

**John S. Gleason Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/27/1968**  
Administrative Information

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(1915 - 1993). Administrator, U. S. Veterans Administration (1961 - 1965), discusses participation in the 1960 campaign, appointment as VA administrator, and various projects during his appointment, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

John S. Gleason

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John S. Gleason

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Initial contact with John F. Kennedy [JFK]
3, 10	Campaigning for JFK in 1960 as former National Commander of the American Legion
3	Contact with R. Sargent Shriver about working on the campaign
5	Involvement in and appointment as director of Veterans for Kennedy-Johnson
12	Day to day operations of Veterans for Kennedy-Johnson
12	Offer of becoming Administrator of Veterans Affairs and making the decision to accept
18	Comments on the Veterans Administration and its importance in the government
21	Reactions of major veterans groups to appointment
23, 27	Transitioning the Veterans Administration from Eisenhower to Kennedy
24	Working relationship with William J. Driver
27	Meetings with the Budget Bureau and handling disagreements with JFK
29	Working relationship with Phillip S. Hughes
31	Building relationships with members of Congress
31	Handling veteran medical appeals with the Chief Medical Director
37	White House interest in appointments to board of appeals
38	Working relationship with Olin E. Teague and its development
39	Relationship with Congressman Albert Thomas
42	Work towards setting up national cemeteries across the country with Albert Thomas
45	Submitting an appropriation for the purchase of ground for cemeteries with burial ground provisions
46	Establishing a national cemetery in Houston, TX
48	Dedicating the cemetery to Albert Thomas
50	Contact with White House staff

Oral History Interview

With

John S. Gleason

November 27, 1968  
Chicago, Illinois

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Maybe you could just start off by talking about your contacts with the President [John F. Kennedy] before he became President, while he was in the House or the Senate.

GLEASON: Well, I think I could do that easy enough. On a number of occasions, oh, beginning maybe in 19—probably '48 or '49, I had occasion of running into the President in the House, and from there on, I'd stop in to see him, just to say hello. And then when he ran for Senator, of course, I was interested as another person, a guy that you had thought a lot of. Then in his unsuccessful campaign for the vice presidency here in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention, at that

[-1-]

time I was quite active in the Democratic Party here as the treasurer of the host committee of the Democratic Convention. And on the floor I had occasion to see him—very disappointing that this guy that seemed to have the nomination, and then because of one of the senators from Tennessee sort of backing away and the votes then slipping away.

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: So then in 1960 out in Los Angeles, I was a delegate to the Democratic Convention and with one of my other associates from Illinois who is Joe Keenan [Joseph D. Keenan], one of the great labor leaders...

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: ...Electrical Workers Union. He and I really became good and fast friends at that Convention because we happened to be sitting next to one another in the delegation and running around with friends. I had been National

[-2-]

Commander of the American Legion in 1957-58. In so many of the smaller states the Legion is quite a power in these areas, as it is in certain downstate or upstate areas of larger states. In Illinois itself, downstate Illinois is quite Legion orientated; Chicago, I mean, it's not that important. But as you get into the smaller cities and the towns it's somewhat of the focal point both for patriotic as well as social events. So I had a number of friends that were delegates to the Convention. Joe and I, between labor and the veteran side, ran around like mad trying to get people to be for Jack Kennedy. And you interrupt any time and ask any questions.

HACKMAN: Did you have any contacts with any of the Kennedy staff on your efforts at this point?

GLEASON: Well, prior to that time, Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who is Jack Kennedy's brother-in-law, lived in Chicago. And in the 1952 Democratic

[-3-]

Convention, which was also here in Chicago, Sarge Shriver and I worked side by side on the host committee and got to know one another rather well. And this was before he married Eunice Kennedy [Eunice Kennedy Shriver]. As a matter of fact, I can remember—well, it was after the '52 Convention, a couple of years after that, I was down in Washington, and I happened to be going to St. Matthews Cathedral, and I saw Sarge sitting in a convertible talking to a young girl. I was on my way to Mass. And so I walked across the street and said, "Sarge, how the hell are you?" And he said, "Jack, I would like to have you meet Eunice Kennedy." Well, you know, this was the thing.

So in, oh, I guess it was February of 1960, Sarge asked me if I would assist in making a donation to the campaign of his brother-in-law, Jack Kennedy, a Senator. He was going to be here in Chicago—I think it was the Belle Tavern Room, or one of the rooms, anyway, at the Sherman Hotel—

[-4-]

for a luncheon, and anyone that could support him.... Of course, so many people thought, "What the hell, this guy doesn't have a chance. He's a Catholic, but a great person," and so on. But I was able to give Sarge a contribution of about a thousand dollars, I think. I thought the Senator did a great job, really fine, at the luncheon.

Then, when I was at the main meeting of the American Legion's national executive committee—it was at the time of the big primary fight in West Virginia—Sarge called me on the phone in Indianapolis and asked if there were any people that I might be able to call to assist in their campaign, which I was able to do. I mean, how successfully, I don't know. While I had been National Commander of the American Legion, one of my National Vice Commanders came from West Virginia; so, you know, all of these things opened up various avenues, and so on. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: After the '60 Convention, then, how did you get involved in the Veterans for Kennedy-Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] effort?

[-5-]

GLEASON: Well, I would say.... I had my family in our yacht—I had a sixty foot yacht that we used to cruise around the Great Lakes in—and we were up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, cruising, and a call came on the radiotelephone. I just didn't want to answer it, so for four times I didn't answer it. My wife's father had had a stroke about a week before and she got concerned for fear that it might be something about her father, so I finally answered it. And Erle Cocke [Erle Cocke, Jr.] of Atlanta, Georgia, who had been a previous National Commander of the American Legion before me, wanted to know if I would be interested in working in Kennedy's campaign. And I said, well, yeah, I would. And he said, "Well, the Senator wants to know if you could meet him Wednesday afternoon at 5 o'clock in the Mayflower Hotel?"

Well, this was Monday evening at about seven. I didn't want to leave my family stranded there and so on, so, it meant starting out that night and cruising all that night and the next day and that next night. And I own

[-6-]

a helicopter company here in Chicago, and I berthed the yacht down here at Burnham Harbor anyway, so I was able to get in about 1 o'clock in the afternoon, I guess. A helicopter took me to Midway Airport, and I got on....

Well, anyway, I walked into the meeting room at the Mayflower at about five minutes to five. And so the Senator asked me if I'd help in his campaign. And when I said, you know, I would be most happy to do what I could, he asked me then, if I would contact Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue].

And so I went over to see Mr. Donahue at the National Committee the following day, and this was the start of a very nice friendship with Dick. We seem to get along admirably. And he told me that the Senator had had some disturbing thoughts about my being active in the campaign because I happened to be a Catholic and I happened to be Irish, and when you have too many of one it might be a little detrimental.

So he had also asked John Mahan [John W. Mahan], who at that time was the—what the devil do they call him?—the National

[-7-]

Commander in Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which is the same as the National Commander of the American Legion. John Mahan was from Montana, a very able attorney, a very pleasant delightful person, a nice looking young man. The President had gone to Detroit to their national convention and had asked Mann (whose father had been selected the first Attorney General under Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] and died en route to the Inauguration and never was able to take the oath of office as Attorney General), but John Mann just didn't seem to want to get to Washington and really get into things. But in view of the fact that he had asked him to be the chairman, Donahue said, "I don't know what you...." I mean, to me, I wasn't interested in titles, you know, what the hell, it didn't make a damn bit of difference to me, as long as we got the guy elected, you know, that we were for. So I said, "I don't care what

[-8-]

title. Let him be the chairman, you know, it's fine with me. If you want, so we have some kind of a program here, put me as the director; I don't care." So I became the director of the veterans program for Kennedy. And in talking to Dick, we thought that it would be best if we concentrated in the heavily populated states where the greater electoral votes were and to try and get really outstanding veterans in these areas to participate and try and do a great job. At the same time asking all the other states to help a state chairman, too, so that they don't feel as though they're completely left out of it because you never know—my God, somebody with three votes might make all the difference. But we really concentrated heavily in fifteen states, and the only one that I was tremendously disappointed in was Ohio, when the vote finally came out.

So we just set up an office over in the Esso Building that's now been razed, my God, I was

[-9-]

over there with Whizzer White [Byron R. White], and they were able to locate an office for me in what really was the attic of the building. They'd had some planks piled up and got up a couple of window air conditioners. But, you know, what the hell, all you're trying to do is got the job done because you know you're not going to be there forever and a day. It's not comfort you're seeking; it's the efficiency, and so on. So I had in Washington a staff of one secretary stenographer, one young man to try and get the mailings out and handle the mail that was coming in as well as the telephone calls from the various chairmen.

I had a meeting with all of the veteran organizations in the United States that is representatives of them. I might say that I don't recall any of them wanting to be a participant at all in Jack Kennedy's campaign. It's always been my personal feeling that 99 percent of the veterans' organizations, if not a hundred percent, are Republican orientated.

[-10-]

In that connection, Dick Donahue had informed me that they had tried their best not to have me as the director of the program, that their first choice had been to Dan Daniel [W. C. "Dan" Daniel]—who proceeded me as National Commander of the American Legion— from Virginia. But Senator Byrd [Harry F. Byrd, Sr.] would not permit him to do it. Dan was all for doing it, but if he wanted to have any political future—I mean, Senator Byrd had such a control—he couldn't do it. Then they went to my successor Preston Moore [Preston J. Moore], of Oklahoma, who was also a Democrat. But Senator Kerr [Robert S. Kerr] from Oklahoma was very outspoken and against Jack Kennedy because he had been supporting Lyndon Johnson and so on, and so Preston Moore, who wanted to someday become Governor of Oklahoma and has twice tried to do so, couldn't very well buck Senator Kerr's ideas on this. And they didn't have much choice but to come back again to the Irish Catholic,

[-11-]

because it wasn't me as an individual that they really didn't want, but they wanted to avoid the Irish Catholic situation. And so in traveling around the country, as I say, to these fifteen highly populous states, with the contacts with all of the veterans and the what not, this is where we concentrated.

HACKMAN: Did you spend most of your time organizationally in the office, or were you on the road speaking most of the time?

GLEASON: No, I would say it was a 50-50 situation. From time to time Erle Cocke would stop in and assist in the office and try to pick up the slack if I was out of town and so on. And, of course, when it was successful, I came back here for election day and then returned to Washington the same day, and the next—on Wednesday—just closed up the files and everything else and came back to Chicago, never anticipating or desiring at all to be a part of government.

It was, I'd say, around the middle of December that I received a telephone call from Dick Donahue, and he asked me if I would like to be in the Administration. And I said

[-12-]

no, that I really hadn't thought much about it, that I really didn't care for it. [Interruption] He said, "well, why don't you just drop me a line and tell me what, if anything, in the government you might be interested in." "Well, I've been interested all my life in the army—I'm a Major General in the United States Army Reserve and command a reserve division here in Illinois. From administration in the bank and so on, they thought it.... Well, if there's anything I would like to do, I would like to be Secretary of the Army or maybe Assistant Secretary of Defense or, you know, something like that."

So I never heard another word until the day I went down to Springfield for Otto Kerner's [Otto Kerner, Jr.] inauguration as Governor. Otto and I had served on the same staff

in World War II, and we had become fast friends. Mary Jane [Mary Jane Gleason] and I went down, and we were out making the rounds

[-13-]

of parties on Sunday night—the inauguration was Monday at noontime. And Monday morning at about 7:30—I forget; oh, gee, he later became our Ambassador to Chile.... Dungan. Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan].

Yeah, Ralph Dungan, the telephone rang about 7:30 a.m.; I picked up the phone, and he said, “Jack, the President-elect would like to ask you to serve as Administrator of Veterans Affairs.” Well, after my experience as National Commander of the Legion, I mean, I wanted as little to do.... You know, really, my God, no anything but that! He said, “No, gee,” he said, “the President thinks that you are the one most qualified for it, with your background and all.” So trying to play for time—I didn’t know what the hell to say. I wanted to have a chance to talk to Mary Jane about it; the Mayor [Richard J. Daley] was there, who was a very dear friend of mine; my cousin was (and still is)

[-14-]

the State Chairman of the Democratic Party; you know, I wanted to talk to the bank, I couldn’t really take-off unless I could get a leave of absence. I mean I’d had so many years in here that I just couldn’t afford to do it. So I told him that I’d like to have a chance to talk to Mary Jane. And he said, “Well, when do you think you’ll be able to do that?” I said, “Well, I may be able to contact her by 7 or 8 o’clock tonight.” And here she was in the twin bed next to me, you know. He said “Well, the President would like to know tomorrow, so I’ll give you a call tomorrow at the same time.”

So all of that day we were going over in our minds, you know, should we? We had six boys, and it would mean moving from Chicago, dislocating them; although it might be intriguing for us, would it be fair to them to take them out of their schools and put them in a new school. Fortunately, being boys—I had attended Georgetown Preparatory School, which was just outside of Washington,

[-15-]

so I knew that there was a good school. And then my eldest son was graduating from high school here in Chicago that June and he would be going on to college, so that he wouldn’t be with us anyway. And the others: the first one was just—the second one was just going to be starting in high school. So by the time midnight came, we had discussed it with the Mayor and a few friends and we decided that this would be not only a challenge, but a very exciting time in our lives and that the children themselves would probably gain untold benefits from the meetings, the associations, just the general tenor of the New Frontier.

So the next morning when the phone rang I said that I’d go. I know that the selection as Administrator of Veterans’ Affairs I am sure was highly recommended to the President, when it came to the selection at this point, by Sarge Shriver because, as I mentioned, Sarge I had

[-16-]

known for some time, and I'd had such a nice letter from Sarge the afternoon that he left the President down at Palm Beach, and said that the President—by the time I would receive the letter, the President would have had contact, but that he was delighted at the selection and hoped that I would accept and so on.

HACKMAN: Do you know if you were getting any political support from the Illinois end of the line, from Mayor Daley, or others?

GLEASON: Well, I mean, this wasn't a case of political support, I'm sure, because the Mayor told me later, after this had occurred, that the President-elect had called him on the phone—I suppose to find out if there would be any objection, you see. And there was no objection. Although I've never run for office, I've been active in any way that I can with the Democratic Party and have known the Mayor for many years.

I told Ralph at the time that he called, the second time, that I'd be happy to take the

[-17-]

position on two conditions: one was that I wouldn't have to give up the command of my reserve division, and the second one was that (which was the most important to me) was that I would be permitted to build new veterans' hospitals in conjunction with medical schools, and not based on political—well, I don't want to use the term—not based on political favor. And I was assured that this would be the case.

And, of course the Title 32 of the US Code—few people in the United States know that the Veterans Administration, next to the Department of Defense and the Post Office, is the largest department, or agency in government.

HACKMAN: Right, budget-wise, yes.

GLEASON: Budget wise, employee wise. Few realized the powers which the Congress specifically reserves only to the Administrator. There is no one over the Administrator, except the president; he reports to no one: he doesn't have to report

[-18-]

to anyone. No other Cabinet official or any other person in the United States, not even the President, had the one power that Congress specifically confers upon the Administrator of Veterans Affairs, and then it specifically states that any decision of the Administrator of Veterans Affairs cannot be appealed to any court in the United States, which is quite a lot of power.

HACKMAN: Let me ask you—you said a while ago that when the call first came concerning the Veterans Administration you were a bit reluctant because of your earlier contacts.

GLEASON: Well, then, of course, as I said, we kept thinking about it, and the more that I thought about the Veterans Administration—at that time we had approximately twenty-two million veterans, this is a great segment of the population. Every veteran at that time could vote. Along with it, the Veterans Administration fit well

[-19-]

into a banking background in that the V.A. had at that time approximately fifty-eight billions of dollars in GI home loans, at that particular moment in time it was the largest insurance company in the world; this all fit in. From a hospital viewpoint although at that time I hadn't had much hospital experience or medical experience, the very necessity of having someone with administrative ability, which I thought that I had anyway, to run what actually is the largest medical program in the world, easy. And I had been active in university affairs, and this gave me the opportunity to manage the largest mass adult education program ever undertaken in the history of the world—I mean these were, there were a number of outstanding features, but these were the four main ones that were so enormous in themselves.

The Veterans Administration is by far much larger than Health, Education and Welfare, with the exception of Social Security, but in itself,

[-20-]

we had almost that with the pension program of the Veterans Administration; I mean, so that it tied in so well. But the medical research, my God, they do almost twice what the National Institutes of Health and Health, Education and Welfare do. In home loans, housing, the Veterans Administration started its mortgage program two years after FHA [Federal Housing Administration] and was at least three and a half times larger than FHA. All of these things sort of—I began to focus on them, it meant that, gee, this would be a great challenge, a great experience.

HACKMAN: How did the major veterans groups react to your appointment? Did they have candidates of their own that you knew about?

GLEASON: Well, the one that—when Dick Donahue asked me whom I might suggest for the Administrator of Veterans Affairs, I recommended John Mahan. And it seemed rather peculiar that

[-21-]

I would recommended John Mahan, and then I'm the guy that gets it. The night that it was announced, John was nice enough to call me, right away, when he heard it on television and

radio. And I said, “John, really, I didn’t double cross you; I mean, I didn’t want the job at all, I didn’t seek it.”

The American Legion at the time, I think, was pleased about it. I don’t think they were pleased after I got it because many of the things that they sought and might have wanted—just because I was a past National Commander, I didn’t believe that you should give favoritism to one over another, no matter what they wanted. Many of the programs that I espoused, they, at the time, if not openly fought, at least covertly, they were opposed to. But since then they’ve acknowledged that these were beneficial.

HACKMAN: How did Donahue react to your recommendation of Mann? Did they think he had done too little in the campaign?

GLEASON: Yeah, very little, and I would say that this

[-22-]

was probably the overriding reason. I know that later in talking with Sarge Shriver, he said that when the subject came up in Palm Beach the President said, “Oh, my God, no, not another Irish Catholic and a guy from Harvard!” So it was really a tremendously exciting, a very challenging experience.

HACKMAN: Let me ask you what problems you can recall from the transition from Sumner Whittier [Sumner Gage Whittier], I guess, who was going out. Did you have any conversations with him at all?

GLEASON: Yes, I did, I had known Sumner before this happened. Sumner, as you probably know well, had been Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts and then came into the Veterans Administration under Harvey Higley [Harvey V. Higley] and was head of the insurance department and then became the head administrator under Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] when Higley retired or resigned. I thought that Sumner was an exceptionally

[-23-]

able administrator. He was a great organizer, he had, I think superb organizational abilities. If there was any one factor that I could say that Sumner lacked, it was that he didn’t know when to shut up. When he began to talk, if you didn’t sit there for an hour, it was a poor day. And for a man—I thought he was brilliant. Practically everything that he did, as hard as I might try, I don’t think we were able to find fault with a damn thing.

HACKMAN: What kind of relationship had he had with Driver [William J. Driver], Monk [A.H. Monk], these people.

GLEASON: Well, you see Bill Driver was Chief Benefits Director under Sumner Whittier, and Bill Driver was the espoused and open candidate for the position of Administrator of Veterans Affairs of Olin Teague [Olin E. Teague], who was a most powerful individual, being the Chairman of the House veterans affairs committee.

[-24-]

And for a short time was very disillusioned that I would get the position ahead of Bill Driver. I had known of Bill Driver's work while I was National Commander—probably the man that knows more about the internal operations of the Veterans Administration than any living person; I'm speaking of all phases of it. And when I had the opportunity, there was one man that I knew that he knew everything there was in the VA, and so I looked no further for a deputy than Bill Driver. I'm sure that this in itself helped to assuage the feelings of.... At the same time it gave me a strong right arm in trying to bring me up to date, because here was a man that espoused to the Administrator of Veterans Affairs.

And in the four years that we were associated, there was never, never a time—I couldn't think of any man in all the world that was as loyal, and I mean sincerely loyal, to me as Bill Driver.

[-25-]

I don't know whether many of the things that I wanted to do that Bill, you know, thought were good. But we would discuss them, and once I had made a decision that we would do something this way, this guy got behind it and pushed it just as though it were his very own idea, you know. And, my God, you can't ask for loyalty greater than that. Well, I don't know—I got off the track here somewhere.

HACKMAN: Let me go back to something specific. In the early days of the Administration when Eisenhower's budget was being reconsidered, the fiscal '62 Budget, can you remember making any effort—a lot of people did get some budget changes made—can you remember making any efforts on this, and was anything done?

GLEASON: I really don't think, as I can recall, that there was much done at all. I do know that when I became Administrator that there were some fifteen to eighteen former White House staff that had been sent over to the Veterans Administration

[-26-]

and put on the payroll, hoping like hell that the three month period would go by, before I ever found out about it. The only thing is, I think I was smart enough to bring Ed Kelly [Edward T. Kelly] with me, who had been an administrative assistant to Senator Douglas [Paul H. Douglas] and he knew his way around and had the ability of ferreting things out. Long before

these people would be permanent on the payroll, I got rid of them. Other than that, and some of the hospital projects that we held up because to me they sort of smacked of politics, but outside of that generally, I can't think of anything.

HACKMAN: There are a couple of meetings on this list of appointments with—later with Budget Bureau people, and I thought maybe you can recall?

GLEASON: Oh, my God, I had some knock down drag out fights with the Bureau. I used to keep a score card on my desk, and when we would come to certain points and we couldn't agree, it used to be that the Director

[-27-]

of the Budget—although I was very friendly with all of the Directors that were there during my tenure—on nine separate occasions the Director and myself went to the President. And on nine separate occasions the President would sit in the rocking chair and the Director would be on then coach over there and I would be on the couch here, and the President here, and he would always ask the Director to give his side of the story first. And then he'd say, "Well, Jack, let's hear your side." And we would get through and he might rock for ten seconds, which seemed almost like an eternity, and nine times out of nine he said, "Well, I think we'll go along with Jack."

So this to me was really great because the very last one that we had on that I remember well; in leaving the office, on the way out, the President said, "Jack, would you stay for just a moment?" So Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and the Director went out, and in about five minutes I came out. And the Director

[-28-]

was standing there, and he said, "Jack, I just want to say one thing to you: my head is tired of hitting the wall." He said, "From now on, when you and I have a disagreement, I'll go along with whatever you want." But they were mostly matters of policy decision, of what the future really should be of the Veterans Administration, government policy.

HACKMAN: Why was Sam Hughes [Phillip S. Hughes] at these meetings? Were they on legislation? He had the legislative clearance, right?

GLEASON: Well, Sam was one of the few people, as I can recall, that really had a good background and understanding of the Veterans Administration, because this was much of a conglomerate. God, when the Veterans Administration was formed I think there was something like—I don't know—thirty, forty different bureaus thrown together and, hell, they were knocking heads together and so on. And Sam was a very nice person to deal with,

[-29-]

and anytime that you dealt with Sam, you could be sure that Sam wouldn't use your own words and throw it back at you to double cross you at some future date. I mean you could talk about a subject today, and there was always the chance that you or I might change our minds in five months about a matter, and he wouldn't be throwing it up at you, saying, "Well, gee you made a mistake five months ago; maybe this is a mistake now." He was very knowledgeable about it. As you can well appreciate my first year and a half or so, it was rather difficult to grab hold of an organization this large and know its every fact of it; without the loyalty of Bill Driver , Carl Monk, all of the staff, you just can't do it, it's just too enormous.

And I know that in the Congress every year that I was Administrator, we asked for more money every year, and every year the Congress gave us every penny we asked for,

[-30-]

and they didn't do that with anybody else. I followed the suggestion of Sarge Shriver. Sarge, when he got there, for the Peace Corps, went around and saw every member of Congress. Well, when I heard that Sarge was doing that, I did it. And it got to the point when I could practically call every Congressmen and Senator by their first name, and by the time I left, there wasn't a Senator that I wasn't permitted to call by their first name; you know, some of them are very aloof and so on. And I think this was because we tried to be fair with everyone.

I know that on the Republican side in the House a particular Congressman from Pennsylvania, he was very put out because of the decisions of the Chief Medical Director on appeals. You can appeal from a decision that is made by the appeals board, and then it can go to the president of the board, and from there you can appeal it to the Chief Medical Director, and then, in theory, you can appeal it to the Administrator. And

[-31-]

of course, as I mentioned earlier, once the Administrator makes the decision, no court in the United States had jurisdiction to even bring it into its courtroom. And I thought that one way to pull the horns of this dilemma and try to be eminently fair with the veterans—and, after all, the whole purpose of being there was to try and take care of the veteran; not all of the veterans at one time, because you've got the poor guy who really needs the help, and this is the fellow who needs you more than the affluent veteran. And so, I decided that instead when anyone would appeal to me from the Chief Medical Director's decision, and the Chief Medical Director, Bill Middleton [William S. Middleton], who had been Dean of the medical school at the University of Wisconsin—here was a man that I had a very fine rapport with. He was an outstanding teacher of medicine, a wonderful gentleman, the man who really knew medicine. I couldn't know as much in a hundred years as he did, and how could I sit there and say,

[-32-]

"Well, you're wrong," yet judiciously say, "Well, you're right?" So when this particular congressman, who was John Saylor [John P. Saylor], who used to just give me hell in the

Committee hearings as a partisan, without his knowledge of it, I thought—there was an appeal that he had sent up from one of his constituents—and I thought, well, now if I make a decision or someone else makes a decision he’s still going to say that this is because I’m either a Democrat or I’m partial. So I asked Dr. Middleton if he could arrange with the Dean of the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania, that we would send up all of the records that we had on the case, taking out the man’s name (that’s the only thing we blocked out, the man’s name; everything else was a true copy) and asked him if he would have a board, (if it was in the field of cancer or brain tumor, you know, whatever the hell it

[-33-]

was), people from the University medical school to sit as a panel and review everything and then give us their suggestion as to whether it was service connected, or whether it was not service connected, you see. And so the University of Pennsylvania came back and said that there isn’t any possibility that this could be Service connected.

So I didn’t tell Congressman Saylor what I’d done, I just denied the appeal and sent it back to him. Well, he excoriated me, my god. So I went up to him, and I said, “Now, John, you really shouldn’t feel that...” And he said, “Don’t you ever dare call me John; you call me Congressman.” Oh, he was vulgar, and he was a tall man. And I said, “Well, very well, Congressman, may I just have the courtesy of three minutes of your time so that I can tell you how I arrived at that.” “I don’t give a goddamn how you arrived at that,” he said. I said, “Please, may I?” And he said “All right.” So I told him, I said, “I tried to be fair, because I

[-34-]

don’t know medicine.” So I said, “I thought as long as the man concerned was from Pennsylvania and because you were from Pennsylvania that I should give the opportunity to the medical school of your own state to render a decision.” And he looked at me, and I said, “I sent all of the papers up to dean so and so, and he appointed a panel of men, whom I sure he believes to be outstanding men in the particular field, and this is their decision,” and I showed him the original letter. And he looked at me, and he said “Jack, you son of a bitch, that’s great.” And from that day on, he’s been one of my very dearest friends.

From that day on, every time we would have an appeal from any state, then I would send it to the medical school of that particular state. But, of course, there are some states that don’t have medical schools (they may now; in the last four years I haven’t kept abreast of it). But even in North Carolina,

[-35-]

where they had three medical schools, there was one appeal, and I sent it to Bowman Gray [Medical School] because it so happened that the doctor of this boy was on the faculty of Bowman Gray; so I thought, my God, what better chance do you have of trying to help the guy? And they turned it down. So then I told them what I did, and they said, “Ah, those guys don’t like this doctor.” I said, “Okay, you’ve got [University of] North

Carolina, and Duke [University], which one do you want me to send it to?” “Send it to Duke.” So we sent it to Duke, and it came back “no”. They said, “Yes, but we have since found out...” So I sent it to all three of them, and all three of them turned it down. “Now what the hell do you want me to do?” Not a thing, you know. So in this way we were able to obviate my lack of experience in medicine in arriving at those really crucial and major decisions.

HACKMAN: Now that board of appeals, those people are presidential appointees, right?

[-36-]

GLEASON: Yes, they are presidential appointees on the recommendation of the Administrator of Veterans Affairs.

HACKMAN: Did the White House take any interest in these?

GLEASON: Everybody that I—if they did I would have resigned and not come back. There was one nice thing that I had in my favor; I wasn’t seeking a federal job, I didn’t care whether I kept the federal job, all I wanted to do was the best job I could, and if they didn’t like it, all they had to do was to say so, and I could come back here and make three times as much money as I was making there. This is a hell of a nice comfortable feeling to have. It was the greatest experience of my life, but if they had tried to intervene, well, there were many ways that I could play ball with them, too, you know. It wasn’t just a one way street.

[-37-]

HACKMAN: You talked about Teague’s feelings about Mr. Driver—Congressman Teague. How did your relationship with him develop, and also with Albert Thomas, who had the important subcommittee on this?

GLEASON: My God, he had a great subcommittee. Well, let me say that my relationship with Teague.... Of course, I’m a funny guy; I still do it here.

HACKMAN: Thank you. Is it the last one?

GLEASON: No, we can get more. On any subject dealing with Teague, when I was first there, realizing the feeling that he might have, I took every occasion—if he called about a certain matter that you could pick up a telephone and answer, I would never do it. I’d go downstairs and hop in the limousine and go up to his office. This gave me better opportunities to sit and visit with him because then I answered the question, specifically, that he wanted to know, it gave us just a little more opportunity to visit about something else. And, you know, I don’t know,

[-38-]

I must have been there every day. People used to say, “Well, Glee, you don’t want to be a bellboy.” Well, I wasn’t a bellboy; in fact, I was trying to overcome what I thought was a great difficulty. And as a result, Olin Teague and I became very dear friends, his wife Freddie [Freddie Teague], and Mary Jane and I would have dinner together and cookouts and steaks, you know, and really a real nice thing.

And with Albert Thomas, who was a bear—God, that first March when I went before his Committee for the hearing on the budget, it was something that, God, I’d never.... Here we were up for seven billion dollars or something like that, and my God, that was twice the deposits of the First National Bank of Chicago, you know, and you’re going to spend it in one year. I didn’t know how to really talk or anything else, but I did have a great ally and a friend who was one of the senior members, and that was Congressman

[-39-]

Yates [Sidney R. Yates] of Chicago. And Sid had told me that his bite wasn’t as bad as his bark.

And so in the course of time, once again, whenever I really wanted to do something, instead of picking up the telephone, I’d get the hell up there and go in and see him and sit around and visit, you know. Instead of talking to him for two minutes on the telephone, it’d wind up with a half hour in his office. Well, after a while, when you’re sitting there and you’re having coffee, different things start breaking, discussions, and he finds out that although I may not know a goddamn thing about the Veterans Administration, maybe I do know something about other things. And I find out that he’s a rather pleasant and personable individual, outside of the committee hearings and all. I find out that he’s a very smart individual, a guy that does his homework well for the hearings.

Gosh, he could read you lines and verse of all those

[-40-]

preparations for the hearings. He’d take them home at night and prop himself up in bed (especially as the cancer came later, badly) and having a little whiskey alongside of him and every now and then pour himself an ounce—I know that because I used to go up and visit him—and he’d have all of those books, and my God, he would go through them.

The next few days, as you’re sitting there, you’d start to tell him, and he’d say, “No, don’t give me that business; now on page 983, and paragraph 2,....” And, gees, by God, if he wasn’t right. Oh God.

So, I don’t know how you get to be friends with people, you know; it’s one of these things that develops. I suppose it’s almost like courting a girl: If you really think she is something terrific, you put a little extra effort into it to make sure that your best foot is forward so that she begins to think that you’re not a bad guy.

[-41-]

HACKMAN: Let me put you on the spot a little bit. I've heard part of the story about the burial ground moving the cemetery in this district. How did that come in, and how was it resolved?

GLEASON: Oh, the cemetery? Well, for a long time there has been an impasse with the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration on national cemeteries. The Veterans Administration has cemeteries of their own, this, they're empowered by Congress. However, the veterans cemeteries and hospitals—you must die in the veterans hospital in order to be buried there. Well, it seems unbelievable that in many outlying areas you could live across the street from a hospital, and be a veteran and you die and you can't be buried in that cemetery. Now, it might be comforting to your wife if you were buried there, and God, she only had a couple of blocks or a mile to go, but yet, George Thompson that lives out in Wyoming, my God, he's buried there.

[-42-]

And my God, his wife, she's got to travel a thousand miles to visit his grave.

So, it was my feeling that—I thought the national cemetery land should be enlarged. The Bureau of the Budget, the Department of Defense, were forever trying to reduce it. Well, if you're going to have it available for one veteran, I think you ought to have it available for every veteran. If this is a democratic society; under a republican form of government, we each ought to have the same opportunity. We can all vote—now, whether we take advantage of it is another thing—but so long as we reach twenty-one years of age, we can vote. If you served your country in time of war, then you should be eligible for these.

But there was so little room in national cemeteries; there were none out in the Southwest. I actually had not, you know, really focused on the Southwest until one day the Congressman said to me, “Jack, what the hell are we going to do about all these veterans

[-43-]

in Texas? When they die, if they want to be buried in a national cemetery, we've got to ship them eight hundred miles.”

Well, then you begin to think. You must remember that this was a powerful guy; when he said something like that to me, I know that he's got something on his mind. So I said, “Maybe what we ought to do is have a cemetery in Texas, but, “God, the Administration, the government, they won't support it. The Bureau of the Budget is deaf on it. Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], gee, he doesn't want to enlarge them at all; he wants, actually, to do away with them.”

And he said, “Well, do you really believe in”—I mean, God, this may be over a period of weeks—“do you really believe in them?” And I said “Yes, I do. Hell, in Illinois, if I die, geez, I'm going to be in a hell of a fix if I want to be buried in a national cemetery. Fortunately, we have a family plot,

[-44-]

but I don't know, maybe my kids will all go to the far corners of the country, and Mary Jane and I, at least we know we'd be together, you know." I said, "I don't know how the hell to get around this." So he said, "Well, I think I can do it if you're for it." So I said, "I'm for it."

I forget the exact wording of it, but in the appropriations act—you see, you can't line up items in the appropriations act, as the act is passed you have to accept it in total, or you have to veto it.

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: Well, whenever there is a conference between the House and the Senate, I mean, he's the guy representing the House, so if he has something that he's interested in, you can bet your bottom dollar that it's going to remain in there. So I forget just what it was. There was an appropriation made for the Administrator to, I don't know; the main point

[-45-]

of it—let me see if it's in here.

HACKMAN: How are you fixed for time?

GLEASON: That all depends on yours. What time have...

HACKMAN: I've got a plane to catch at about six, and I've got to...

GLEASON: Oh well, now you better get started. Greer, you're going to be...

HACKMAN: I'll try and get back to you, and maybe we can finish this?

GLEASON: Well, anyway the appropriation came out not for the purchase of ground for cemeteries, but it said something about burial grounds, and nobody caught the damn thing at all. He had it buried in there, but it was there. So when the thing passed, why, there was the money for burial grounds.

Well, then it was up to where the hell the burial grounds are going to be. So I said to him, "Where do you want it?" And he said, "Where else but Houston?" I mean it has everything: space, my God, you know (Chairman of that Committee—my God, he had the whole damn, space program down in Houston) and the Veterans Hospital,

[-46-]

you know, with Doctor De Bakey [Michael E. DeBakey] down there for heart surgery and so on. So he said, "I'd like you to go down. I know a real estate man that has—I want you to know that I have no connection with this thing at all." He said, "I think you ought to get a large enough area."

We discussed this at VA: We felt that—not at that time but in twenty years time—that the cemeteries by the time World War II came to really falling by the wayside; that we'd had Korea, made the studies on the veterans in that five state area, that there were more veterans moving from the Midwest and from the East to places like Florida and Arizona and Texas and California (California, primarily in the southern parts) and so on. And so we went down there.

I didn't go down, I sent our engineers down. And they came back, and they said, "This looks like a good spot." I said, "Can you find any others?" Well, they found others but not quite as good: not quite as good as far as accessibility

[-48-]

to the Veterans Hospital, as far as the approaches by road were concerned, and so on. So we went ahead and did it.

A number of years before that, while I was National Commander, I was over in Manila and visited the United States cemetery outside of Manila, which I thought was the most beautiful thing that I had ever seen in my life. So as long as we had an appropriation for the cemetery, I was determined that we were going to have one in the United States that I think is even—will be even better than Arlington. So I had them design one similar to the one in Manila. And this is how it happened.

When we had the dedication—the guy that had brought this about was the Congressman—I thought it fitting and proper because I knew, he knew (Olin Teague knew), many of us knew that this guy was going to die within a year. This guy had more courage and guts in that he didn't give up and he just kept fighting all

[-48-]

the way through every day. God, he'd sit in those committee hearings, and he would be suffering the tortures of hell. And finally cancer caught up to him, and he did die. But all the way, he was a great American, a great statesman, and a very able and fair legislator. And I thought, "Now, here's a guy that's been fighting—helping the veterans all the time. This guy will be dead within a year, so why the hell don't we dedicate this cemetery to him while he's alive, so that he can see what the hell people think of him."

When it was all over with, he came up with a big smile on his face, and he said, "You know damn well, Jack, that I'm going to be buried right here in about eight months. Now damn it, have you made provisions to have a plot right next to me, and they'll drill a hole through the coffins so that you and I can be shaking hands under there?" He was a great guy. If he was your friend, God, he was all the way,

[-49-]

and if he was your enemy, he was a very determined opponent.

HACKMAN: What can you remember about the White House staff, contacts with the White House staff on this problem of where to build the cemetery? Did they...

GLEASON: Really, not any flak. No, I mean, I can't recall. Oh, I might have gotten a call from—the ones that I dealt with primarily on the White House staff would be Dick Donahue, Larry O'Brien, and Lee White [Lee C. White]. Those were the three guys that I might deal with, although I'd see Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] on occasion and Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] and McGeorge Bundy—oh, so many of the others, but these were the key guys. Larry was sort of, you know, running things, and Larry and I got along great—wonderful, as a matter of fact... [Interruption] Come in.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-50-]

John S. Gleason Oral History Transcript – JFK #1  
Name List

**B**

Bundy, McGeorge, 50  
Byrd, Harry F., Sr., 11

**C**

Cocke, Erle, Jr., 6, 12

**D**

Daniels, W. C. "Dan", 11  
Daley, Richard J., 14, 16, 17  
DeBakey, Michael E., 47  
Donahue, Richard K., 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 22, 50  
Douglas, Paul H., 27  
Driver, William J., 24, 25, 26, 30, 38  
Dungan, Ralph A., 14, 15, 17, 21

**E**

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 23, 26

**G**

Gleason, Mary Jane, 13, 15, 39, 45

**H**

Higley, Harvey V., 23  
Hughes, Phillip S., 29, 30

**J**

Johnson, Lyndon B., 5, 11

**K**

Keenan, Joseph D., 2, 3  
Kelly, Edward T., 27  
Kennedy, John F., 1-11, 14-17, 22, 28  
Kerner, Otto, Jr., 13  
Kerr, Robert S., 11

**M**

Mahan, John W., 7, 8, 21, 22  
McNamara, Robert S., 44  
Middleton, William S., 32, 33  
Monk, A.H., 24, 30  
Moore, Preston J., 11

**O**

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 28, 50  
O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 50

**R**

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 8

**S**

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 50  
Saylor, John P., 33, 34, 35  
Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 4  
Shriver, R. Sargent, Jr., 3, 4, 5, 16, 17, 22, 31

**T**

Teague, Freddie, 39  
Teague, Olin E., 24, 38, 39, 48  
Thomas, Albert, 38, 39, 41, 43, 44-50

**W**

White, Byron R., 10  
White, Lee C., 50  
Whittier, Sumner Gage, 23, 24

**Y**

Yates, Sidney R., 40