

Arthur T. Thompson Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 06/26/1964
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Arthur T. Thompson served as Administrative assistant to Governor Herschel Loveless of Iowa (1959 - 1961) and as Director Grain Policy Staff, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (1961 - 1968). This interview focuses on discussions of the farm problem before and during John F. Kennedy's [JFK] presidency, the 1960 Farm conference and rally in Iowa, and recollections of JFK's assassination and the following days, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

ARTHUR T. THOMPSON

June 26, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By George A. Barnes

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BARNES: Mr. Thompson, will you recall, if you can, the occasion and the circumstances of your first meeting with President Kennedy?

THOMPSON: George, it was at Des Moines, Iowa, prior to the 1960 convention when I was administrative assistant to Governor Herschel Loveless. I don't recall the date. It was in one of the downtown hotels where he met with the delegates for rather a short visit. He came to town on a plane and was soon off again.

Actually, however, my exercise in discovery, as it might be called, of John F. Kennedy began somewhat earlier. This was probably in 1958 when I was then editor of the National Farmers' Union Newsletter at Washington. I was in the gallery on a day when the then Senator from Massachusetts occupied one of the back row seats, as I recall, on the west side of the Senate Floor. He was conservatively dressed in a dark suit, with the familiar shock of hair, and the somewhat spare figure. I don't remember the subject of his short speech, but there was the unmistakable flat Boston accent, and I believe that was the first time I saw the famous hand chop gesture to emphasize the points.

It was about that time, I suppose, when I began to take a measure of the man in terms of his position on the farm issue. I had had a lifelong interest in this issue, having been a farmer and a

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farm paper editor, an agricultural attachè for the America government, and two hitches with the Department of Agriculture beginning in 1933. I had reservations, from what I had heard, that he at one point, and I forget the exact year but I believe it was probably 1954, took a somewhat favorable attitude toward what we called the flexible price policy. In my judgment, and in our part of the country, we felt this was not going to be effective and successful.

BARNES: Your part of the country at that time was...?

THOMPSON: Was Iowa.

BARNES: Iowa. You were out there?

THOMPSON: That's right. However, later on (this would have been about 1958 or 1959 when I was in Washington, as I said, with the Farmers' Union,) the Senator did a sort of retake on the farm issue which by that time, incidentally, had gotten more serious. I recall that he asked John Baker, who was then head of the Farmers' Union office in Washington, to suggest some content for a farm bill. They discussed the problem and John did supply a draft which in due course was drawn up as a bill and a number of copies were printed. I do recall having heard that the Senator discussed this with some of the people who came to his office interested in the farm question. Of course, he did not come from a farm area, but being a member of the Senate had to consider all the problems of the country.

The next period in which you might say I came closer to an understanding of the Senator was when I had become administrative assistant for Governor Loveless of Iowa. This was in the fall of 1959.

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Shortly before I joined the Governor's staff he had been appointed by Paul Butler, the chairman of the National Democratic Party, to be chairman of a farm advisory committee. This committee met three times, as I recall, in the fore part of 1960 prior to the convention, twice in Washington at the headquarters, and the last time in the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago shortly before the convention. This advisory committee was made up of 16-18 members including two former Secretaries of Agriculture, Brannan and Wickard. Its conclusions and its recommendations to the convention, I would say, did influence the content of the agricultural plank. The position of the committee was read to the Resolutions Committee at Los Angeles by Governor Loveless.

I should backtrack a little bit here, leading up to the convention. In Iowa it was recognized by those who began more and more to be inclined toward the nomination of Kennedy that there was, of course, a major issue of religion. Here was one matter about which the Kennedy directness in dealing with this question impressed me personally, and I'm sure a lot of others. First, as it happened after one of these meetings of the Advisory

Committee in Washington, in the evening the Governor and I had dinner and conversation with Ted Sorensen. We didn't know it at the time, but Mr. Sorensen dealt with subjects in which we had an interest in common. He seemed quite composed and normal, yet later on we discovered that this was the night they were working out that famous Press Club speech on the issue of Catholicism, the speech which put the issue in the open.

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During these days, as one observer, and I think this was in common with a lot of others, in judging the competence of one who is seeking to become a candidate, judging the competence also for the aides was one of the things which figured rather large in an appraisal of the man -- one learns these things as one goes along. I was recalling about that time how in the days of the depression, 1932, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was considered for the Presidency, and had become a candidate, there was concern on the part of midwesterners who were somewhat mixed in their political inclinations, disturbed by the depression, and what they thought was inadequate action -- as to the characteristics of Franklin D. Roosevelt. One of the best judgments that I happened to be close to, because I was editing the contents for the farm paper, "Wallaces' Farmer," was when Henry A. Wallace returned from a visit to Hyde Park and epitomized it all in these three criteria:

The man has good advisors; he listens to them, but has the ability to make up his own mind; and third, and most important, he had the right temperament for the upcoming situation.

His final remark, especially apropos, was "He is a chance-taker -- if necessary, act first and think afterwards!" And for the 1930's, of course that was exactly what was needed.

BARNES: This was Wallace with reference to Roosevelt...?

THOMPSON: With reference to... that's right. That made an impression on me because I realized, and later, of course, this was very clear, that the "men around the man" had a great deal to do with what he can accomplish. Then along with his in the case of Kennedy was the growing appreciation of his ability to handle questions off the cuff which, of course, came to a climax in the famous campaign debates.

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BARNES: Did you then, in the preconvention period, during which time you were in Washington and had met some of these people around the President, form the opinion that there were similarities in temperament and attitude between Kennedy and Roosevelt? Having been through the New Deal period yourself, did you feel there was some of the same vigor?

THOMPSON: Yes, I think I did. I, of course, recognized that there was a different situation in 1960. We were out on the world in so many ways, which was not the case in 1932; and yet basically the same concern for, you might say, the public welfare, relations with other nations, and all -- they were there. This is true.

BARNES: Now we come to -- first let me ask this question. During the pre-convention period when Senator Kennedy was undertaking to line up votes for the convention, or even before that, did you meet him personally at any time, or deal with him?

THOMPSON: Only that instance I spoke of which was some time prior to the convention. The actual meeting with the man for more than a handshake occurred on the Sunday morning prior to the nomination in Los Angeles. This was when the Governor [Loveless] and I went to the suite, which I believe was on the 9th floor, and passed into the bedroom where we were greeted by Senator Kennedy and Governor Ribicoff of Connecticut. There were the pleasantries, and then the Senator moved directly to the subject of interest. I believe his words were, "How are we doing?" I don't recall all of the words now, of course, but to me one of the interesting remarks was when the Governor said

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to Senator Kennedy, "You know, Jack, I'm running for the Senate myself, and if the thing works out, that one of the opponents has something to say about the appointments to Senate Committees, maybe I won't come out so well!" The Senator said, "Well, Governor, in the first place, in the Senate there are no bad committees. Secondly," he said, "Lyndon is mad at me now, but he doesn't like to stay that way."

Looking at it afterwards. I thought he gave us a tip of sorts as to willingness, providing Lyndon B. Johnson would accept, to take him for a Vice-Presidential running mate. But I also, I might say, didn't run into anybody at the convention who held this to be even the remotest outside possibility because they were so convinced by the passionate rivalry of the backers of each of these men that such a thing would not happen.

BARNES: You think then that even at that point, that early in the convention period, and during the convention, the future President had the idea that Lyndon Johnson might be the nominee for Vice President?

THOMPSON: I'm not sure I'd go so far to say he was thinking of it in a positive way, but at least, as I thought about it afterwards, it had not been ruled out in his mind on an emotional basis. I think he recognized the competence of Lyndon Johnson very clearly.

BARNES: During your meeting up in the suite that day, did you get onto the subject of agriculture, in which I suppose Governor Loveless was deeply

interested?

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THOMPSON: Not in my earshot. Just after this little exchange I have recited, the Governor said to Senator Kennedy, "Did Ted Sorensen mention the thing he and I talked about?" Governor Ribicoff took this as a signal for the two of us to retire, which we did, and that ended my witnessing any exchange between the men. I would say they probably continued privately for 5 or 10 minutes; I don't recall exactly.

Then, I could say next, I believe, keeping to the farm issue as a centralized thing here to discuss, that about Monday, perhaps, there was a belief on the part of some of the Senator's advisors, one being Dr. Willard Cochrane, economist from the University of Minnesota who had been taken into the Kennedy organization as an advisor, that if the Senator came out and declared that in the second session after the recess of the Congress he would introduce a farm bill -- sort of an emergency farm bill -- that this might help clinch his concern for the farmer. This was debated, I learned, on the inside and there were pros and cons to which the would-be candidate listened. It was decided to issue the statement. It was a short one, but the substance was that he would attempt to introduce a farm bill.

BARNES: Just to interrupt here for a moment, who participated in the discussion of whether this statement ought to be issued or not?

THOMPSON: Well, I was told on good authority that the debate was mainly -- the wisdom of doing it -- was mainly between Willard Cochrane and Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] (Harvard University who was also an advisor to Kennedy in economics.) Galbraith took the position that it probably was unwise because it probably would prove futile. They wouldn't be able to do it in the second session. The counter argument was that the

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farmers do want reassurance here (at the convention) of the interest of the candidate, and in a sense this was underscored a little later -- I think the next day -- when a group of delegates from the farm areas, principally I recall from Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota, arranged a sort of session, replete with microphones of the main networks, at which each of the would-be candidates appeared and stated their positions. It was very interesting and very well attended affair. They got a great deal of attention over the country, I was told later.

The next vivid recollection I have of the convention was that of nomination night. I did not go down on the floor. We had some people in the Iowa group who wanted to get on the floor, so I turned in my pass and went up into the galleries. There were, of course, the usual lines of marching boosters, bands, and what have you outside, as the convention doors opened up for this person and that one. But I took my seat -- well, I didn't quite take it at first -- I found somebody sitting in it and I had to ask the usher to have it vacated. There were others around who seemed to be sitting in seats for which they didn't have tickets. They were

also carrying cards which I judged to be about 2' by 2'. They were holding them so that the backside was showing. I couldn't tell what was on them, whether it was printing, or writing, or color, or what. It aroused my curiosity a little, but I didn't think much about it. The bedlam became so great as the evening went on that I went outside in the hallway, in back of the seats, because there in the ceiling every so often there was a speaker that carried the speeches directly from the speaker's platform, and you could hear a great deal better what was being said.

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I happened to turn after a few minutes and noticed that -- this was when the Stevenson demonstration began -- I saw people walking in, apparently attracted by something unusual going on. I walked on in and found some of these folks that had these cards had turned them around and were holding them in the air like at one of those big football games, shouting and hollering. They got down and formed big lines around in the aisles. It was some moment!

BARNES: This was at the time of Stevenson...?

THOMPSON: This was at the time of the demonstration for Stevenson. Then we had the ringing eloquence of Senator McCarthy nominating Stevenson. I went out again to pick up a little more of this, and then I noticed that near by, walking back and forth in what I would describe as a very nervous manner, smoking a cigarette, and with further evidences of nervousness, was Senator Kennedy's sister, Mrs. Lawford. She walked in several times to take a look at the proceedings and back out again to catch some of this, as I was, from this loud speaker. I've called that since the "Kennedy faction's moment of uncertainty."

This I believe was the moment of uncertainty. Up to that time I had not noticed any uncertainty, but this was. For a little while, there seemed some doubt as to whether the thing might become unstuck. I went out on the other side and looked in the other side of the big auditorium during the time that Eleanor Roosevelt was making her appeal for Stevenson. It turned out that one of the delegates in the Iowa group, who had earlier indicated that he was

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going to vote for another nominee, wound up voting for Stevenson. I saw him the next day and I said, "Steve, what did it?" He said one word, "Eleanor!" Following that, of course, we all know the results. I didn't happen to go to the acceptance speech ceremony. I watched it on the TV.

The selection of the Vice President had some moments of suspense. Our governor was mentioned, and a lot of others, during the latter part of the morning of that day the Vice President was nominated. It was said that if Symington didn't take it then our man might be in. For a little while I played sergeant-at-arms in the doorway. Noon came and no word. It was going on 1:00 and still no word, so I left the Governor's suite and went to luncheon in one of the basement restaurants with Willard Cochrane. We were about two-thirds of the way

through lunch, I suppose, when the suspense got me and I said, "I'm going to have to call the suite." I went upstairs in the lobby to do so. No answer at the suite so I knew they had gone down, too. I came out in the lobby again and here comes the Chicago Bureau Chief of Time Magazine, Murray Gart, on the run and he said, "I've just got it. It's Lyndon!"

Well, I suppose we could move next perhaps to the post convention period. First, shortly afterwards a group of us went to Washington. I went to represent the Governor. I don't recall all the names of those who attended but I recall Archibald Cox, Sarge Shriver, who acted as chairman of this ad hoc group, Ken Galbraith and Willard Cochrane.

BARNES: Let me interrupt just here, Mr. Thompson. This is shortly after the convention?

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THOMPSON: This is right, and before the second session of the Congress convened.

BARNES: This would put it in the...?

THOMPSON: Late July or the early part of August. At any rate, the purpose of this little conference up there at Democratic headquarters was to consider again whether Mr. Kennedy should introduce a farm bill as he said out in Los Angeles, he planned to do. This time the debate around the table was also divided, but it was held a little more in relation to the situation that they now foresaw on the Hill. The subjects that would be up, the fact that probably, as I recall, a medicare bill was going to get into it, and I think there was another bill or two which seemed likely to take their time. Even if the farm bill was introduced it would likely never see action, so the idea was just tabled for the time and there never seemed to be a moment in which it would be effective, so there never was one introduced. There was some chiding of the candidate, as you might suppose, from the opposition, but it didn't last long.

The next big event that deals with the farm issue was the farm conference and rally at Des Moines on August 20-21.

BARNES: Of what year?

THOMPSON: Of 1960. This was agreed and developed at Hyannis Port during a visit of Governor Loveless to Senator Kennedy. They sent Charlie Tyroler who had served as sort of resident secretary to the Agricultural Advisory Committee, as an advance man to Des Moines, and we worked together in lining this up.

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BARNES: You worked with him?

THOMPSON: That's right. The location was the big Veterans Auditorium at Des Moines.

The first day, a Saturday, was given over to hearing statements from farm organization leaders, farmers, we had several governors, and several members of Congress. It lasted until, as I recall, something like 7:30 pm before it was finally closed. The hearings were summarized that evening by a small committee and were given the next day before a workshop session which followed a Sunday family-style dinner, including roasting ears -- it was, of course, roasting ear season, and, I suppose, it being Iowa they thought it ought to be something involving corn. One of the interesting things to watch, it turned out, was the efforts of the cameraman to get the candidate, Senator Kennedy, to engage in a little ham acting in eating a roasting ear. But he never went further than to lift it, I guess, about an inch from the mouth -- tackling a roasting ear can result in all sorts of facial expressions and so on and I suppose he knew that. They cleared the tables after dinner was over and held the work session on the platform at the end of the room. They had the members of our Farm Advisory Committee and the two candidates, Senator Humphrey was chairman, I remember. Governor Freeman of Minnesota was also there as were several other members of Congress and other State Government officials.

The summary of the hearings highlighted these points: They called on the Democratic Party to undertake efforts to get higher farm income, a sympathetic Secretary of Agriculture, greater voice and farmer participation in program development and administration. The ones who took part in the hearings expressed a willingness to accept the

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responsibility for supply adjustment. They asked that efforts be made to preserve and protect the family owned and family operated farm system through greater encouragement of co-ops, adequate credit at reasonable, honest rates, and greater protection against monopoly power. They asked for maximum utilization of American agricultural production for the sake of all humanity through food stamp programs, expansion of school lunches and food for peace programs. They asked for better ways to tell the farmers' side of the story to the rest of the American public, and to continue exploration for new uses for agricultural products. Now whether this was done later at the insistence of President Kennedy primarily, or rather more through his approval of the initiative of others along these lines I cannot say, but the record shows that the Administration's policies in 1961-1963 closely followed the lines recommended at the Democratic Farm Conference at Des Moines in August 1960.

BARNES: Would you say then that the President's attitude on farm policy and programs was influenced in an important way by his attendance at this particular meeting?

THOMPSON: I believe so. I think that he was developing an interest, of course, but I believe this helped to underscore it, as he said. I might quote here a few of his remarks. He was introduced and sort of closed the meeting with his own statement, and I remember he said, "I come from Massachusetts but my state and this country cannot possibly move ahead unless the farmer moves ahead. I believe this is an important conference." And he mentioned two purposes. They were for himself and Mr.

Johnson to establish contact with the farmers and to get their latest views and their reactions to the Democratic platform.

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Secondly, he said that would be the only meeting they would attend together in August, which he said demonstrates our strong feeling that this is a number one domestic issue. He said the number one domestic issue is to define the farming problem. I noted that at the time, and have looked back at it since because this reveals to me what I later came to realize was one of his problems with the farm problem. That was that he never felt very comfortable with it. It was complicated and difficult, and he wasn't posing as a farm expert. He wasn't ready to say too much about solutions and give details. He was especially interested to define this so it would be understood.

BARNES: Now we're rapidly entering the campaign period, if we haven't already. Were you present at any of his major appearances, or did you ever take part in the preparation of any of his major appearances in the agricultural area?

THOMPSON: I didn't directly. I discussed some of the attitudes as we sensed them in our part of the country, with some of the folks that were close to him. For example, I occasionally talked by phone to Willard Cochrane here in Washington at campaign headquarters assisting in writing of material for speeches on the farm issue. The nearest I suppose I came to contact in the campaign was the time he went out to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I didn't go to the -- this was a plowing match -- event. It has become somewhat of a tradition for candidates to appear at a plowing match and outline their farm policies. I did go to Fort Dodge, Iowa. There was a dog-leg trip over there -- a quick one -- to be driven through the streets and then back out on the way to the plowing match. On this occasion I met Willard Cochrane, and we

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stayed at the airport and discussed how things were going while the candidate and party went into town. This, of course, was the most detailed speech of any he made in the campaign on the farm issue. It argued for supply management, and various items that went with it. I was told there were several who had contributed ideas to it, Mr. Cochrane being one, Ken Galbraith another, and the ones who made these contributions, figuratively speaking, their contributions were passed through a slot in the door to the writers who did the finishing. They were airborne on the way to Sioux City that night when one of the drafts nearing finality was shown to Mr. Cochrane, among others. There was further conferring, further editing, further revising. Along about midnight -- by that time I believe they were on the ground and in quarters in Sioux City -- the draft was shown to Mr. Kennedy. He kept his own counsel, but sometime during the night, along toward morning I understand, he rolled this over in his mind some more and thought he'd like to get some judgment on the fitness of this

by calling Senator Humphrey, which he did. He read it in its entirety, I understand, and then awaited a verdict. The verdict was short. Senator Humphrey said, "It's great! Don't change a word! Give it as it is!" Which he did do.

BARNES: This was his major statement on the farm problem during the campaign? Mr. Thompson, do you recall anything about the reaction in Iowa, which is surely the heart of the farm country?

THOMPSON: Yes, I do. By that time it was coming to be realized that while farm people were quite concerned over prices and the problems

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of overproduction, they still were more concerned over several other issues, one of them being peace. There was the continuation of this peace concern and this of course -- this fire was being constantly stoked by the opposition. So that the response to the appeal for a change in farm policy, while generally favorable, didn't come back with any resounding assurance that this was making much headway. About that same time (this incident happens to be related to it, I think) the Republican candidate, Mr. Nixon, made a speech in New Jersey, I believe, in which he charged that the farm plan of the Democratic group was bound to increase the cost of living. He charged that this would be the result. In fact, I believe that he even qualified it by such and such percent. This was a serious charge, and inasmuch as farm income was down and if it was to be assisted at all, it would almost require some action, expenditure of public funds, and might to a degree result in some adjustment of consumer prices. This, you might say, put the farm issue to one side. It wasn't discussed very much after that.

BARNES: In other words, as you assess it, do you believe the Kennedy farm program would give rise to an increase in consumer food prices led the candidate from that point on to say as little as possible about the farm program he was going to pursue or the farm policy generally, since this was not compatible with what one might call good political campaign tactics.

THOMPSON: Yes, I think so. First of all, as you well know, it's very easy to make a charge on the farm issue of that kind, and very difficult to answer it. I think that other issues began to crowd it besides.

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Now there was, after the election in our country -- in the farm country -- quite a little speculation on who's going to be the Secretary of Agriculture. I mentioned a moment ago that this farm conference stressed that there was going to be a sympathetic Secretary of Agriculture. Many names were bandied about. I formed in my own mind an opinion of the kind of man that probably would appeal to Mr. Kennedy by that time. I judged that he would

want to be quick minded, politically wise, not what we sometimes call an agricultural “fundamentalist” who is too married to the past approaches and the cliches on parity and one -- to use the vernacular -- one who would give it fast and take it fast. Mr. Kennedy was somewhat apprehensive it seemed to me about getting involved with too many rigid preconceived ideas because he, I think, appreciated by that time that there was going on in agriculture this thing called the “revolution of technology,” and that was a good many things would have to go through a new judgment. Well, as we know.

BARNES: Let me interrupt right there. Did your appraisal of the kind of man he was looking for derive from conversations with various people close to the President, let’s say people like Willard Cochrane, and others over a period of time?

THOMPSON: Yes, somewhat from that and -- it’s one of those things -- the idea sort of germinates and grows in your mind that was the evidence of the -- well, I don’t like to use the words “intellectual approach,” but this man was strong on getting the facts and making sure that this was a fully intelligent inquiry into the problem.

BARNES: Yes. In due course then, the President did appoint Orville Freeman of Minnesota as Secretary of Agriculture. As a person who had

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been following the agricultural situation during the campaign, and who lived and worked in the agricultural community, were you able to appraise the reaction of farm people to this appointment in any way?

THOMPSON: Yes, I would say I did. I’ll confess to some personal surprise partly because Norris Ellertson, who was sort of an agricultural advisor to Orville Freeman when he was Governor of Minnesota, happened to come through Des Moines after election and we got to discussing the matter of the Secretary of Agriculture. Both our chiefs had been mentioned as possibilities, and he was saying he didn’t believe that his Governor was likely to be selected, and he didn’t think this was a post to be sought, with all of its problems, but I had gotten acquainted some, through meetings of Governors with Secretary Freeman, as he became, in the months prior. We had had a meeting in Minnesota once, St. Paul I believe actually, on a position to be taken to Washington by a group of midwest governors -- Democratic governors. They appeared before the House Agricultural Committee, as a matter of fact, and read a statement and testified individually on the seriousness of the farm problem and recommended action. They included Steve McNichols of Colorado, Ralph Herseth of South Dakota, Governor Blair of Missouri, Governor Freeman of Minnesota, our Governor Loveless of Iowa as leader of the group, Governor Brooks of Nebraska, Governor Williams of Michigan and Governor Nelson of Wisconsin. In the discussion that took place at this meeting in the Twin Cities and as part of

the summing up before the press, I recognized that Governor Freeman had a very good grasp of the agricultural issue and was quite

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articulate about it. His selection gave me no uneasiness about how he would perform. In some of the farm belt outside of Minnesota they didn't know him very well, and their appreciation of him had to grow with time. I would say, looking back at it now, that this appreciation developed first as he demonstrated at the August meeting in Des Moines in 1960, his efforts to tell the farmers' side of the story. This had been outstanding, and this fulfilled their request that there be a sympathetic Secretary of Agriculture.

BARNES: Now we come into the period immediately following the inauguration and the beginning of John Kennedy's incumbency as President. During this time were you involved in the formulation of the new Administration's agricultural program?

THOMPSON: Yes, I was appointed to the Feed Grain Advisory Committee which met about a week after inauguration, here in the Department. This advisory committee drew up some recommendations for an emergency feed grain bill. It amounted to a program of moderate price support, payments for diverting acreage from feed grains, and some other features. This land, it was emphasized, would have to be truly diverted and held out of production. This was an effort to make an effective supply adjustment program; it was the first one on the list. It not only meant we had come to grips with a program of more production of grains, but it also indirectly and quite importantly would have influence on the livestock industry -- prevent that from really getting into a lot of trouble on price and production.

BARNES: I don't know whether this is exactly the place to ask the question, but wasn't there at that time a real urgency about some action on the feed grain problem?

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THOMPSON: Oh yes, that's right. You may remember that during the 1950's the corn allotment program had gradually been weakened until it became rather ineffective with lowering the supports and at the same time cutting down the number of acres permitted for planting. I happened to believe in farm programs and I was farming. I kept with it to the very last, but every year there would be more of them leaving it until it had no effect. Then came the legislation in 1958 which permitted a referendum to abandon the program and this was done so that in 1959 and 1960 there was no acreage set aside whatsoever. They could plant all they wanted. Now some farmers did not do so. They might have gone back to about what you call their historical base, but there were others who overplanted and the result was that we had an acceleration in the accumulation of grain in the

government hands. It was running something like a million dollars a day for the storage of these surpluses, and it was bound to end in excessive livestock production. We had already been through two price collapse periods so that this was in the nature of a genuine emergency issue. That was why it was the first one up. The committee finished deliberating, as I recall, shortly after noon on a Saturday. On Monday the Secretary, Willard Cochrane, former Secretary Wickard and Fred Heinkel, President of the Missouri Farmers' association, who was chairman of this advisory committee, went to the White House to meet with the President and some of his aides to discuss these recommendations and the farm problem in general. It happened that when they got there they found three other persons also there to discuss some aspects of the farm problem, namely Lauren Soth, editor of the editorial pages of the Des Moines Register and Tribune, Jesse Tapp, once upon a time with the Department of Agriculture and then with

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the Department of Agriculture and then with the Bank of America, and Dean of Agriculture J. N. Efferson of Louisiana State University. I learned afterwards from Mr. Soth of the latter group that they did not know in advance exactly when the subject would be and it turned into a rather interesting exchange of ideas before President Kennedy.

It was highlighted by the difference of viewpoint expressed somewhat vigorously, I was told, by Mr. Tapp and former Secretary Wickard, on whether the adjustment of feed grain acreage was so terribly important to the livestock industry, with Secretary Wickard contending very vigorously that it was. This I learned was followed with great attention by the President. He found this quite interesting. The up-shot was that he did approve this attempt for legislation that was successful. Even though enacted a bit late it was put into action that same year and was the beginning of a series of annual programs which you might say have been the more successful of the actions taken. Now, one thing might be said here about this comeback, on the road back from the years when we did not have effective controls, got down to lower price levels, with more technology coming and actually raising the general efficiency level, there had to be a sort of a moderate modest start and that was involved in the determination of the support levels. At one point a member of the Council of Economic Advisors discussed this general problem, of all groups standing a share in this effort to make a comeback to economic health. He discussed this rather seriously before the National Agricultural Advisory Committee. This was the big, over-all committee. He used the word "sacrifice" --

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something to the effect that all groups had to share in the sacrifice to get things on the road back, and keep the stability of the economy. This I might say, was received in shocked silence by some of the members of the committee, and one, representing the dairy industry afterwards said: I represent producers who last year earned an average net of something like 38 cents an hour and my people are going to ask me, "How much more sacrifice will we have to stand?"

BARNES: Was this at the meeting with the President?

THOMPSON: No, this was not. This was before the agricultural commission itself, later. I mention this in passing because there had to develop and there has developed a somewhat different approach to these programs and this was understood by the President fairly early in the game, and this I think, when you make comparisons with the past, is evident.

BARNES: When did you become a part of the staff of the Department responsible for grain policy?

THOMPSON: That was in March 1961.

BARNES: So that you were in on the evolution of the Administration's farm legislation right from the beginning?

THOMPSON: Oh yes, at that time I was Director of what they call the Grain Division, a part of the administrative apparatus for the Commodity Credit Corporation's farm programs. I got my present assignment through reorganization of the agency in December of 1962.

BARNES: Having been here right from the beginning and dealt with the development of programs one after another during the three years of the President's term of office, would you say that the White House, insofar as you were able to tell, was sympathetic and understanding

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of the farm problem which certainly was one of the most perplexing it had to deal with? Was it your impression that the men around the President were impatient with this nagging problem that wouldn't go away, that they advised him soundly, and that he responded soundly to the advice that he was given?

THOMPSON: Well, I think there definitely was some perplexity at times because of the way in which a good deal of opposition developed to the farm programs. Some of this was not unexpected on the part of us who had been in agriculture over the years, and were fairly sure that the American Farm Bureau Federation probably would be in opposition. It turned out they were, mostly actively for example, in the wheat referendum of 1963. The responses to the voluntary feed grain program were good enough that it appeared that this kind of program made the President feel that on that particular kind of thing we had done all right. He undoubtedly was puzzled by the difficulty with the diary program. I never really had much to go on as to how he might have regarded an effort which was made for awhile on the marketing agreement approach, sort of what you

might call the bargaining power approach. This, as you may remember, was turned down in a sense by failure of the efforts to get a turkey agreement, and difficulty on the agreement involving chickens. And yet with all, each year when the time came for a message on agriculture to the Congress, it indicated that he was holding to the basic ideas of what had to be done. I wouldn't be positive that all of his advisors were in harmony with some of the feelings we may have had here in the Department. I suspect that there might

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have been uneasiness sometimes about the impact politically on things that were of economic sense, because it is difficult -- you have individual farmers making individual decisions, and an individual has a hard time equating his own actions with the result for the industry for his commodity group.

BARNES: But would it be correct to say that however much the President and the people immediately around him -- none of whom had an agricultural background as far as I know --

THOMPSON: I think that is right.

BARNES: ... however much they may have entertained misgivings about some of the programs that were advanced, once they were put forward by people whom they regarded as competent in the area of agriculture, they got behind them solidly and gave them all the support that we could ask for?

THOMPSON: Yes. I think the best indication of that, considering the fact that you say they were not grounded by the experience in agriculture, was in the first two years when they gave approval to the proposals which involved mandatory programs. There were pretty strong affairs, you might say, for the traditions of agriculture and yet they did put them forth with a great deal of vigor and with Presidential approval. They did not succeed the first year, nor the next year in a somewhat modified form. I would suppose that any President and his aides, that otherwise might be quite willing to accept the judgment of the Secretary of Agriculture and his aides on an economic basis -- might have had qualms the next year about going anywhere near that route. Yet, they did put it up again. And these things had good sound economic basis. The fact that they were not accepted is explainable on other grounds.

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BARNES: Mr. Thompson, with your background of involvement with the Kennedy Administration, and with the President himself, particularly during the campaign period and later in the Department's period of formulation of agricultural policies which he put forward and supported, would you like to tell us a bit of

your own personal feeling on the day on which the Kennedy Administration came to its abrupt and tragic end?

THOMPSON: Yes. That afternoon I was hurrying with some tables and a memorandum to be in discussion with the Under Secretary about 2 o'clock. My office secretary went up the hall to get some item from Mr. Jaenke's office. She came back in a hurry and asked if I knew why the folks up there seemed to be huddled around the radio. She said there seemed to be something going on. "No," I said, "I haven't any idea, but I'll go up and find out." She had not stayed to find out because of the pressure in getting the job done. When I got back up there it was soon evident. These were in the anxious moments still in Dallas before the result was well known. Needless to say, our 2 o'clock meeting was never held. Department employees were dismissed at 3 o'clock and most of them left.

I stayed around and I suppose it was 5 o'clock or thereabouts, when I walked down the hall and stopped to chat a little bit with Assistant Secretary John Baker, an old acquaintance. Then I walked on a little further and had a talk with Willard Cochrane. I left the Department of State, across the south end of the

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Ellipse. This happened to be the time when the Kennedy children were being flown out over my head by helicopter. These were hours of complete incredulity. I think this was universal.

I happen to be one who was never given much to demonstrative adulation of leaders. I did go down to Constitution Avenue for the funeral procession of Franklin D. Roosevelt and was always glad I did. So, in the same way I went out twice to watch the passing of the catafalque during that weekend in November 1963. The second time, I watched the funeral procession to Arlington Cemetery from a position along the street near the Lincoln Memorial. I happened to have been asked to accompany there a graduate student from Argentina at George Washington University. This was an opportunity to observe the impact of this tragedy on a national of another country. I would say that it matched that of Americans. I suppose some people charge this viewing to be morbid curiosity, but I had the feeling that a lot of the bystanders were there with a desire to see so that they could fully realize it was really so. I had a son in a midwestern college who drove back 1,100 miles nonstop with two of his classmates to see this for the same reason.

On the day after the funeral I was a member of a small mission to go to South America to hold discussion on grain matters with the Brazilians and with the Argentines. In Rio de Janeiro, at the American Embassy in a downtown location, there had been put -- into the reception hall, right off the street -- two large signature books, and they had been there a day or two before we arrived.

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There was still a constant stream of people off the streets who kept coming in to write their names in the book, to add a thought or two, and then pick up a small printed color picture,

not a photoprint, of the late President and Mrs. Kennedy. Some of them would leave symbols of a religious character, and some of other things. I saw this too while I was there; at no time, during several waits for a car, there was not always someone at one of the books. The magazines in Rio, two or three of what you might call news picture magazines, did an outstanding job of covering this matter. I never did see in American magazines some of the photographs that were taken. In Argentina where we visited about a week later, the first emotional surge had somewhat settled back, but there, too, we saw the magazines and heard the remarks of the people. This was an event regarded tragically by the whole world, apparently.

One member of our mission had just come out of Europe; he had been in Paris and London on that weekend. More than once a citizen of these cities would find out he was an American and offer condolences, and remark about their regard for the late President. There was, of course, the utter completeness of the tragedy which made feelings universal. The young wife, the children, everything to live for, and for us -- a manifestation of our better selves and, as has been so well said, the special grace suddenly and brutally ended.

As I said at the beginning, this matter of regard for the late President grew by stages, and, for me, perhaps in more involved fields than on the part of some people. In the field of not only farm policy,

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but of money management, international finance, matters of foreign investment, at one point his having shown is concern for the fact that American capital was going a little too eagerly into other countries -- as they said jumping the fence -- of wage and price issues, the problem of payments balance and world trade policies -- his attitudes on all these things added up to an ever increasing regard.

But I suppose the most dramatic thing of all, in a way, was the Cuban crisis, in which I had a small part. We spent much time here in the Department of Agriculture considering what we would do if this turned into a very serious matter. We were provided with the special passes that had on them such things as blood types in the event you were part of a certain team and had to go a certain direction if the signal was given. This challenge was appreciated, this stand of courage and judgement on the part of the President was appreciated all over the world.

BARNES: Thank you very much, Mr. Thompson. We'll have this transcribed and you will have an opportunity to look it over.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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