

Sidney S. Kellam Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 03/01/1968
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Sidney Kellam (1903-1986) was a political figure in Virginia. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's [JFK] 1960 presidential election in Virginia, among other topics.

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Sidney S. Kellam– JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Support for John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] vice presidential run at 1956 Democratic National Convention
2	JFK’s campaign trips to Virginia
3	JFK soliciting African American votes in Virginia
4	Effect of letter from Robert E. Moore on campaign
5	Robert F. Kennedy’s speech at the Chamber of Commerce in Richmond, Virginia
7	JFK’s relationship with the Democratic National Committee
9	JFK administration’s handling of civil rights in Virginia

Oral History Interview

with

SIDNEY S. KELLAM

March 1, 1968
Virginia Beach, Virginia

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Mr. Kellam, why don't you just start off by recalling, if you can, when you first met John Kennedy or if you had any connections with him before 1960.

KELLAM: Well, I first met John Kennedy in 1956 when he was a candidate for vice president at the Chicago [Democratic National] Convention. The Virginia delegation supported him for the vice presidency at that time, and he was reasonably active around in our delegation. As a matter of fact, he gave the keynote address. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: ...were particularly active on behalf of Senator Kennedy in the state?

KELLAM: Well, Governor Almond [J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.] spoke about as forcefully as he could, and several of the leaders around the state did likewise. Several of them withheld their support.

HACKMAN: What about, let's see Thomas Blanton, I think at that time was, what, chairman of the state?

KELLAM: Tom Blanton was for Senator Kennedy. He was reasonably active, and I think he felt very kindly towards Kennedy. While he was for Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], I think he felt very kindly towards Kennedy even before the nomination.

HACKMAN: What about Senator Robertson [A. Willis Robertson]? I had heard that there were some problems attempting to get him--well, for instance, when the candidate would come in the state--in attempting to get him to appear on the platform.

KELLAM: Well, sometimes he was a little shy, but he was not active in the campaign.

HACKMAN: Were Senator Kennedy's trips into the state at all effective, did you think? He went to Norfolk and Roanoke and...

KELLAM: Yes. His trip into Virginia was late, late in the campaign, and probably too late to generate any great effort, but he had tremendous crowds. He came to Norfolk. We then went to Roanoke. But he arrived here early one morning and spoke at, I think, at either 8:30 or 9:30 in the morning at an open field out in Norfolk. He had a tremendous crowd. And he had a parade; that is, he rode through the city and was seen by a lot of people. And, of course, his vote here was very well. He had a tremendous crowd in Roanoke. He left from here and went to Roanoke. But it was late in the campaign and probably stirred up a little interest for him, but probably didn't have the effect that it could have had, had it been really organized and put on in a better shape.

[-2-]

HACKMAN: Had people here in the state urged an earlier trip?

KELLAM: Yes. Yes.

HACKMAN: I'd heard some people had wanted him to come into Richmond. Were you of this mind, or do you think a trip in there would have done any good?

KELLAM: Well, I think we felt like that Norfolk and Roanoke would be more effective if he couldn't make the three places. Yes, there was some talk of him going to Richmond, but he couldn't make the three stops, so they picked Norfolk and Roanoke. They had every--pretty much every area was clamoring for him to come, but it was just impossible for him to do it.

HACKMAN: How effective were Senator Johnson's efforts in his trips into Virginia?

KELLAM: Johnson came into Virginia some two or three times. He spoke at Culpeper, and he spoke at Richmond. I was at the Richmond meeting. He had a very large crowd and made a very fine speech. How effective it is, why, if you take the vote, you'd say, well, it wasn't effective enough.

HACKMAN: Can you recall any discussion at that time concerning whether his campaign train should stop for speeches in some of the Negro areas in Richmond? I'd heard that this came up. I don't know if you got involved in that at all.

KELLAM: Well, I don't think his train came through the Richmond area. It went to Culpeper, and did it.... I don't--it may have come to Richmond, but I thought it went to Culpeper and...

[-3-]

HACKMAN: I know it went to Culpeper. I was thinking...

KELLAM: ...went the other way, went through the state rather than coming down.

HACKMAN: I was thinking there was another trip through; maybe I'm wrong. Were the Kennedy efforts with the Negro votes in Virginia creating any problems at all at that time with the regular Party that you can recall?

KELLAM: No, I don't know it created any great deal of differences. I don't recall the question being raised.

HACKMAN: I know they had that Negro lawyer, Oliver Hill, working for them at the Washington end, and I can't remember who they had working for them particularly within the state, several people. I just wondered if that created any problems at all?

KELLAM: No, it did not.

HACKMAN: How much effect did you think--if you recall, that letter from Moore, E. Blackburn Moore, about the appointments was circulated a lot...

KELLAM: Well, I think it hurt Kennedy; I think it cost him some votes. Blackburn Moore was a very well respected man, especially in a great many circles. He had tremendous influence, and I think that letter did hurt Kennedy some.

HACKMAN: Let's see, Robert Kennedy, I believe, came down to Richmond and gave a speech or a press conference reply to that. Did you talk to him at all at that time?

[-4-]

KELLAM: He spoke to the Chamber of Commerce there.

HACKMAN: Yes.

KELLAM: That's right. Yes, I talked to him and carried him down to Williamsburg that night for a speech. He spoke down there.

HACKMAN: That's right. Can you remember at that time trying to impress upon him anything about how the campaign was going or what they should do?

KELLAM: Well, I don't remember any particular items. I reckon they felt that they were traveling as fast and as furious as they could, and they were doing about all they could do.

HACKMAN: How effective do you think Battle's [William C. Battle] efforts were, in general? Was he pretty effective in getting support around the state, or did he make a lot of mistakes?

KELLAM: Basically, I reckon he did very well. I think the biggest effort was--as I said, they had two headquarters, and they never did consolidate them, and I think, probably, that was maybe their main mistake in the campaign. I don't know whether he could have consolidated them or not--he may have made an effort--but I think, probably, that they lost a lot of effectiveness by having two headquarters.

HACKMAN: How much influence did the--particularly in the Richmond area, the Democrats for Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]--Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] were getting a lot of publicity. Was there anything that could have been done to keep this from developing, do you think?

[-5-]

KELLAM: I don't know that it was. It was, of course, left over from the Democrats for Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], and they were pretty much the same group, very influential and very outstanding businessmen. They were very effective and proved it when the voting time came.

HACKMAN: How effective did you feel at the time that Nixon's campaign was in Virginia? Obviously, he won, but was there anything particular that he did within the state, do you think, that was instrumental?

KELLAM: No, he made some two or three appearances in the state, and he had a large following and, I think, a well-handled campaign.

HACKMAN: Did the campaign leave any serious splits in the Democratic Party in Virginia after it was over?

KELLAM: No. I don't recall of any particular serious splits that it left by reason of the campaign.

HACKMAN: Did Kennedy's defeat in Virginia have any great influence on Governor Almond's strength within the party since he had come out fairly strong for Kennedy?

KELLAM: Well, he was, of course, about to retire as Governor, and he was interested in a federal appointment. I don't think he got it by reason of his activity, but his activity didn't hurt him in any respect.

HACKMAN: You were new to the Democratic National Committee in that period. Do you have any particular views on the way the Democratic National Committee was used in the campaign? A lot of people, you know, have commented that the whole apparatus was more or less bypassed and the Kennedys tried to set up their own organization.

[-6-]

KELLAM: Well, of course, in addition to the Democratic Committee's activities, of course, they had their own organization, but I think basically that's usually the case anyway, and I don't think it was any particular different at that time. Certainly Kennedy was as close to the National Committee as any presidential candidate is because he designated the chairman and the officials of the Committee. I say he designated them; they were his loyal supporters so that he was in touch with the National Committee as much as any candidate would normally be.

HACKMAN: Following this up during the Administration, what reactions do you have of your experience with the Democratic National Committee, particularly of John Bailey? Did you feel he was effective, or did you have problems in dealing with him?

KELLAM: No, I think he's been very effective. I think he's.... During that time, of course, he had the complete say, so far as the Committee's concerned. I mean, he was a Chairman not in name but in action, and he, I think, did a reasonably fine job.

HACKMAN: What was your opinion of the way the Administration handled appointments within Virginia, particularly, well, the federal judgeships, first of all. They raised, what's his name, Albert Bryan to the Circuit Court and then appointed Butzner [John D. Butzner, Jr.] and Michie [Thomas J. Michie].

KELLAM: Michie.

HACKMAN: Did these create much controversy within the Democratic Party in Virginia?

[-7-]

KELLAM: Very little, because certainly Judge Bryan was an outstanding judge and Judge Butzner has turned out to be an outstanding judge. I'm not too familiar with Judge Michie, but he was an outstanding authority on law and so forth, so that it created very little problems.

HACKMAN: I had heard that the Kennedy Administration paid most attention to Battle's recommendations as far as appointments. Did you find this to be so?

KELLAM: Well, I think that was substantially true. He had managed this campaign, and he was probably as friendly with him as anybody from Virginia. I think that his recommendations did carry a tremendous amount of weight.

HACKMAN: Did you recall this creating any particular problems with Senator Byrd [Harry F. Byrd] or with Senator Robertson?

KELLAM: Well, I don't think it did, for the simple reason is that they had never been great patronage hunters any way, and I don't think it particularly bothered them so long as qualified and capable people were being nominated.

HACKMAN: What about your experiences with the Democratic National Committee? I've heard some people say that, well, a more traditional setup didn't work where a lot of jobs were handled through the Democratic National Committee and that the Kennedys paid very little attention to recommendations coming over through that channel.

[-8-]

KELLAM: Well, I suspect that some part of it is true. I mean, certainly in Virginia, as I've just said, they were paying more attention.... I don't recall any particular recommendations I made that didn't get consideration, but I would think that certainly the endorsement of Bill Battle carried more weight than anybody else's, any one individual at that time.

HACKMAN: What about the way the Administration handled civil rights, particularly school desegregation in Virginia? Did you have any talks with either the President or with Robert Kennedy and the Justice Department people on how things should be handled in the state, that you can remember?

KELLAM: No. No, I didn't. One of the cases was a Charlottesville case, and John Battle was representing the school, the people, against what they were proposing to do, so that certainly from that standpoint they had the knowledge of it as well as anybody could have.

HACKMAN: On some Southern states they had the habit of at least touching base with people before they went into a community and got something going, and I just wondered if that was usually the case in Virginia?

KELLAM: We had--in Virginia we had some three or four cases that, as you know, stood out. Norfolk was one of them; Charlottesville was one of them. Of course, Prince Edwards County still stands out. But in the Charlottesville case, I said Battle represented against what the government was trying to do, and in Norfolk they had quite a time there. I think they about closed schools there for a little bit. But they just--they worked it from Washington on a policy basis, and that was it.

[-9-]

HACKMAN: Did the Administration express any preference in the '62 race for governor and lieutenant-governor that you can remember? Did they get involved to any degree...

KELLAM: No. No.

HACKMAN: ...in that Stephens [A.E.S. Stephens]-Harrison [Albertis S. Harrison, Jr.] race?

KELLAM: No. if they had any preference they expressed it quietly and not effectively.

HACKMAN: So there was no problem.

KELLAM: No.

HACKMAN: Those are really all the questions I have unless you can think of any anecdotes or any experiences you have that you...

KELLAM: No, I tell you the truth, you kind of refreshed my memory in asking questions about a lot of it, because sometimes you forget what takes place.

HACKMAN: Particularly when you're deeply involved in something like that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-10-]