

Samuel Bornstein, Oral History Interview – 4/15/1977
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Biographical Note

Bornstein, a journalist and later managing editor of the *Boston Sunday Advertiser* from 1942 to 1971, discusses John F. Kennedy's 1946 congressional campaign, 1952 and 1958 senatorial campaigns, and the role that Joseph P. Kennedy played in those campaigns, among other issues.

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Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1, 3, 8	Covering John F. Kennedy's (JFK) 1946 congressional race
2	JFK's 1958 senate campaign
4	JFK's 1952 senate campaign
5	JFK's influence on Edward Moore Kennedy's political career
6	JFK in 1956
10	Joseph P. Kennedy's role in JFK's campaigns
11	Vietnam War

Oral History Interview

With

Samuel Bornstein

April 15, 1977
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: I wonder, Mr. Bornstein, if you could recall your first contact with Mr. Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], particularly the election of 1946?

BORNSTEIN: That was the first; congressional campaign?

STERN: Right.

BORNSTEIN: I was given the assignment. I was a reporter on the *Boston American* at that time, and it seems that President Kennedy's father [Joseph P. Kennedy] called Mr. Hearst [William Randolph Hearst]. They were very good friends. He acquainted him with the fact that his son was going to run for Congress. At that time we had a Cambridge-Somerville [Massachusetts] edition which included the area of the congressional campaign...

STERN: The Eleventh District.

BORNSTEIN: Mr. Kennedy, as I heard it, said "We'd appreciate coverage in your Cambridge-Somerville edition." Mr. Hearst relayed that fact to our managing editor Jack Malloy, who in turn spoke to the city editor and he picked me to cover that campaign. That's how I first met Jack Kennedy.

We would meet at a certain time each night in the district, and as he went around campaigning, I'd go with him. He rang doorbells and I was right on his heels. We got to be very good friends, and that extended all through his political life—even to the presidency. One thing I'll always remember about Jack Kennedy, he never forgot old friendships and that goes right into the time when he was president of the United States. And this refreshes my memory about one particular incident: this letter you showed me in which Ted Kennedy [Edward Moore Kennedy] wrote to Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], the President's secretary, if she would arrange a tour for my wife, me, my son and daughter at the White House. My daughter was applying for admission at American University in Washington, and we went down there for her interviews. President Kennedy showed us through his offices. We all sat in his oval room, his rocking chair, and he gave me, my wife and children souvenirs: fountain pens, P.T. boat tie clips, matches

[-1 -]

with the White House insignia on the cover, White House memo pads and so forth. He showed us the cabinet room opposite Mrs. Lincoln's office. Afterward he had someone guide us through the White House.

Some of the letters I have from him while he was senator bring back many memories. I invited him once to Boston for a B'nai Brith Sports Lodge dinner. I remember on this particular occasion he'd wait until five, five-thirty, until the Senate session was over before he would fly up to Boston rather than leaving after lunch. He was very conscientious about being present in the Senate. And I think that's characteristic of Teddy, too, just like his brother. They did their homework as senators.

STERN: I wonder if I might particularly raise one point. There has been a lot of controversy, particularly since last year when a book was published on Kennedy's early years from 1935 to about the time he entered the Congress, that portrayed that campaign, the '46 campaign, very differently than it has been in the more recent past. Generally the two points of view are that the campaign was run by nonprofessionals, that a lot of his old navy friends, his school friends who were not really tied to the old Boston political establishment really ran the whole thing. The other point of view is very different, which is that although some of those people were involved sort of up front, the real brains of the campaign was his father, Joe Kennedy, and his father's cousin, Joe Kane [Joseph Kane]; and that it was very carefully run, very carefully orchestrated, et cetera, and that Jack was very, very cautious in following their advice on strategy and tactics, et cetera. I wonder if you could, you know, have any insight into that.

BORNSTEIN: To my knowledge his father was always in the background. I saw more and more of that in the senatorial campaigns of '54 and '58.

STERN: Really.

BORNSTEIN: Particularly, I remember the last election he won for senator.

STERN: Fifty-eight.

BORNSTEIN: Fifty-eight. Was that against Celeste [Vincent J. Celeste]? Well, anyway, it was an unknown. It might have been a handpicked candidate.

STERN: It was hardly a major contest.

BORNSTEIN: I remember the senior Kennedy telling me that this was a very important election, this senatorial election of 1958, for one main reason, and that was this. He said Jack was considered a young kid in Washington. They scoffed at this young kid from Massachusetts running for president of the United States. But Joe Kennedy, was very astute. He knew one thing politicians understood, and I think to this day they do, because you hear it time and time again, and that is the plurality by which

[-2-]

a candidate wins. So, if young Jack Kennedy wins.... The candidate doesn't mean anything to these people down in Washington. How big he won was important. If he wins by a record-breaking plurality, they'll know he is a vote getter. That was Joe Kennedy's plan for his son: to win as big as possible. And the opposing candidate was made to order for such a plan. And Jack Kennedy did. I think he won, as I remember, by well over a million votes. That record plurality may still stand in Massachusetts. And that woke them up in Washington and elsewhere that he was a vote getter, and so forth and so on.

STERN: What specifically, particularly that incident you mentioned a little while ago in Dave's office about the Catherine Falvey...

BORNSTEIN: She was a candidate during his second run for Congress, early in his political career.

STERN: I think she ran in '46.

BORNSTEIN: Was that the first run?

STERN: With Cotter [John F. Cotter] and Neville [Michael J. Neville].

BORNSTEIN: Was that the first one?

STERN: Right.

BORNSTEIN: Okay. Somebody called me up one day and said, "Are you covering Jack Kennedy's campaign?" I said yes. And he said, "I got something

he might like to see.” So I met him and he gave me a batch of documents purporting to show things she had done while in the army. He had copies of her army record or something or other. To me there wasn’t any particular story there because what he told me was unsubstantiated. However, I said “I’ll show it to Jack Kennedy.” That night I did show it to him. I told him the story, “Somebody gave me this. There may be some material here you may want to use in the campaign and then again you might not want to use.” He took one look at it and threw it in the wastebasket. He said that it was going to be a clean campaign, no matter what. And I think that move was characteristic of him all through his political career.

STERN: Did you think personally that he was going to win right away? A lot of people who’ve described the campaign described it as an uphill fight considering that....

BORNSTEIN: It looked like a tough fight since he was the first young kid, so to speak, who was going against the pros.

STERN: He had strong opposition in Charlestown and Cambridge.

BORNSTEIN: The campaign that really surprised me was his senatorial campaign

[-3-]

against Henry Cabot Lodge for United States senator.

STERN: Fifty-two.

BORNSTEIN: His father had a lot to do with it, directing it personally, spending lots of money and so forth. His father was convinced his son could upset the big favorite, Lodge. And he did.

STERN: Right. In the first campaign can you recall any specific incidents in terms of, you say, walking around the district with...

BORNSTEIN: The fact he was Irish helped him tremendously. You know, if he hit a bar of some such meeting place, the older men there invited him in and gave him a hearty greeting.

STERN: Do you detect a...

BORNSTEIN: Many of them remembered his grandfather Honey Fitz [John F. Fitzgerald].

STERN: ...was still alive then.

BORNSTEIN: That's right, and of course the old Irish associated themselves with that generation of his grandfather. They asked him more questions about his grandfather probably than anything else.

STERN: Did you ever see any hostility directed towards him because of his age or wealth, or anything of that sort?

BORNSTEIN: No, they might keep calling him "Hey kid," you know, "Are you running for office?" in a kidding way, that sort of thing, but not hostile. Sort of joking, over a glass of beer or something. No, I don't remember anything hostile against him at any time. He had a sincerity about him that appealed to people, as far as I could see.

STERN: Dave Powers [David F. Powers] tells some extraordinary stories of running after people with stickers on their cars and thanking them, that sort of thing. Did you go to any of those famous teas or receptions....

BORNSTEIN: No.... by his sisters and mother?

STERN: Grandfather?

BORNSTEIN: No, I never did. No. But I'll say this. All through the years, one thing stands out foremost in my mind about Jack Kennedy. He was no different as president of the United States than he was as a congressman. He never forgot friends, he was honest and sincere.

As he elevated himself in office from representative to senator to president, to me he was always the same Jack Kennedy.

[-4-]

STERN: Did you cover the '52 campaign, too, for Senate?

BORNSTEIN: No, not actively. No, by that time I was in another position, I think I might have been city editor or something else that kept me behind a desk. But I remember one incident. I was the president of the B'nai Brith Sports Lodge. We always had invited him to sit at the head table at our annual dinner. He never missed an affair. This particular year we were going to honor him and give him an award, a public service award. He wrote me a letter. He said that on that particular day he'd have to be in the Congress until about five, five-thirty. But he said he'd come up, although he may be a little late. Then he wrote me, "I want you to know I wouldn't do this for anybody but you." He wrote this in his own handwriting. I still have the letter. You know, he was that sort of guy. He had committed himself on the phone to me that he'd come to the dinner, but even though he felt he had to be at the Senate session he wouldn't back out of it.

That, incidentally, is how I met Ted, whom I know rather well. I met him through Jack Kennedy. He always maintained that Teddy, you know.... He'd say, "You take care of

Teddy like you took care of me,” when Teddy was first starting out. But he once told me, “Just remember this: Teddy is smarter than Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] and me, and I’m not kidding. He is.” He was very, very fond of Teddy. There were a lot of stories that there was a lot of pressure put on President Kennedy to keep Teddy from running for his first senatorial office.

STERN: I’m going to ask you a few things about that.

BORNSTEIN: You know, “You don’t want him around.” You know, “You don’t want another Kennedy; he’d do you harm politically,” and so forth. But he believed that Ted was a bright young man and should be in politics. I think he felt sincerely that Teddy was better than “Bobby and me.” I don’t think he would have said it if he didn’t sincerely feel that way. I heard him say it several times.

STERN: After his three terms in the Congress when he defeated Lodge for the Senate in ‘52, many people felt that he couldn’t win that election. Especially given the fact that it was clearly going to be a Republican, and Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] swept the state by a considerable margin. Are there any things that you can particularly recall about why you think he won that election? I just happened to notice the other day, for example, that in certain areas in Boston they called in Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.], John McCormack [John William McCormack] did some work for him, and various other people did some work for him. Particularly, there were stories that were circulated apparently by the opposition concerning Joe Kennedy’s alleged anti-Semitism; and FDR junior who was very well received in Boston’s Jewish wards and came in and spoke for Kennedy as did John McCormack. Although I want to talk to you a little later about the question with John McCormack. It appears to be an interesting question in terms of their relationship.

[-5-]

BORNSTEIN: I think, in retrospect, that it was 100 percent personal popularity and it helped to have all the money available for a campaign, unlimited funds. I think he was a great campaigner. I think to meet him was to vote for him, I think it’s that simple. I think if you start to look for complicated reasons, you won’t find any. He was a great tireless campaigner. He out-campaigned Henry Cabot Lodge. It was that simple. He liked people—and they liked him.

STERN: Of course, Lodge was busy getting Eisenhower organized.

BORNSTEIN: That’s right. And I don’t think that Lodge thought this young kid congressman would be too much of an opposition. I think that he just took his reelection for granted. But I just think it was his day in and day out, tireless campaigning, with all the financial support that his father could provide.

STERN: ’56, many of his biographers and other people often call the turning

point in his career. Two major things, of course. First was the great struggle here in Massachusetts with John McCormack over the control of the [Massachusetts] Democratic State Committee, the so-called "Onions" Burke [William H. Burke, Jr.] fight. Do you have any recollections on that?

BORNSTEIN: No, I don't.

STERN: In which he apparently wrested control of the Democratic State Committee from McCormack and was able to take a pro-Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] delegation to the convention. Then of course at the convention the major surprise was his sudden emergence, almost, as candidate for vice president, which certainly put him in the national spotlight.

BORNSTEIN: No, that was important. That was very, very important. I remember his father telling me that was their goal, was the vice presidency.

STERN: That's interesting, because a number of accounts have indicated that Joe Kennedy did not think very highly of the idea of Jack becoming vice president.

BORNSTEIN: The old man told me that he knew Jack Kennedy wasn't going to get the vice presidency nomination. That's the one that Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] got, wasn't it?

STERN: That's right.

BORNSTEIN: No, no, it was just the national exposure, just the exposure the father wanted. He wasn't disappointed one bit, so he told me.

STERN: I see.

[-6-]

BORNSTEIN: The father knew that Jack Kennedy needed national exposure. See, everything was for a purpose. That was for a purpose. That campaign for senator against Celeste, winning by, I think it was well over a million votes, the biggest plurality probably at that time, I'm sure, in the history of Massachusetts, was for a purpose. Those were accomplishments, just the stepping stones. Because after losing to Kefauver for the vice presidential nomination the country knew who Jack Kennedy was.

STERN: Right. He became a very popular speaker.

BORNSTEIN: Delegates and Democrats began to know who he was. As a result he went all over the country making speeches and public appearances.

That was part of the plan. Joe Kennedy was aware of this. I'm convinced he had it all planned.

STERN: Apparently he said later, Joe Kennedy, that it would have been bad if he did get it...

BORNSTEIN: Yes, I believe it, based on what he had told me.

STERN: ...because he lost.

BORNSTEIN: That's right. They got the exposure, the national exposure. They needed it. To many he was a young kid from Massachusetts. But they had to get exposure for him. It wasn't just nationally that he wasn't recognized, but more importantly, he wasn't being recognized by his peers in Washington as a comer, and that national publicity, the national prestige that he would get with that, would wake them up a little bit.

STERN: Do you really feel that there really was this tremendous drive in his father, particularly in terms of the whole question of the first Irish Catholic president and all that? That this was something really meaningful to him?

BORNSTEIN. No, I think he just wanted his son to be president of the United States, period.

STERN: Period.

BORNSTEIN: Not because he was Irish. As a matter of fact, I recall the father telling me that his biggest fight was with the Irish. And he said, "I get a better response Jewish friends throughout the country"—he was talking about contributions, support and so on; this was prior to the campaign again—"than I am from my Irish friends." I naturally asked him why, and he said, "They're afraid he'll stir up things." You know, stir up animosity against the Irish and against the Catholics. The first Catholic president...

STERN: Memories of '28, sure.

[-7-]

BORNSTEIN: That's exactly right. He said, "That's what they're afraid of."

STERN: That's interesting.

BORNSTEIN: It is, and I remember it distinctly. He said, "I wish I could get the response from my Irish Catholic friends that I get from my Jewish

friends.” And he mentioned some Jewish friends of his—I forget the names now—in Cincinnati and other places. He mentioned the city. “So-and-so in Cincinnati can’t do enough for Jack,” a Jewish fellow. “So-and-so in another city can’t do enough for Jack.” He said, “I wish I could get such response from my Irish Catholic friends.”

STERN: He had very similar problems even when he was running for president, that famous Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] dinner in New York which was attended by Cardinal Spellman [Francis Edward Spellman]...

BORNSTEIN: Yes.

STERN: ...and apparently Cardinal Spellman gave a far more enthusiastic introduction to Vice President Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] than he did to Kennedy. And there was clearly real, real source of friction there.

BORNSTEIN: I think the turning point in his presidential campaign was Jack Kennedy’s speech to that Texas Baptist [Greater Houston Ministerial Association] convention. They saw he didn’t have horns. No, really. I think that was the turning point. Just as I think those debates with Nixon had a great deal to do with tremendous national recognition. People everywhere could see what Kennedy looked like and how he handled himself.

STERN: Right. Any other things you can specifically remember such as that Falvey incident from the ‘46 campaign or.... Those are the sorts of things, those little tidbits that are really valuable.

BORNSTEIN: No, but he was tireless. He rang every doorbell and went down one street and down the other, you know.

STERN: And the other candidates didn’t do that?

BORNSTEIN: Well, not as much, you know. But of course, he had the edge. You open the door and there is this swell-looking young guy, you know, and of course the Kennedy name or the Fitzgerald name was very well known.

STERN: Somerville, Cambridge, it was a strange district both ethnically and in terms of economic...

[-8 -]

BORNSTEIN: And he had the edge, and I think the same edge that a lot of young politicians today have. He was a fresh face. Of course, Falvey was a

fresh face, but at that time I don't think the people were ready yet for a woman in Congress.

STERN: Particularly women military, right?

BORNSTEIN: Yes, you know, in Congress. I think that's what she had going against her. Sort of something insincere about a woman running for national office at that time. Now we're going back over thirty years. Things have changed since then.

STERN: Thirty years. Sure, sure.

BORNSTEIN: Sure. Now they welcome women candidates.

STERN: Do you have any recollection of the other two major candidates, Cotter and Neville?

BORNSTEIN: No, of course Neville, was, I recall, was the major opposition. The Neville name was a big name in Cambridge.

STERN: Right.

BORNSTEIN: Yes, the family name. I think that Neville was his main opposition.

STERN: Were other reporters assigned to cover the other candidates?

BORNSTEIN: Yes. We had people.... When I say covering, I should make that clear. When I was assigned to cover Kennedy, that didn't mean the paper didn't cover the other candidates, because every day they gave a balanced report on what they were doing. But I was just assigned to cover Kennedy day in and day out.

STERN: There were a lot of famous incidents such as the Gold Star Mothers speech and the Bunker Hill [Bunker Hill Day] parade and things of that sort. Were you at any of those that you can recall?

BORNSTEIN: No, I don't remember those, no.

STERN: One of the accounts by Mark Dalton [Mark J. Dalton] who was his campaign manager, indicates that he apparently was not very healthy in some ways at that point, and collapsed after the Bunker Hill parade and was pretty sick for a while.

BORNSTEIN: I don't remember that.

STERN: That was the day before...

[-9-]

BORNSTEIN: I don't remember that.

STERN: ...the primary. But of course he won by a substantial margin.

BORNSTEIN: He was a swell-looking attractive candidate, you know, a very popular one. It wasn't difficult to like him very much.

STERN: Of course now it's very true of all major historical figures and certainly people who have been president that they inevitably go through phases in terms of interpretation and what people, the journalists and historians, et cetera, will say about them, and Kennedy is now clearly in a process of being revised. Some of the new material that's coming out tends to be very muckraking and tries to show that he had a lot of extracurricular activities with women and this sort of thing, and trying to show he was not sincere and that the campaigns were run and orchestrated very carefully by the family and that sort of thing.

BORNSTEIN: His father was in on every campaign and he planned a lot of things, but as far as I could determine, when you come right down to something specific, Jack Kennedy made the final decision.

STERN: That's a very important point.

BORNSTEIN: The father's primary role was with the finances. Of course he pressed opinions about the campaigns and became involved in a lot of things that didn't involve Kennedy personally. For instance, I got a call one day from Frank Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey]. He said, "on the way home tonight, could you stop by?" They owned an apartment house on Beacon Street, near Hampshire House, right beyond Charles [Street]. I went up there wondering what it was all about. It was a public relations discussion about what to do with Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] in the campaign, and so forth. Some advisors wanted to put on a TV show or something for a half hour. They asked my opinion on it and I said, "Gee, you'd drive anybody crazy with a half hour of TV." Just talk for a half hour would turn off TV sets. I said I thought the best thing Jackie could do was to get her out on the street, and let them see her. Particularly if she knew French, send her into Lowell which had a large French population, send her into other French neighborhoods, let her go through the shopping areas and the supermarkets, so forth and so on. And right then and there the old man killed that half-hour television show they were going to have. He made that kind of decision, you know.

STERN: But he stayed pretty much in the background obviously.

BORNSTEIN: Yes, he did.

STERN: Of course, he was fairly controversial as a result of that period of time.

[-10-]

BORNSTEIN: But I think as far as the actual, what to do, the nitty-gritty decision, Kennedy made up his own mind. If he didn't want to go somewhere he'd say, "No, I don't want to go there." And I don't think he'd care who might have said, "Well, it's on the schedule." He did very much his own.... Although he listened to what the others said.

STERN: Do you recall any of his, while he was congressman, he made, particularly in the last two years as he was beginning to think about running for the Senate, a tremendous number of weekend trips up to Massachusetts. Just scoured the whole state making kinds of connections and friends....

BORNSTEIN: And importantly, meeting people...

STERN: Right.

BORNSTEIN: ...because he had that thing, as I said before. He was a personal campaigner, and when you met him, I think he had a fighting chance to get your vote. And he liked campaigning. He liked people.

STERN: He always seemed to enjoy campaigning, there's no question about that.

BORNSTEIN: Yes, he did.

STERN: Back to something I mentioned briefly earlier, do you have any recollections particularly about the Kennedy-McCormack rivalry in this state, starting with the '56 thing and...

BORNSTEIN: No, I don't. There was more of this rivalry later during Ted Kennedy's campaign.

STERN: ...going up to the famous '62 race...

BORNSTEIN: Outside of a general recollection, you know, the fight for Democratic power, Who is going to run the state? I don't recall anything specific. At that time I wasn't personally involved in political reporting whatsoever. I was an editor.

STERN: I see. In the light of the last decade when, I think, there has been so much disillusionment about politics, particularly young people feeling

kind of, to use their term, turned off, by the system and turned off by the presidency as a result of Watergate and Vietnam and the whole thing, how would you put Kennedy in terms of that perspective?

BORNSTEIN: Jack Kennedy provided an entirely new conception of the presidency. Particularly as far as young people were concerned. He aroused them. My own feeling is—it's just my own opinion—that if he hadn't died you wouldn't have had any of that Vietnam reaction,

[-11-]

the Vietnam situation among the young people. To them he was a symbol, a youth symbol, their president. Typical is the way my daughter, then in college, and her classmates reacted. All the kids wanted to get into the government because Kennedy was their government. He represented their kind of United States of America. He was their new type of government versus the old type politician—to them the stereotype politician, the machine politician. And he was a symbol of the government they wanted. A youthful government, the young thinking chief executive. And I don't think there would ever have been a Vietnam. Kennedy never would have let it happen—so many young people killed in a war. That's the tragedy, I think, of the world, that Kennedy was assassinated. That's my personal opinion.

STERN: Well, there is of course tremendous controversy over questions like that.

BORNSTEIN: Of course, and it's just a personal opinion.

STERN: I understand that, sure.

BORNSTEIN: That's just what it is. But I remember the reaction to his presidency among the young people, and it was fascinating to me. When he was assassinated, their hopes and dreams went with him. I don't know how he would have resolved it, but I don't think we would have had the Vietnam that we know, and the furor that accompanied it particularly on the college campuses...

STERN: It's a fascinating question.

BORNSTEIN: It is, and nobody knows the answer.

STERN: Because so many of the people who advised President Johnson, [Lyndon Baines Johnson] his very faithful staff, Rostow, [Walt Whitman Rostow], Rusk [Dean Rusk] and McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and the others were all, of course, Kennedy's appointments.

BORNSTEIN: Except this. It's entirely different because Johnson was different from Kennedy as day and night. He had them around, but little by little they

disappeared. I heard Johnson say at a private luncheon that he didn't want to get Red China into the Vietnam war. He figured if he backed down, the Chinese communists would get in there or Russia would get in there and take over the whole Far East. He didn't want to get involved in another world war. He thought this delayed action, or call Vietnam what you will, would prevent that. That was his theory. But no matter what, I can't see Jack Kennedy involving the young people of America in the war that we went through, the Vietnam war.

STERN: You feel then that the abrupt end to his term was certainly a turning point in...

BORNSTEIN: Absolutely.

[-12-]

STEIN: ...the history of this country?

BORNSTEIN: No question about it. Particularly as far as the young people are concerned. For the first time in their generation they had a man who was one of their own, so to speak.

STERN: I think that many people have commented on the feeling that he had the capacity to grow and the capacity to change his mind, and most importantly he didn't take himself that seriously. He did when it was proper but at other times he could laugh at himself.

BORNSTEIN: No. He had a great sense of humor.

STERN: Can you remember anything specific?

BORNSTEIN: No, no. But you could tell a joke in front of him and laugh and so forth. No, he had a good sense of humor. He enjoyed a cigar, enjoyed a drink. He was as regular as they come. I never saw him change through the years. I keep repeating myself, but that's how I remember him. He filled out physically and got older, but he's basically the same kind of a guy that I first met in 1946 as the man I saw in the sixties when I took my children and my wife into his presidential office. The same sort of guy. For instance, when he kidded my son and said, "You can touch anything you want over there. Don't let anybody bother you." And he joked, I remember now, at the time, "Oh, so what, all you can do is start another war. So what." My son was touching things on his desk.

STERN: What, did he touch the red phone?

BORNSTEIN: He touched the red phone. My wife said, "Get away from there." Jack Kennedy laughed, "No, leave him alone."

[-13-]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Samuel Bornstein Oral History Transcript
Name Index

B

Burke, William H. "Onions", Jr., 6

C

Celeste, Vincent J., 2, 7

Cotter, John F., 3, 9

D

Dalton, Mark J., 9

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 5, 6

F

Falvey, Catherine, 3, 8, 9

Fitzgerald, John F. "Honey Fitz", 4

H

Hearst, William Randolph, 1

J

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 12

K

Kane, Joseph, 2

Kefauver, Estes, 6, 7

Kennedy, Edward Moore, 1, 2, 5, 11

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 10

Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11,
12, 13

Kennedy, Joseph P., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10

Kennedy, Robert F., 5

L

Lincoln, Evelyn N., 1, 2

Lodge, Henry Cabot, 4, 5, 6

M

Malloy, Jack, 1

McCormack, John William, 6, 11

McNamara, Robert S., 12

Morrissey, Francis X., 10

N

Neville, Michael J., 3, 9

Nixon, Richard Milhous, 8

P

Powers, David F., 4

R

Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr., 5

Rostow, Walt Whitman, 12

Rusk, Dean, 12

S

Smith, Alfred E., 8

Spellman, Francis Edward, 8

Stevenson, Adlai E., 6