could do such an enormous amount of work and he had Dick Goodwin helping him out in the field – that he didn't have the need for the additional speech writers that he thought he would have. Or it may have been that Archie Cox never presumed to be a speech writer and perhaps his style of expression, his method of writing, was a little bit too professorial for a political campaign. Whatever the reason, anyhow, that operation was not too successful.

The other operation that was associated with mine was the speech writers for Johnson. My official title was Coordinator for both Kennedy and Johnson. At first, it was thought that I would feed material to Johnson

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as well as to Kennedy, but I just didn't have that much time. It was all I could do to take care of my responsibilities for the Kennedy campaign. So, shortly after the office was inaugurated I was visited by Jim Rowe [James Rowe], Charlie Murphy [Charles J. V. Murphy], and Dave Lloyd [David Lloyd]. They said they thought they could undertake to help the Vice President and I said, "Fine, we'll establish a liaison between this office and

your office." We appointed Bill Welsh [William C. Welch] who was then working with me to act as kind of a liaison.

They, then, went about their business independently to help the vice presidential candidate. They established an office on K Street – I think it was 1518 K Street. I'd walk over there occasionally to see how they were coming along.

Well, that in brief was the organization of the office of coordinator for research for Kennedy and Johnson – my office. We had other functions, of course. Approximately once a week we'd meet at the National Committee with Bobby or whoever happened to be in charge at the time, to go over the problems of the campaign and decide what had to be done. I also was present for a few days before each of the debates and would participate in the preparation of the candidate for those debates. Did I discuss that with you already?

MORRISSEY: Not in detail.

FELDMAN: Well, I'll go into that in a minute. And I also made one or two trips with the candidate just to get the feel of the campaign. This was useful for my job.

MORRISSEY: In all these research, speech writing, and publicity efforts, what was the National Committee Headquarters doing?

FELDMAN: The National Committee was an organizational group more than anything else at that time. I think it was also in 1964. I was involved to some extent with them too. The National Committee had the "get out the voter" drives; they would see that the National Committeemen and all the local candidates were coordinated with the national campaign; they raised money which was extremely important; they did what I might describe as the non-intellectual part of the campaign. The intellectual part of the campaign, I would say, was centered in my office on L Street. But the National Committee had an enormous letter-answering office headed by Dave Hackett [David Hackett]. I guess he must have had as many employees as the National Committee put together just to answer all the letters that were coming in.

The National Committee didn't interfere with what I was doing, and I had very little

need, really, to check with them or coordinate with them. They would tell me that they had so many spots, or they would call over and say, "Can we get some radio spots for such and such a place, or can we have some TV at such and such a time? Will you develop the material and will you give us some script?" I didn't, except really under unique circumstances, have much to do with the actual preparation of the television program. What

I'd do was simply write the message and then let them take it from there. What was I going to do? Oh, the debates.

MORRISSEY: The preparation of the debates.

FELDMAN: About three days or so before a scheduled debate, the candidate would call me and ask me to come join him. I would go with all of

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the material about the subject of the debate. If it were foreign policy, I'd go with a lot of files on foreign policy. If it were domestic policy, I'd go with a lot of files dealing with the key issues in domestic policy. In addition to that, there was a little trunk that the candidate carried with him that had an enormous amount of research information in it. Well, when I got to headquarters – I wouldn't travel. He was out speaking; he'd make 8 or 10 speeches or 12 speeches a day that were customary. And I wouldn't see him normally the first day. Instead, we'd try to organize the material. When I say we, it was normally Sorensen and I and Goodwin. The second day we'd meet with the candidate, usually at breakfast or lunch, and go over the outlines of what questions would probably be asked and what

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the nature of the answers should be. Then we'd leave the candidate and prepare first on letter-sized stationary, the question and a reasonably full answer. We might wind up with a hundred questions and answers at the conclusion of that. We'd have two or three secretaries typing all the time.

The night before the day in question – the night before the day of the debate – we'd go over that ourselves. Then the day of the debate was usually a free day for the candidate and we'd meet with him in the morning – first thing in the morning. At that time we'd show him what we had. He would ask additional questions. He'd instruct us in what we should get for him to prepare him for that evening, and we'd go back then. We'd be busy on the phone an dictating and we'd finally, by the

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afternoon – put on cards about 5 or 8 – summarize the essential factual information dealing with any question that might come up. There were normally no more than 25 or 30 of these cards. By that time we had narrowed the subject down considerably.

We'd give these to the candidate around dinnertime. He normally took a nap in the afternoon, or a bath, or relaxed before the debate. Right after he got up, when he was free, he'd call us and Ted Sorensen and I would normally go into his bedroom or into his living room and give him the cards. This was shortly before he'd have to go to the television studio. He'd run through them and then he'd go on his way. We'd go to the studio to watch and he'd go to the studio to debate. But by the time he got to the studio there was nothing he

didn’t know. [Laughter]

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MORRISSEY: Were there any questions that came up in the debates that you had not anticipated?

FELDMAN: Very few. I think we probably guessed almost every question that was asked of him. Oh, there were questions we didn’t anticipate but they were usually of a pretty silly variety. Any serious question we anticipated.

MORRISSEY: At any time prior to each debate did you have any meetings either inadvertently or otherwise with any of the panelists who would be asking questions?

FELDMAN: No. No, and we avoided that deliberately. Sometimes we thought maybe we’d like to talk them. For instance, Sandy Vanocur [Sander Vanocur] was a good friend of ours and was a good friend of the Kennedys, and we sometimes thought, when he was appointed, that maybe we ought to talk to him and tell him what he ought to ask Nixon but we resisted that temptation.

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MORRISSEY: I was wondering if some of these panelists were looking for you rather than, perhaps, you looking for them.

FELDMAN: No, not that I know of. I don’t ever remember any – I know there were no planted questions and I think the panelists took their job very seriously.

MORRISSEY: I’ve read that…

FELDMAN: I think Rolly Evans [Rowland Evans, Jr.] was a panelist on one of those panels. I remember talking to him afterwards about it. I asked him why he didn’t come to us and ask us our opinion of something to help in the preparation of his questions. He said he wouldn’t do that in spite of the fact that he was a good friend.

MORRISSEY: I’ve read that Senator Kennedy went into these debates very calmly, unemotionally.

FELDMAN: Yes. As I said, he relaxed in the afternoon before the debates, usually had a – what

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for him was a – light supper. He ate voraciously during the campaign. I think he put on about 10 pounds. He never ate his dinners; when he went to a dinner, he didn't eat the food they gave him. But before the dinner or after the dinner, he'd have a sandwich or hot soup – he liked creamy soup, and other things that went with it. But he'd have what for him was a light meal before the debate. And he'd sit in bed and he'd relax. He'd look at these cards and after he'd read them he'd toss it aside. He had absorbed all the information. He, as you know, was a very fast reader. By this time we'd been over the material so he understood it and there wasn't anything new on the cards that he hadn't seen. The cards simply served to refresh his recollection. I think he was supremely self-confident. I never detected

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the slightest bit of nervousness about him. I think he was always convinced the debates were good for him and he accepted it that way.

We had some discussion about the make-up problem, I remember. After what happened to Nixon in the first debate, we were glad that he decided that he would do without the make-up. He did have a very light make-up, but he didn't need much. He had a ruddy complexion, he came across well on television, and he also was aware of the fact that whatever make-up would be applied would be described by the reporters and this wouldn't do him any good with most people. So he wisely decided not to have any make-up.

Then when Nixon had this tremendous amount of make-up because of his heavy beard – I guess that he felt that he

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needed the make-up - and showed him to such disadvantage on television, we were all convinced that the candidate's decision was a very wise one.

MORRISSEY: Did you accompany the Senator to the studio on the occasion that the temperature was so low?

FELDMAN: No. I don't remember that.

MORRISSEY: That was the second or third debate. I can't remember which one.

FELDMAN: I normally – well, in one occasion I went into the studio with him. I don't remember which debate that was. That was in New York. In most instances, he went directly to the studio and I went to a little viewing room just off the studio where the network executives and people associated with Kennedy would see the screen. Now it just strikes me now that there were no Nixon people doing this. I guess they kept us separated.

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There must have been another viewing room for the Nixon people. But we saw it in the television studio adjoining the studio in which the debate was actually taking place. They served canapés and drinks while you relaxed. This was the one bit of relaxation you'd get during the whole campaign. [Laughter]

MORRISSEY: Do you recall any of the Senator's comments after these debates – how he felt it had gone?

FELDMAN: Yes. After the first debate – I don't remember his exact words but I had the very distinct impression that he was elated. He was very elated after the first debate. He thought that Nixon had shown off poorly; he'd come out well. I remember particularly after the reports started coming in from the pollsters who polled people after that debate, he commented to the

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effect that Nixon shouldn't have been so anxious to have a debate. After the other debates, I don't remember any precise comments, but he was never disappointed. He was always quite critical with himself.

If I can digress for a moment, I remember not following a debate but shortly thereafter, being with him in the hotel room – just the two of us. He turned on the television as he always did around 7 o'clock to hear the news, and as it almost invariably did, there was a film clip of a speech he made during the day. He would sit before that set or stand before that set – I've seen this happen two or three times. I'd seen it happen in Hyannis, too. He'd sit or stand before that set and watch it intently, observing his own mannerisms before the television camera.

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I remember early in the campaign when this occurred and the person on the screen started talking about the great Democratic Party, he became very annoyed. He became very annoyed. He points to himself on the screen and he says "party" not "pawty", "party." [Laughter]

He was this way about each of his speeches. As he would watch himself on the screen, he'd be critical of the manner in which he was expressing himself, the personal mannerisms that he was engaging in, and so on. I don't think he did it just because he liked to hear himself talk or because he enjoyed seeing himself on the screen. I think he did it in an effort to improve himself.

MORRISSEY: I'd like to go back to the research function of the campaign and ask you how the Peace Corps speech in San Francisco developed.

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FELDMAN: Well, it's hard to pinpoint the beginnings of the Peace Corps speech – and I've heard lots of stories, and I've heard lots of people say that the idea originated a hundred years ago or so – but from the point of view of John F. Kennedy, I'm convinced that the idea first came to me from somebody – and I've forgotten who it was – who said – yes, I do, I remember who it was now – I think it was the former Governor of South Carolina, Fritz Hollings [Ernest F. Hollings], who called me on the telephone in my L Street office and said that he had heard a great speech by General Gavin [James M. Gavin] in Florida. In this speech General Gavin had a great idea. The idea concerned Americans volunteering to help less privileged people in other parts of the world. He thought maybe Kennedy could use that. I called Sorensen,

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as I remember, and told him about my conversation with Fritz Hollings, and Ted said, "Well, why don't you get a copy of Gavin's speech and see what it's like?"

I called Gavin and Gavin said he didn't have a copy of the speech but he had some notes and he'd be glad to send us the notes. He sent me the notes and it looked interesting. I sent a brief description of these notes out to Ted and asked him to show it to Kennedy. The next I knew, Ted called back and said that this was worth developing into something perhaps a little more formal, and let's see what could be done with it. By this time it was not too far from the end of the campaign. The next speech was scheduled for Michigan. Really before we could do anything to develop it further, Kennedy, in an off-the-cuff kind of statement – he

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had read and discussed this – started talking about it. And the students at Michigan were enthusiastic about it. The papers carried the story, the students cheered, and Ted told me that the candidate was pleased with it, perhaps would develop it into a full-scale speech – that we should do some more work on it.

Well, we got some more ideas. I talked to Archie Cox and we did some material out to Ted. He didn't use much of that but he then drafted a speech and the speech resulted in the San Francisco speech.

Now, the things we developed were based on things that Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] had said and done in the Senate, and that Congressman Reuss [Henry S. Reuss] had done and said in the House. I don't remember any of the older things. I don't think we saw them, although that's given as the natural ancestor of the Peace Corps. You know, the things that this German from North Carolina started. I don't remember that

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ever being part of the Kennedy idea.

I think the Kennedy idea, the idea that Kennedy adopted to make the speech in San Francisco, stemmed from the thoughts that came to him from our office, from perhaps other

places, which he expressed informally in Michigan. Having had the dry-run there, he found it good enough so that he directed Ted's draftable speech.

MORRISSEY: During the '60 campaign, the missile gap was an important factor that after the campaign was of even less significance in retrospect. Could you tell me how the idea of the missile gap developed and how it was utilized as a campaign weapon?

FELDMAN: Well, I didn't play a great part in the missile gap concept. This was largely Ted Sorensen. Ted, of course, wrote the speech which developed the missile gap philosophy. I sat with him while he labored

through it but I must say, like most speeches he did, it was based upon a lot of research. He read a number of books, he read a number of papers. He got papers from people at Harvard, and he got – I don't even remember all the people that wrote him about the fact that we were lagging in defense. Ultimately, it developed into a speech the way most major speeches are and John F. Kennedy delivered that speech on the Senate floor.

I suppose you've gotten from others the story of what happened on the Senate floor at the time this was delivered. I can only tell you that in our own office we were quite excited about it. We thought that Homer Capehart helped us a great deal. You may remember that Homer Capehart got up first in an attempt to answer it, but it was so foolish an answer that it made our presentation much stronger.

He also called, at one point, for clearing the galleries. All this served to concentrate attention on the speech.

Anyhow, having launched this initiative, we pursued it during the campaign with additional speeches, additional statements. Here I did play some part in it when we were asked to comment on great issues in the campaign for Scripps-Howard, or for Time magazine, or for Newsweek. I would always try to get something in about the missile gap and this was a thing I mentioned earlier that I assigned to Solis Horwitz. This was a defense issue and he was supposed to develop things for it.

We felt that this was an important criticism of the existing administration and this was a basis on which we could ask the American people to put them out and put us in so we could do something about it. This issue had a lot to

recommend it as a political issue: number one, we thought we were right, and number two, there's nothing that's more effective than an appeal to the security of people, number three, you could poke a lot of fun at the other side with this kind of concept – you know, talking about how far behind they were, and so on. So, we tried to develop it during the campaign

and I think we did it very effectively.

The second part of your question was what happened afterwards. Well, I think I have to answer that in two stages. Shortly after we took office, I remember the President saying to me that we'd been making a lot of speeches during the campaign about the missile gap and about gaps of various kinds, but he didn't realize that it was true until he became President. That was, I think, his initial reaction when

he became President. He was a little bit surprised that everything he had been saying was true and that we were in a hell of a state.

The second phase of it came much later, I'd say after maybe a year in office. We were a little bit more skeptical of the kind of appraisals we were getting from government sources. We tried to question a little more closely all the information we were receiving. At that point I think the feeling was that we were not as far behind and that we didn't suffer from this gap as much as we had been led to believe, both from unofficial sources and from official sources prior to that time. I don't think we'd take credit for closing the gap that rapidly. I think that perhaps the gap wasn't as great as what we had been led to believe

it was, or as great as what we thought it was after we took office. The Russians weren't ten feet tall; they had made mistakes just as we had. They had been slowed down and we were catching up. Of course I think we deserved some credit. We were doing a lot to narrow that gap.

MORRISSEY: I recall that after John Kennedy's farm program was announced during the campaign, that Richard Nixon claimed that the program would raise consumer prices 25 percent. Did you anticipate that?

FELDMAN: Yes. Yes, we knew that. As a matter of fact, I forgot to mention when I described our operation that we had another committee. Again, they were not in the L Street office, but they were physically located on K Street, which I think was called Farmers for Kennedy and Johnson. This was headed by Nunn [Alexander Nunn], I think. Nunn who was the publisher of the – Alex Nunn, he was the publisher of the farm

magazine in Alabama. Cotton Farmer, I think the name of it was. His assistants were a fellow that used to be Symington's [Stuart Symington, II] legislative assistant, Ed Jaenke [Edwin A. Jaenke], and Lewis [Robert G. Lewis] who is now over in the Department of Agriculture. They both worked on that Farmers for Kennedy and Johnson.

We maintained a very close liaison with them. They really didn't have enough authority to put out any information until it cleared with us. One of my functions was

reading what other people wanted to put out and say, “Yes, this is what the candidate represents.” It did reflect his views, or it did not. So they had to clear anything with me that they said.

Now, we asked them initially for a draft of the farm speech. It wasn’t too satisfactory, neither the Kennedy style nor

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the Kennedy thought. I developed a draft myself that I based on a speech Kennedy had given in 1958 at the National Cornplowing Contest. During his ’58 campaign for the Senate, he took a trip to Iowa and spoke there.

This, although better, and although this reflected his views, it didn’t have a great deal that was new in it. I was asked to let a fellow named Cochrane [Willard W. Cochrane] who was helping me, Willard Cochrane, work on it and see what he could come up with. Well, he came up with a number of new ideas but we were sure that these ideas would be attacked as: 1) increasing prices to consumers. All bread would go up 2 cents or 3 cents a loaf, and all shirts would go up 25 cents and 30 cents, and so on if his plan were adopted. His plan was largely a production payment plan for everything and we did it by means of certificates.

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I will say that a lot of the things that he said then are now in the current farm program, but it was regarded as pretty dangerous at that time. So we toned it down, we toned down the Will Cochrane ideas considerably. We still knew that it would be attacked by the Republicans on the ground that the consumers would then have to pay a lot more and even though the farmers would be better off, the consumers would be a lot worse off. So even before he gave the speech, we prepared material which would counterattack – which would destroy any attack on it. We showed the increased incomes of the farmers would not reflect any increase in cost to the consumer. We emphasized the middle-man spread throughout.

After the speech, you’re perfectly right, the attack did occur. But we then got into

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the kind of “you did – you didn’t” argument, in which they said the price would go up and in which we said the price couldn’t go up. Our office was kept pretty busy answering questions and putting out statements and responding to this kind of attack. So busy that I think we put out a formal document defending the farm program, showing just how little effect this would have on the consumer prices.

MORRISSEY: Were there other committees like this Farmers for Kennedy and Johnson?

FELDMAN: Yes. In addition to the farmer’s committee you had the following committees. We had a natural resource committee – I’ve forgotten what the name of that was. That was under Smith [Frank E. Smith],

then Congressman Smith from Mississippi. It was at his insistence that we include in a statement by that committee – each one of these committees published a

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basic document which was distributed to their constituency. In his basic document he made the statement – which haunted us in the White House later on – that under no conditions would the President support a waterways user toll. I approved it and the candidate approved it. I wouldn't put out any statement that was as flat as that without the…

Now later on, after Kennedy got into the White House, this was called to his attention when we did in fact in the budget include a waterways user toll, and copies of this statement were circulated. He'd say to me, "Mike, Jesus Christ, Mike, you've got me into a hell of a lot of trouble. Every time I want to do something, I'm faced with something I said during the campaign."

So, as a matter of fact, although I suspect he was too busy to read everything I

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sent him, I wouldn't take any important action like this without notifying him of it. Now I couldn't wait for an answer in most instances. Things moved just too rapidly during the campaign. I knew, though, that if he violently objected to anything that I was doing, I'd hear right away. You know, I had to take silence for being assent in most instances. It was only in an issue of national security I'd insist on an actual affirmative reply, but in most instances I knew what the right thing to do was. I knew what he thought and I'd give him the information about what I was doing without expecting a letter or telephone call or anything else that would tell me. As I say, he was moving too quickly and he had too much to do to spend any time on these details.

So as I say, for that reason – and I

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suppose we'll get into this later on – after he took office we prepared a list of all of his commitments. It filled some 35 or 40 pages – single-spaced type. He looked over it and shook his head, "Boy, you sure got me into a lot." [Laughter] He blamed me for it but it was in a good-natured way.

Well, that was one of the things that the natural resource committee did. Let's see what other committees there were. We had a doctors' committee headed by Doctor Spock [Benjamin Spock] and that was to counter the medicare opposition. They didn't do much. They didn't publish any statement. I think the big ones were – of course we had a nationalities division, too. They did issue a lot of statements and they did work generally with me on that.

MORRISSEY: All these various committees would clear through you before they'd make a public statement.

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FEDMAN_PLACEHOLDER

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