

Rowland Evans, Jr. Oral History Interview - JFK#1, 1/7/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Rowland Evans, Jr.
Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele
Date of Interview: January 7, 1966
Place of Interview: Washington, DC
Length: 54 pp.

Biographical Note

Evans, Rowland, Jr.; newspaper columnist with Robert Novak, and television commentator; discusses his association with John F. Kennedy [JFK], JFK's work on the foreign relations committee, his relation with Clare Booth Luce, his experience in the primaries, the role of the religious issues in JFK's presidential candidacy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. and the Humphrey-Kennedy relationship, liberalism, ethnic politics, Truman's opposition to JFK's candidacy and JFK's coup with Michael V. DiSalle, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed March 27, 1990, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the

transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Rowland Evans, Jr., recorded interview by Ronald J. Grele, January 7, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of
Rowland Evans, Jr.

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Rowland Evans, Jr., of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of personal interviews conducted on 1/7/66 and 7/30/70 at Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

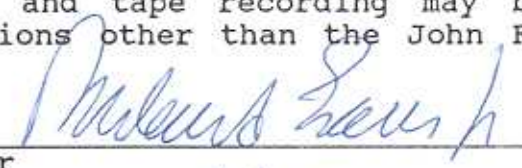
(1) The transcript shall be made available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the John F. Kennedy Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

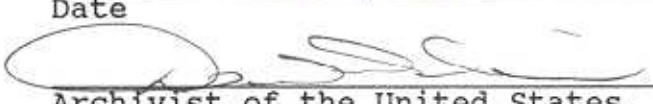
(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.


Donor

2/1/90
Date


Archivist of the United States

3/21/90
Date

Rowland Evans, Jr. – JFK#1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Beginning of association with John F. Kennedy [JFK]
4	JFK on the Foreign Relations Committee
12	Clare Boothe Luce
13	First impressions of the Kennedy organization
15	Tension in the Kennedy family
16	JFK's illness (back problem)
18	Wisconsin primary, 1960
20	Test Ban Treaty
23	West Virginia Primary: Impact on JFK
24	West Virginia Primary: Catholic factor
26	West Virginia Primary: Polls
28	West Virginia Primary: Campaign money
30	West Virginia Primary: Key players and techniques
33	West Virginia Primary: Rally snafu (airport mix-up)
35	Religious issue anecdote
37	Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr.'s statements about Hubert Humphrey's war record and their impact on the Humphrey-Kennedy relations
42	JFK and liberalism
43	JFK and ethnic politics
47	Truman opposes JFK for President
51	JFK states he will be nominated for President
53	JFK's coup with Michael V. DiSalle

Oral History Interview

with

ROWLAND EVANS, JR.

January 7, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Evans, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

EVANS: I don't recall the day, or even the year, but it was about 1953, 1954, or 1955 — in that period after he was elected to the Senate in 1952. I remember running into him frequently up in the Senate corridors, maybe in a Committee hearing and then walking over to his office with him, but I have no vivid recollections of the President before, really, 1956.

GRELE: You were then working for the [*New York*] *Herald Tribune*?

EVANS: Yes. I moved to the Herald Tribune in 1955.

[-1-]

I suppose I had telephone conversations with him when I was with the Associated Press. I do remember I used to talk to him on the phone, but I didn't know him at all really until 1956 and the Convention experience that year. I was not at the Convention, but of course that immediately made John Kennedy much more of a political figure. Although I had known him slightly in kind of a semi-social way, that made him a fascinating figure.

GRELE: What were your impressions of him when you first met him or first noticed him?

EVANS: Oh, not very different from what they are today. It was always a pleasant encounter when you ran into John Kennedy because he had a little needle he put in on one aspect or another of your life; he would know enough about it to be able to tease you a

[-2-]

little bit. He was always laconic, witty, wry, and funny, and he always had a little commentary on whatever the situation that interested you was that made him a delight to run into.

GRELE: Am I correct in assuming that you knew him more or less socially during these years of his Senate career?

EVANS: Well, we would see him a good deal socially. He would come over here for dinner or we would go over there. We would see him around, but I would say it was half and half. I mean it was also politically because I was writing about him, writing about politics and writing about the Senate, so the two merged.

GRELE: Was he married at the time?

[-3-]

EVANS: Oh, yes. He was married in 1952 or 1953. Yes, definitely.

GRELE: What particular aspects of his political career did you concentrate on? Can you recall?

EVANS: Straight elective politics, his campaign for the Senate in Massachusetts in 1958.

GRELE: Did you cover that campaign?

EVANS: I went up there and did a couple of columns on it. I never saw him, but I saw his organization and went through the state. I also covered his foreign policy work in the Senate and on the Foreign Relations Committee. Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had gone to some trouble in 1953 to place John Kennedy on the Foreign Relations Committee, and I used to cover that Committee for the AP. Johnson had passed Jack Kennedy over — no, it wasn't 1953; it must have been

[-4-]

1955 — he passed him over the head of several more senior Democrats in the Senate who wanted to be on the Foreign Relations Committee and had put Jack Kennedy on Foreign Relations. I covered that Committee so I used to see a lot of him in that relationship.

GRELE: Did anyone ever tell you why he had placed John Kennedy on that Committee instead of men who were seniors in Senate service?

EVANS: Well, you know, he went out of his way for... No, it wasn't 1955. Isn't that funny? It must have been 1957. Johnson made a point in the Senate when he became the leader in 1953 of distorting, if not totally obliterating, the seniority rule, and he did it because he felt the younger members, younger Democrats, of the Senate should have a good committee rather than sit on the Post

[-5-]

Office and Civil Service Committee for five or ten years before a vacancy opened up on a really good committee. As a result he took younger men. He took Mike Mansfield; the first year he got into the Senate Mike Mansfield went on the Foreign Relations Committee. He had been on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He took Stu Symington [Stuart Symington II] the first year in the Senate and put him on the Armed Services Committee. He had been Secretary of the Air Force. And as I say, he took Jack Kennedy and put him on Foreign Relations in — I thought it was 1955, but it must have been 1957. It was. He put him on after the 1956 election.

So I saw a good deal of him then, he and Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis] would come over here and we would go over there. Not a great deal, but two or three

[-6-]

times a year. I would offer to eat lunch with him. Eating lunch with him in the Senate was an experience because even then — we are now in, say 1957, after the 1956 Convention in Chicago. He had of course become a figure of tremendous appeal to people. Just everybody knew about him. He had been on the cover of every magazine. We used to have lunch over there, and it was an incredible thing to have lunch with Kennedy in the Senate Dining Room because everybody, somebody from every table in the dining room, before that meal was over would come over and he would have to get up and say hello. I used to kid him that he couldn't eat lunch in the Senate Dining Room and eat; you can have a ceremony and a performance, but you can't really eat lunch because you don't

[-7-]

have time. I used to kid him in those days about all the — I'm sure you have heard many of these stories — about all the publicity he was getting as a result of having been almost nominated for the Vice Presidency and being spawned as the 1960 presidential contender. I'd say one day, "You really ought to tone down this magazine splurge because it is getting boring. There is too much of it. You've got your face on the cover of every magazine." He said, "I think you may be right, but if somebody comes down here from

New York and comes to your office...(machine cut off — resumes) He said, "If somebody comes to your office and they knock on the door and you see them and they say, 'My editor sent me down here to do a story,' what am I going to say? I don't

[-8-]

want you to do my story? I wouldn't make a good story, beat it! I can't say that! I have to be nice to these people, and when they do a good story on me I give them everything they want. And besides," he said, "this publicity does one good thing; it takes the V out of VP," meaning that it would make him a presidential candidate instead of vice presidential candidate.

He accomplished a hell of a lot in those days in the Senate in a very casual way. I remember one day walking over with him from the Chamber to his office in the Senate Office Building and we went down to the basement of the Capitol where they have a recording studio where the Senators record statements for back home. I said, "What are we doing down here?", and he said. "I just have a brief stop at the TV studio."

[-9-]

He stopped in there and spoke extemporaneously for ten minutes on Medicare, plugging the Medicare bill. This was about 1957 or 1958, I guess. He spoke into a little microphone for ten minutes saying, "This is the most important thing in your life. The Democratic Party is going to give you Medicare," and etc., etc. Then we walked over to his office for lunch — which is usually brought in, as you know, by Provie or somebody from the house — and he would sit there at lunch having done this little broadcast which seemed very innocent and not very important, but actually he was building up these tapes on all kinds of issues and they were being used all over the country. They were all part of this tremendous buildup which he had set into motion very quietly and

[-10-]

very thoroughly without any wasted effort or energy.

GRELE: It was apparent then that he was planning for the presidential nomination?

EVANS: Yes. This must have been 1958 or 1959. Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop] amazed me one night in 1957, I think, by predicting flatly that Kennedy was going to run for President and be nominated. Well, I thought he was going to run, but I never thought he would be nominated at that point. But he had the whole thing very carefully figured out. He knew exactly which primaries he was going into, more or less, depending, of course, on what Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] and the other contenders would do, well before the time limit.

GRELE: When you covered his work on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, what was your impression of

[-11-]

his work on that Committee?

EVANS: He never made much noise in that Committee. He took a part in the confirmation hearings of Clare Boothe Luce, who had been nominated as Ambassador to Argentina by Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] in 1959, I guess it was. He would take a small part in a situation like that to lay a very small record to show why he was supporting Mrs. Luce. In fact, I think he was later unhappy that he had supported her.

GRELE: Did he ever tell you this?

EVANS: My memory is a little vague. We sat here one night out in the garden right after that confirmation and after Wayne Morse [Wayne L. Morse] had been attacked by Mrs. Luce. My vivid recollection is that the President was extremely annoyed

[-12-]

at Mrs. Luce for having made these disparaging remarks about Morse. I don't remember precisely whether he said he was sorry he had voted to confirm. It would have been difficult for him not to. He played a rather prosaic role in the Senate, and it would have been out of character, I think, for Kennedy to have opposed Mrs. Luce unless there was some really important extenuating circumstance, which in her case there really wasn't. She was just an old bitch and he knew it.

GRELE: Back to the campaign you covered in Massachusetts when you first came in contact with the Kennedy organization, what was your impression of this organization?

EVANS: My opinion of that is really worth very little. I spent three days up there. I met

[-13-]

Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] for the first time. My impression of his opponent was that he had about the weakest opponent that any senatorial candidate could have in Massachusetts. Although he used to kid about that, you know, "This is a very great Republican who is running against me; it is going to be a close race," the fact was that whether he had a good or bad organization in 1958 didn't make a damn bit of difference to the outcome. I'm sure that in fact he had a good organization because he always had a good organization everywhere, but I can't give you any first-hand details on that. You know, he had the teas and the town committees. He had all that organized and I didn't even see him in the campaign.

[-14-]

GRELE: At the time when you were first meeting John Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy socially, I believe there were reports that there was tension in the family. Did you ever notice any of this?

EVANS: I never noticed the slightest sign of any tension. I know there were a lot of reports and they may have been accurate, but I never saw the slightest sign of that. He was always very gay to have at a party. Like so many other people — young men, attractive guys — he always would like to sit quietly and talk to a pretty girl or make a play for a pretty girl. There was an awful lot of teasing and banter and this constant needling — not mean, always frivolous and pleasant, but this little needling would go on at parties with him. I never noticed the slightest sign of tension or friction. In fact,

[-15-]

I never noticed that anytime. I remember in 1961 we were up at the Cape and he asked us to come over and see him for cocktails one Sunday afternoon. It was in the summer and he was up in Hyannis Port and we were near there. I said, "That's fine, Mr. President, but you had better check Jackie." There was a pause and he laughed and he said, "Oh I don't have to check Jackie; I still have some rights around here." I mean, there was this kind of play going back and forth all the time, but I never saw any friction.

GRELE: When you first met him, what was the stage of his illness — his back — do you recall anything about it?

EVANS: Well, I remember distinctly his coming on to the floor in 1955, I guess it was, the spring

[-16-]

or early summer of 1955 when he came back from Palm Beach on crutches. I was in the gallery and I have a vivid impression of him coming through the main door and up the main aisle, and the whole Senate standing. He was on crutches walking very slowly. I remember Johnson getting up from his majority leader's chair and making a very pertinent nice little speech about how glad the Senate was that Jack Kennedy had fought his way through this. I never got into that with him that I can recall.

GRELE: He never discussed his illness?

EVANS: Yes, he may have. I just don't recall ever sitting down with him and having a long talk about his back.

[-17-]

GRELE: Moving on now to the Convention. Did you cover the primaries for the Convention?

EVANS: Oh, I did. I covered the primaries.

GRELE: Which ones?

EVANS: Mainly West Virginia. I flew out with him once to Wisconsin. I went in to see him for lunch one day in February or March of 1960, and the lunch lasted longer than it should have and at 3:30 Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] came in and said, "You are due to leave National Airport at 4 o'clock, or whatever it was. I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going out to Milwaukee. I've got to make an appearance tonight at a primary rally." I could check the town. It was the first rally that Bill Walton [William Walton] ran in the Wisconsin primary. He was going to fly to Milwaukee and drive for an hour to this

[-18-]

rally and be there at 7 o'clock and make a speech.

GRELE: Janesville?

EVANS: No, no. So I said, "Oh, that sounds interesting." He said, "Why don't you come along?" I had an overcoat but nothing else, so I got Evelyn to call Katherine [Katherine Winton Evans] and I went along. I was doing a piece then on Kennedy as a presidential candidate for the *Tribune* and I asked him a great many questions on the way out about how he ever had time. One point I was trying to draw out of this was that running for President is a fulltime job, even before the nomination, and that a man who does it has to give up everything else in life, all aspects of his private life. I asked him who he ever saw, how he had any friends, and

[-19-]

his answer was that a man builds friendships along the way, starting early, and if they are built right they last and they don't have to be constantly nourished and fertilized, that they are there and they give enjoyment to both sides. He said, "Now, I have a lot of friends that I don't see a great deal of, but a lot of them are going to be helping me in this campaign." He went through the list. You know, Chuck Spalding [Charles Spalding], Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.], etc. The fact that he always had members of his family around filled this gap of not being able to spend a lot of time with friends. He was in a curiously... I remember that day very vividly because Humphrey had been — of course he was in the Wisconsin primary against him — Humphrey was making a major issue out of the Test Ban Treaty.

[-20-]

Kennedy was afraid Humphrey might be outflanking him on the Test Ban Treaty. He had Humphrey's latest speech, and he would go through two or three paragraphs and stop and read me a sentence and say, "What do you think of that? Hubert ought to know better than that." The point being that he thought Hubert was going too far and exposing the United States a little bit too much in his desire for the Test Ban Treaty.

GRELE: Do you remember any of the particular sentences?

EVANS: No, I don't. I couldn't possibly, not remotely. But he was worried about this. This was an issue in which he did not want to get outflanked, which Humphrey was a clear leader in — the peace issue. Hubert had that issue, he thought, and he had been more active in it than any other Democrat. He was securely detached that afternoon and

[-21-]

seemed to be concerned and bothered about things the way they were going. Max Freedman came out on that plane that day and sat way up in one corner while for some reason Kennedy and I sat in the back. I think he was tired, he was just getting in to the tail end of the Wisconsin primary and after that, you know, there was this endless procession of combat, political combat, that he engaged to undertake and he was tired that afternoon. But the point was that in his life as a candidate there was very little wasted time and yet with all the appurtenances that he had such as the Caroline, Mugsy [John J. O'Leary] with the car always there ready to drive, Jackie at home ready to send that lunch out, he moved terribly fast

[-22-]

yet he didn't seem to move fast. So anyway, we went out to Wisconsin and he was a smash at this rally. It was the first time I had seen Bill Walton. Bill Walton had just joined the campaign and it was the first time I had seen him since he had joined the campaign. He had organized this rally. Then I saw Kennedy a great deal in the West Virginia primary. I mean I spent weeks down there. I think the West Virginia primary had a profound impact on him.

GRELE: In what way?

EVANS: Well, psychologically and politically. It affected his sensitivities. He had never seen anything like this before. He would stop off at the collieries and get out and go down and

[-23-]

shake hands with the miners, and he would go back into the creeks and hollows and look at those houses and he just couldn't believe that Americans actually lived this way; he had

never seen it before. Neither had I. What specifically about the primary do you want to know?

GRELE: How much of a factor was the religious issue?

EVANS: You mean in the primary elections?

GRELE: Yes.

EVANS: Well, I think it was a major factor.

GRELE: Do you ever recall him discussing it?

EVANS: Oh yes, he discussed it all the time. He went down there to open the campaign, I've forgotten the dates now, but it was a month before the election, and on that first trip that I went on — I can't remember the towns now. It wasn't

[-24-]

Huntington, it was not Wheeling...

GRELE: Bluefield?

EVANS: No, it was up north. Anyway, he had a very poor turnout the first morning and it was disappointing. On the second day of that trip he was obviously prepared to make a major play on the religious issue, which I am convinced he did not originally want to do in West Virginia. He hoped that he would be able to ride this out and be accepted for what he was without having to make a major pitch on the religious issue. But he was not getting across. There was tremendous hostility, all the ministers were aroused. I don't mean all of them, but a great many of the ministers were aroused. Propaganda was being printed and distributed all over the state. I ran across the Knights of Columbus Oath toward

[-25-]

the end of the campaign, you know, the blood oath that Kennedy was supposed to have taken along with all the Catholics.

Anyway, on this particular trip, which was one of the first major trips down there, he finally decided to open up on the fact that "nobody asked me my religion when I went to fight World War II," and made this very moving appeal to remove religion from the campaign. This had an instantaneous reaction, a healthy reaction, and he continued and accentuated this campaign right up until the election. So it played a tremendous part. I did a lot of polling.

GRELE: Did he ever comment to you on the Harris [Louis Harris] polls? How effective he believed they were in West Virginia?

EVANS: Well, of course, in hindsight he said afterwards

[-26-]

that if he had known the real story in West Virginia as it was not told in the first major Harris poll that took him in there which showed him winning, I think, 60/40 or 70/30, he never would have gone in. I don't really believe that though. I think he would have gone in to West Virginia if the poll had been no worse than 50/50 or even 45/55. He was brilliant as a tactician and a politician in overplaying the odds against him. I will never know, and I don't think anybody will ever know how much Jack Kennedy really meant it when he told a reporter or he told anybody, "You know, I may lose this for the following reasons..." Whether this was building a psychology so a win would look much more significant, I don't know.

[-27-]

He was very, very psychological in playing these games. The only thing I remember about the Harris Poll was that he kept kidding about that first poll. He would say, "Boy, Lou Harris was down here, but I don't know who he talked to!" because the polls showed him much stronger than he really was. In fact, he may have been that strong all the time. I don't know. This is a matter of public opinion and it is very hard to decide.

GRELE: At the time, I believe, there was a great deal of discussion of Kennedy money, especially among the Humphrey people. Did you ever notice Kennedy money being spent in West Virginia?

EVANS: There is no question that he spent, by comparison with Humphrey, a great deal of money, but nothing

[-28-]

like the amounts the Republicans, Dick Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon], and the Humphrey people suggested. The money was spent to "slate." You know what I'm talking about?

GRELE: Yes.

EVANS: It was a routine operation. You link up the Kennedy name with the best slate in each county and that requires giving money to that slate to oil up the polls, get the workers out to ring doorbells, to get the automobiles to take the voters to the polls. I don't know what it came to, you know, maybe a couple of hundred thousand dollars, something like that, or maybe a great deal more. I don't know. It never really impressed me as an argument one way or the other.

GRELE: Do you recall anyone who was particularly effective

[-29-]

in the Kennedy organization or particularly ineffective in that primary?

EVANS: Well, I thought McDonough [Robert P. McDonough], who was of course the local man and now state chairman, and O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] worked very closely together. Kenny traveled with the candidate more. He was more the kind of personal assistant who was always on the spot. I would say O'Brien and McDonough were first rate in that campaign, did most of the planning and strategy.

GRELE: It has always struck me as somewhat, well, not odd or strange, but different that the Kennedy organization would move in with personal friends like Lem Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings] or Bill Walton into places like Wisconsin and West Virginia

[-30-]

and yet never seem to engender any hostility among the locals.

EVANS: Kennedy's point was always that the business of paying for campaign workers was a highly overrated business anyway because if you had to buy campaign workers they weren't... Well, a campaign worker who had to be paid was not nearly as good as a campaign worker who was genuinely enthused enough to go out and work on his own. He used to talk about how in all of these primary states ninety per cent of his organization was voluntary and working hard. You are right, and I think the reason was that Billings and people like that — I don't know whether you are totally right that they weren't objected to, but I know of no case where they

[-31-]

were objected to vocally — the reason was that they really felt so strongly about him. Everything pointed to Jack Kennedy. As Larry O'Brien used to say, if you have a candidate like that so much of the other work of the campaign falls automatically into place. People come out and they want to help; money comes in because they really have enthusiasm for the guy; the crowds come out because they have read about him and they like what they see. If you have a good candidate it is not hard to construct an efficient organization. It is the easiest thing in the world. The hard thing is to find the right candidate, and this was the incredible thing about Kennedy, that he had this tremendous charm that came over no matter where he was, no matter what kind of people he was dealing with;

[-32-]

they felt this. In West Virginia they didn't leave a single stone unturned in any political technique. He was flying out to West Virginia to meet a crowd of five hundred people at an airport reception with Wayne Hays [Wayne L. Hays] of Ohio who had a plane. Hays put him and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] down at the wrong field. Have you heard this story?

GRELE: No.

EVANS: There was nobody there. They were amazed. "What happened? Where is everybody? We've lost out this quickly?" Then they realized they were in the wrong place. Wayne Hays took off and they got a car, but they couldn't possibly drive back across the mountains. Kennedy went on with his regular schedule having missed that

[-33-]

airport rally and Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] was sent back to that town and got the names of half or three-quarters of the people who had gone out there to the airport and Jack Kennedy wrote every one of them a letter! He said, "I came down at the wrong airport. I'm awfully sorry you waited for me." Well, this kind of thing, that is organization because you can imagine what an impression that would make on these people.

GRELE: Were there ever any discussions about bloc voters in West Virginia? Say union voters, or the Negro voters?

EVANS: There was a very low Negro vote. I don't remember the... Kennedy just put it all over Hubert Humphrey really on every basis in that campaign. He seized the initiative on

[-34-]

the religious issue. If I only could think of the little stories that came out of that campaign. I interviewed one old farmer and I said, "Who are you going to vote for?" and he said "Kennedy." I said, "Are you a Catholic?" He said, "No." This is the standard interview technique if you are doing a poll. You get the religion and line it up. I said, "You must be a Catholic if you are going to support Kennedy." He said, "No, why do you say that?" I said, "Well, the Catholics have the Pope and we have been hearing about the power of the Pope. How do you feel about that?" "Oh," he said, "I know the Catholics have the Pope, but we Protestants have the Archbishop of Canterbury and it is the same damn difference." You ran into incredible

[-35-]

little flashes of insight like this all over the state. It was the most fascinating primary election that I have ever had anything to do with. Kennedy had his momentum up, he kept playing on the fact that you couldn't hold it against him that he was born a Catholic,

and it went over. Humphrey brought some money down into the state two or three days before the election, a little black bag borne by Earle Clements [Earle C. Clements] of Kentucky and they threw this money all over the state but it was too late. The Kennedy organization had slated wisely so the voter came in and voted for the Smith-Jones ticket and Kennedy. Smith-Jones won and Kennedy won.

I could tell you about what happened that night — the night of the election — but you have

[-36-]

read all that, that's all public. Where do you want to go to? I don't think I'm helping you much here.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the events surrounding the incident when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. slurred Humphrey about his war record? Any reactions in the Kennedy camp? How it affected voters?

EVANS: Well, I think that the whole thing was planned. I don't know that for a fact, but... They were worried about Franklin, Jack Kennedy was worried about Franklin and he had a guy [Fred A. Forbes] whose name escapes me whom I know from New Hampshire assigned to Franklin, stayed with him all the time, handled his campaign. I had seen Franklin down there with this man.

[-37-]

GRELE: Why were they worried about him?

EVANS: He was a little flamboyant. They didn't know what Franklin was going to do next and he had all this material. I don't know that they planned for him to deliver it at this point. I was down there just before this happened. In fact, I had lunch with Jackie in Wheeling, West Virginia on the day that this happened. (Machine turned off; resumes) Forbes was this guy's name, Freddie Forbes. Freddie Forbes had been attached to Franklin by Jack Kennedy. I got home that afternoon at 6 o'clock and the next morning was a Saturday. I think he unloaded this on Friday or Saturday. Anyway, Franklin called me from down there and said, "I want you to know what I have done," and told me the whole story on the phone. I was

[-38-]

flabbergasted! He said that he had given this interview or made this speech questioning Hubert's war record. I called Minneapolis and I got the full war record of Hubert Humphrey and wrote a long story on it. I don't know to this day whether the timing of Roosevelt's speech was deliberate in the Kennedy camp or whether he was speaking out of context from the campaign. I tend to think it was the former. I tend to think that they decided this was a good time; whether they thought he would do it quite this way or that he would make this much of it, I don't know. I know that later after the assassination this

event was recalled by two of the major participants and there was a disagreement as to who was really responsible for it: Franklin or the Kennedy camp.

GRELE: How did it affect the future relations between

[-39-]

John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey?

EVANS: Not at all.

GRELE: Not at all?

EVANS: By future you mean the long future?

GRELE: Yes, in the long run.

EVANS: It totally embittered Hubert and maddened him in the short term. It had a very unhealthy effect among the liberals who had been gradually coming over to Jack Kennedy because it looked like a slimy stab-in-the-back kind of back alley play. There had been a good deal of liberal suspicion for years about Jack Kennedy and his liberalism; was it authentic or was it phony. This tended to raise all those doubts all over again: the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] issue, Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] having worked for the McCarthy Committee, the

[-40-]

President having not been there and not recorded himself on the McCarthy censure vote. All these images came flying back as a result of Franklin Roosevelt's speech about Hubert's war record. I think in the short run it had a very bad effect on Kennedy in this situation, in this sense. Politically in West Virginia it undoubtedly hurt Hubert. West Virginia had the highest rate of enlistments, I think, in World War II and the highest percentage in the Army in that point in 1960, and they liked a fighter. To have it forceably headlined out this way, that Hubert Humphrey was either a draft dodger or 4F obviously hurt Hubert Humphrey in that campaign. So from a political sense it was a wise strategy in the short run,

[-41-]

but in terms of the country and the whole sweep of the liberal movement and Jack Kennedy's involvement in it, it was a mistake.

GRELE: Did he ever discuss his relations with liberals with you?

EVANS: Kennedy didn't like the word liberal. He thought the liberals often posed and postured and spoke for the record, not from the heart.

GRELE: Anyone in particular?

EVANS: No, and I would say there would be exceptions in particular. Paul Douglas would be an exception. Kennedy was too pragmatic a politician to want to be attached by a label like that. He never used the word "liberal." He was a member of the Americans for Democratic Action, but he never referred to himself in "the great liberal tradition," or "I am a liberal Democratic and I

[-42-]

come from a state that has a liberal voting record." He never used that word; I think he had scorn for the professional liberals.

He used to tell stories about early politics in Boston as told to him by his grandfather, Honey Fitz [John Francis Fitzgerald]. I remember riding around with him one afternoon in West Virginia and he recalled stories about politics in the old days in Boston and Massachusetts as recounted to him by Honey Fitz, and then he lamented the fact that all that had now changed and the politics in the big Eastern states had become a puzzle in which you tried to fit in each ethnic group to its proper weighted ratio in population percentage of the community within the political power structure, and that isn't

[-43-]

it sad, I remember his point was, that this cuts across so many avenues of political opportunity that are closed to people because they don't happen to fit these ethnic origins. His point was that politics had become a predictable game; you needed a Jew, you needed a Catholic, you needed a Yankee, you needed a Pole, and you needed an Italian, and that you slated your tickets this way, not on the basis of ability, imagination, or enthusiasm, but on the basis of these ethnic groups and that it took half the fun out of the game.

GRELE: Did this attitude, to your mind, ever cause any trouble with the leaders of these various groups?

EVANS: No, not in the slightest. It simply meant that he understood this, probably better than

[-44-]

anybody else in America, which is why he was nominated for President. He understood the importance of ethnic politics, but at the same time privately he could say, "It is too damn bad that we have to live our politics this way, but since we do I'm going to do it better than anybody else." His point was that it really wasn't the same as politics had been when Honey Fitz was active in Massachusetts.

GRELE: From West Virginia did you then move on to the Convention, or did you move to Maryland or Oregon for the primaries?

EVANS: No, I didn't. I saw a good deal of him right here in those days, right here in this block because his brother-in-law was across the street, Steve [Stephen E. Smith] and Jean [Jean Kennedy Smith] Smith.

[-45-]

Whenever he came back to town in those days he would be over there in the evening plotting strategy with the Smiths and Larry and Kenny. He would come out of that house about midnight and he would yell across the street to me, and if I were asleep...

GRELE: He would yell across the street?

EVANS: Yes.

GRELE: Didn't they have the Georgetown Civic Association at that time?

EVANS: No, they were all asleep. He would stand on the door stoop and holler over and say, "Rowland! Come out of there, Rowland!" or something like that. That was what he would say, "Come out of there." I saw a lot of him right here. I would go down and open the door and bring him

[-46-]

in and we would have a brandy or go back in the garden, or if I had some people here he would come over and sit and talk, and then I would walk him home. He usually had his cane. One evening he came over here just after Truman [Harry S. Truman] had made it clear that he didn't want Kennedy for a presidential candidate, and this really affected Kennedy. It really angered him. He paced up and down the living room and backed up against the sofa — I remember he was kind of pulling the back of the sofa over and I was afraid the whole sofa was going to fall on him — and he was agitated talking about Truman and how old men who were out of politics ought to stay out of it and not mix into it when a new generation comes

[-47-]

along and starts to compete for the political power that the older generation once had. It really bothered him about Truman, and he put the basis of the whole thing down to anti-Catholicism with Harry Truman.

GRELE: Did he ever talk about Truman's comment about his father?

EVANS: I don't remember what the comment was. What was it?

GRELE: "I just don't want Joe Kennedy's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] boy in the White House."

EVANS: No, I don't remember it. He probably did, but I just don't remember his putting it that way. All I remember of that particular evening was that he was extremely agitated with Truman. I want to get into these notes here.

[-48-]

I haven't looked through any of this stuff for so long. You ought to come back — if you want to.

GRELE: Yes, I do.

EVANS: Because this is a very dim period that we are talking about now. Let me show you one interesting thing here on West Virginia. No, I don't have it. You know, he lost his voice there also in the West Virginia primary. On that Catholic thing I wrote a little story showing how a Catholic in a small town in West Virginia had been severely censored by the local town officials for campaigning for Jack Kennedy. It was an outrageous thing. The Catholic was attacked by all the Protestant officials of this town for... I wrote a little story on it. It was at the time he had lost his voice and he wrote a little

[-49-]

note to Charlie Bartlett [Charles Bartlett], having read the story, and said, "That was a great story that Evans had today. Why don't you write something like that?" meaning, in other words, that it was in his favor. (I don't know where it is.) He was — well, we're not on the campaign yet. Let me think. Yeah, I guess then we went out to the Convention.

GRELE: On those evenings when he was at the Smiths' and came over, do you recall any other particular evening after a particular event?

EVANS: I remember he came over and Bus HS Macomber [William B. Macomber, Jr.] was here having dinner with me, he was Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Affairs, and it was just after the Clare Boothe Luce thing. He came over that evening — that

[-50-]

was in 1959 — and we went out in the garden and talked about Clare Boothe Luce. On that occasion, now that I think of it, Macomber, who knew him because he knew everybody on the Foreign Relations Committee — he had to as Assistant Secretary — very respectfully said, "Senator, what do you think about next year? I guess you are going to run?" Jack said, "Yes, I fully expect to, and I'm going to be nominated." Macomber said, "You mean for Vice President?" Kennedy said, "No, no, I mean for President."

Macomber was flabbergasted. As he commented to me later, it was such a statement of fact and so much of a definitive quality of the statement that he was flabbergasted. He said, "What the hell makes you think you can get it?" Kennedy's answer was, "Well, I look

[-51-]

around and I don't see anybody else who can get it easier, and that is why I think I will get it. And further, I don't know of anybody who is more able to do the job than I am." This was his approach to it. Macomber was flabbergasted at, not the conceit, but the matter-of-fact quality, this kind of coldly clinical quality with which he was approaching his fight for the nomination. "Nobody else is more able and nobody else has any more chance than I do to get it. Therefore, since I am going to work harder than anybody else, I know I am going to be nominated."

GRELE: In those post-primary, pre-Convention days, do you recall any discussions of strategy? Did he ever comment on the Ohio delegation,

[-52-]

the California delegation, whether or not Texas would go such and such a way, who he had working for him?

EVANS: They are just scatters in my memory now. I just can't put specific conversations together on that. He talked about delegations all the time. He talked about his coup with DiSalle [Michael V. DiSalle], about whether he was going to go into Indiana.

GRELE: What did he say about his coup with DiSalle?

EVANS: DiSalle? He said that this was his first great breakthrough, and I knew that it had been worked on very carefully before he went out there with John Bailey [John Moran Bailey]. What he said specifically I don't know, but the whole portent was that they really crowded DiSalle into a corner and said, "You do it or you are going to find yourself

[-53-]

in the wrong end of the stakes. We are going to come in and beat you." But he always did it very tenderly. Jack Kennedy wouldn't tell me that he put a knife to DiSalle's chest, but this was obviously what it was, that they had taken him and shook him like a terrier and said, "You support me," and DiSalle did and it was a great breakthrough.

GRELE: Then the Indiana primary?

EVANS: Well, I don't remember specifically. I just mentioned that because I remember sitting in his office one day talking about the primaries and he did not know, or claimed he didn't know, exactly which ones he was going to go into. . .

GRELE: This is the end of the first interview with Mr. Rowland Evans, Jr.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-54-]

Rowland Evans, Jr. Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

A

Alsop, Joseph W. 11

B

Bailey, John Moran 53
Bartlett, Charles 50
Billings, Kirk LeMoyne 30,31

C

Clements, Earle C. 36

D

DiSalle, Michael V. 53,54
Douglas, Paul 42

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D. 12
Evans, Katherine Winton 19

F

Fay, Paul B., Jr. 20
Fitzgerald, John Francis 43,45
Forbes, Fred A. 37,38
Freedman, Max 22

H

Harris, Louis 26-28
Hays, Wayne L. 33
Humphrey, Hubert H.
11,20,21,28,29,34,36,37,39,40,41

J

Johnson, Lyndon B. 3-5,17

K

Kennedy, Edward M. 34

Kennedy, John F. 1-7,11,13,15,17,19,21-23,26-
42, 47,49,51,54
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr. 48
Kennedy, Robert F. 40

L

Lincoln, Evelyn N. 18
Luce, Clare Boothe 12,13,51

M

Macomber, William B., Jr. 50-52
Mansfield, Mike 6
McCarthy, Joseph R. 40,41
McDonough, Robert P. 30
Morse, Wayne L. 12,13

N

Nixon, Richard M. 29

O

O'Brien, Lawrence F. 30,32,46
O'Donnell, Kenneth P. 14,46
O'Leary, John J. 22
Onassis, Jacqueline B. Kennedy 6,15,16,22,38

R

Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr. 37-39,41

S

Smith, Jean Kennedy 45-50
Smith, Stephen E. 45,46,50
Sorensen, Theodore C. 33
Spalding, Charles 20
Symington, Stuart,II 6

T

Truman, Harry S. 47,48

W

Walton, William 18,23,30