

Benjamin H. Swig Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 11/18/1970
Administrative Information

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Benjamin H. Swig (1893-1980) was a California political figure; delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1956 and 1960; and member of the President's Committee for Traffic Safety from 1961 to 1963. This interview focuses on Swig's acquaintance with the Kennedy family, John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s charisma, and Swig's political support for JFK, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Benjamin H. Swig

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Oral History Interview

with

BENJAMIN H. SWIG

November 18, 1980
San Francisco, California

By Ann M. Campbell

For the John F. Kennedy Library

CAMPBELL: Mr. Swig, maybe we could begin this afternoon by my asking you for your earliest recollections of the Kennedy family in Boston.

SWIG: Yes. My earliest recollection, of course, comes first from the grandfather of the Kennedys...

CAMPBELL: Honey Fitz [John F. Fitzgerald].

SWIG: ... through the mother of Jack, to Rose [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] herself. I knew Honey Fitz, John F. Fitzgerald, very well. He was mayor of the city of Boston, and now he's considered a great... [Interruption]

CAMPBELL: Were you involved in Boston politics with Honey...

SWIG: No. I was not.

CAMPBELL: You weren't?

SWIG: Not to any great extent. [Interruption] Where were we now?

CAMPBELL: Well, you had said that you weren't really involved in politics in Boston.

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SWIG: No, but I knew John F. Fitzgerald on account of him being mayor of our city, and I had met his daughter on several occasions. We knew her as Rosie Fitzgerald. And -- of course, I didn't remember at the time, but I did know it later -- when I had an office at Coolidge Corner in Brookline, Jack was born right around the corner from me on Beals Street. I don't remember the number. It seems to me as though it was ten, but I'm not sure, but it was right around the corner within two minutes' walk from my office. I have met all the members of the family, I think, since that time -- Pat Lawford [Patricia Kennedy Lawford] and Eunice Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] and Jack and Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] and Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy]. I really got best acquainted when Jack was in the Senate. I remember I asked him to speak for me at a meeting in New York -- I think it was probably '57 or '58 for the Jewish Theological Seminary [of America], when Mrs. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, was going to be the guest of honor. Jack did speak at that occasion in New York at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. From that time on, of course, I considered him as one of my real close friends.

I did attend the convention in 1956 at Chicago, and at that time I saw him a great deal of him. I had the great honor and distinction of nominating him in our caucus as vice president of the United States, which was.... My nomination was seconded and accepted and unanimously carried, and we did go into caucus with him as our candidate for vice president.

CAMPBELL: Do you remember other people in California that were very interested in Senator Kennedy at that very early time in 1956?

SWIG: Let me see. Yes, I do remember I think, Roger Kent was very much interested; Bill Malone [William M. Malone] was very much interested; Elizabeth Gatov [Elizabeth Rudel Gatov], who was former treasurer of the United States. I must have known a great many more. Cyril Magnin I know was interested.

CAMPBELL: The Hellers were.

SWIG: The Hellers, the late Edward Heller [Edward H. Heller] and his wife Ellie Heller [Elinor R. Heller], were very much interested. After he was nominated at the convention in '60, of which I was a delegate, I learned that he was going to go to Alaska to speak. This was probably within fifteen days after he was nominated. I made arrangements to have a luncheon in his honor at the airport. I remember very distinctly making the pitch for him and raising the money. I think we raised eighty-five thousand dollars, which was the first money that was raised in his campaign for the presidency. I remember Jack's words very well. He said, "Remind me never to go to a United Jewish Appeal meeting with Ben Swig; "he'd take the last dollar you had." I always remember that. I was naturally very, very pleased and happy when Jack was elected

president, and I was fortunate enough to be his guest at the White House on four or five different occasions.

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CAMPBELL: I wondered if you had any particular recollections of your visits to the White House. I know that you were there several times.

SWIG: Well, they were mostly when some king or somebody important was being recognized.

CAMPBELL: Ceremonial.

SWIG: I remember one occasion -- I don't know which one it was, but I remember it was towards the end of the evening -- Jack said good night to everybody, and I'll never, never forget this one. He started to walk up the stairs and he saw me and he walked back and chatted with me a few minutes before he went to bed. I was very, very highly elated. I'll never, never forget that.

CAMPBELL: What do you recall about.... The President visited, I believe, this hotel often, here in San Francisco, when he was a young senator. Do you recall any of those visits?

SWIG: Yes. I had a cocktail party in my apartment. I have the pictures of him taken there. He was always so pleasant, so personable, and you just couldn't help but warm up to him. And he was so sincere, never put on any front, any false front. He told you what he had in his mind. You could always believe everything he told you.

CAMPBELL: He had, as you recall, some difficulty swinging the California delegation to his side in 1960. There were a great number of people who supported Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]. I wondered if you had been involved really in persuading delegates in 1960 to...

SWIG: Well, in 1960 I remember very well I was also a great admirer of Adlai Stevenson.

CAMPBELL: I know you were.

SWIG: And on one of my trips East, I stopped in to see Adlai in Chicago.

CAMPBELL: Did you?

SWIG: I think it was in May. He told me that he was not going to be a.... I told

him that I was in a spot, how much I admired him and I admired Jack Kennedy. At that time he told me he was not going to be a candidate for the presidency, and that let me free to do what I could for Jack. At the election, when they tried to make a move for Adlai, as much as I liked him and as fond as I was of Adlai, he told me he wasn't a candidate, and I declared myself for Jack. When I declare myself for anybody, I go through, and I

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did everything in my power to get the California delegation to vote for him. Of course, Adlai had some very, very strong admirers here in California. I think the California group was as strong for Adlai as they were in any part of the country.

CAMPBELL: That's right.

SWIG: And it was quite a job.

CAMPBELL: Governor Brown's [Edmund G. "Pat" Brown] position was interesting at that time. As you recall, he was a favorite son candidate right up until...

SWIG: He was the favorite son. Pat Brown, of course, has been and was and is one of my closest friends. But Pat didn't know just what to do; he was like I was. He liked Adlai and he liked Jack, and he just didn't know what to do so he sort of straddled. But I had received a release which I considered a release from Adlai, and I declared myself for Jack. Nothing could prevent me from going through for him, and I did.

CAMPBELL: You've already indicated that you were involved in raising funds for that campaign. It was a very close election in California, which you recall; Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] got the California electoral votes. As you recall it, do you have any criticism of the way that campaign was conducted in this state? Could it have been a better one in 1960?

SWIG: Well, of course you can always have alibis. You just don't know when there's.... Of course, I remember when Nixon ran for governor, I was chairman of the finance committee for Pat Brown, and we licked Nixon. But I think one of the worst criticisms against Jack, something that reacted unfavorably too, was his youth. I don't think that people want to see a boy -- as they call it -- be president of the United States. I think that was a lot of the reaction to it. It wasn't that they didn't like him, but they just felt that he was a little too inexperienced to be president of the United States.

CAMPBELL: Soon after he was elected, he appointed you a member of his President's Committee for Traffic Safety. I wondered if this was largely an honorary

thing, or was it something that you...

SWIG: It's more or less of an honorary thing. We're all against accidents, and there wasn't much you could do about it. Off the record. He put Bill Hearst [William R. Hearst, Jr.] on as chairman.

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CAMPBELL: I know.

SWIG: I used to tell Bill, "Let's go out and do something now," and I used to fight with him. He says, "Oh, go on, peddle your papers someplace else." I had an argument with Bill because we could've done something about it, but Bill didn't care. It was just an honor for Bill; I believe if you get on a committee, you should work on it.

CAMPBELL: Yes. I guess too many people view it as just an honor. In 1962, in the campaign you mentioned between Governor Brown and Mr. Nixon, the President wasn't able to visit the state. I believe, because of the Cuban Missile Crisis which happened about a month before. Did you feel in the companion campaign in which Mr. Kuchel [Thomas H. Kuchel], you may recall, ran against Richard Richards.... It's been suggested that the administration really would've perhaps preferred Mr. Kuchel. Did you get involved in that at all?

SWIG: No, I wasn't involved in that. I know Dick Richards very well, and to be very frank with this, even though Tom Kuchel was a Republican, I was a great admirer of Toms. I figured Tom Kuchel was a better Democrat than he was a Republican.

CAMPBELL: So you could understand that feeling on the administration side. I wondered if in the little time we have left because I know you have an appointment, you might say a few words about your involvement in building up the Democratic party in this state in the late 1950s and then finally electing a governor in 1958.

SWIG: Well, I don't know as I can take any credit at all for building up the Democratic party. I'm probably not the strongest party man that there is in this state, probably one of the weakest ones, because while I've generally gone down the line for the Democratic party, my father was a Republican, and when I first settled in California, I was a Republican. As a matter of fact, I was named after a Republican president, Benjamin Harrison. It wasn't until Truman [Harry S. Truman] ran, I think, that I voted the Democratic ticket, and I never took too active a part in a.... I did go to one convention and nominated Pat Brown for governor, but the Democratic party in California has been very, very weak, in my opinion, and is never any weaker than it is now.

CAMPBELL: Than it is now. I wondered if you were involved at all... Just to follow the Kennedy story on a little bit, were you able to participate at all in then Senator Robert Kennedy's campaign here in 1968? As you recall, he had a presidential primary here. Did that put you in a difficult position?

SWIG: It put me in a very difficult position because I had been friendly with Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]. I've gone out with Hubert Humphrey probably fifteen times to

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speaking at different affairs for Israel. Hubert was the speaker, and I introduced him. We became very friendly with his wife and the boy. Then when Bobby decided to run, I was in a very tough spot. I spoke to Bob and I told him the spot I was in, and I told him it was very difficult. I told him that I'd never be against him, but I didn't think I could do anything for him in the campaign. Of course, if he got the nomination, I'd go all out a million percent. But until that time -- and I said the same thing to Hubert -- I said, "When you have two children, you love them both. You can't do something for one that you won't do for the other. You can't do something for one that'd be a detriment to the other." And I said, "I'm in a spot and I just cannot get out of it this time. I hope either one of you.... I like you both equally the same." I just kind of said, "But if you get the nomination, I'll make up for it by doing twice as much." And I did. I did have a big party for him; Adolph Schuman and I ran a big party for him. And I started to do everything I could. As a matter of fact, the furniture was taken to my apartment two days before he was killed.

CAMPBELL: Was it?

SWIG: Yes.

CAMPBELL: Here at the Fairmont [Fairmont Hotel and Tower]?

SWIG: I had a party for him in my apartment. This was to be after he was nominated.

CAMPBELL: Yeah, Robert Kennedy.

SWIG: Yes. But Bobby was very, very understanding, I must say. This has been.... "I see your position. I can't blame you." Maybe he says, "How do you think I'm going to get the nomination?" and then he'll come into your party.

CAMPBELL: Just generally, the Kennedy Library is very interested in politics of these years. Could you briefly describe -- your support's awfully important to

many prominent senators and congressmen -- how do you make a decision about who you will support?

SWIG: I don't know. I'm afraid I'm not a... Maybe I'm not a good American. I'm afraid my heart rules more than my judgment at times. If I like somebody, even if they do a little wrong, I think I'd be with them. I think I'm that way. I liked the Kennedy family. Even if one of them wasn't as good as the other -- which I'm not saying is so, but if it was -- I think I'd be for him anyway because I like the family.

CAMPBELL: Because you like their family.

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SWIG: Family. And then my heart does sometimes rule over my head. It wasn't in this case, but it would be. Of course, in this last campaign, I didn't take any active part at all. I felt that Jesse Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh], when Pat Brown was a candidate four years ago, sat on his hands, and two years ago when Humphrey got the nomination, he sat on his hands. I just felt that I didn't want to support him and I didn't. I did vote, but I didn't give him any money. I told Jesse, I said, "Jesse, you sat on your hands four years ago and two years ago. I'm going to sit on my hands this year." And I did not support him. I voted for him, but I did not support him.

CAMPBELL: But you did, however, support John Tunney [John V. Tunney].

SWIG: I did. I did everything I could for John Tunney, I did everything I could for Charlie O'Brien [Charles A. O'Brien], and I did what I could for Pat Brown and the rest of the Democratic ticket. If a man aspires to lead his party and then he deserts it on two different occasions for personal grievances, I just can't support him, and that's why I didn't support Jesse.

CAMPBELL: I wanted to ask you one other thing. You were a close associate of Adlai Stevenson. I wondered if you ever discussed with him later -- some people began to think that he would've accepted the nomination in 1960 if it had been offered. Did you ever have the occasion to discuss that with him?

SWIG: I talked to him about it. In my opinion, I don't think he ever would've accepted it. He told me prior to then. He says, "Ben, I could never go through another campaign I don't want to. It isn't worth it."

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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