

**George S. McGovern Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 4/24/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** George S. McGovern  
**Interviewer:** John Newhouse  
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**Biographical Note**

George S. McGovern (1922-2012) was the Director of Food for Peace from 1961 to 1962 and a Senator from South Dakota from 1963 to 1981. This interview focuses on the 1960 presidential election, the founding of the Food for Peace Program, and the Kennedy administration's work on agricultural issues, among other topics.

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George S. McGovern– JFK #1  
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Kennedy-Ives labor reform bill
2	Trying to recruit support for Kennedy-Ives bill
3	Political benefits of the legislation
5	Rejection of the Kennedy-Ives bill
6	Landrum-Griffin labor reform act
8	John F. Kennedy's [JFK] visit to South Dakota
9	Religious issue in the Midwest
10	Support for Hubert Humphrey
11	Meeting with JFK
12	JFK's record on agriculture
14	Nixon's victory in South Dakota
15	Loss of Senate race in South Dakota
17	Advocating for the use of agricultural surplus overseas
19	JFK's speech on the agricultural surplus
21	Appointment to Food for Peace Office
22	Launch of the Food for Peace program
25	Health, Education, and Welfare Department's involvement in Food for Peace
27	Launching the world food program
28	Meeting with the World Food and Agricultural Organization
29	Creating a proposal for the world food program
31	Announcement of the world food program
32	Food for Peace mission to Latin America
34	JFK's interest in agriculture
35	Rejection of supply management program
37	JFK's disappointment in the government's inability to deal with agriculture
38	The Kennedy administration's congressional relations
39	Contrast between the Kennedy and Johnson administrations
41	JFK's relationship with White House bureaucracy
42	JFK's use of presidential power
43	JFK's operational style
45	Comparison between JFK and Franklin D. Roosevelt
47	JFK's progressive mindset
49	The Kennedy administration's contributions to domestic politics
50	The Kennedy administration's influence on international politics

INTERVIEW WITH THE HONORABLE GEORGE McGOVERN  
SENATOR FROM SOUTH DAKOTA, 1962 --

DIRECTOR OF THE FOOD FOR PEACE PROGRAM  
1961-1962

for the  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
JOHN F. KENNEDY MEMORIAL LIBRARY

April 24, 1964

Interviewer: John Newhouse

INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR GEORGE MCGOVERN

*pgm*

Mr. Newhouse

This is a tape recorded interview with Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. It is being done as part of the oral history project of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library. The date is April 24, 1964. The place, Senator McGovern's office in the Old Senate Office Building. The interviewer is John Newhouse of the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

When did you first begin to know or become associated with President Kennedy, Senator?

Sen. McGovern

Well, my first direct involvement with President Kennedy goes back to 1958 when Senator Kennedy was the sponsor of the so-called Kennedy-Ives labor reform bill. I was then a member of the House Committee on Education and Labor that handled the legislation on the House side. Once the measure had cleared the Senate rather late in the session, there was then a question as to whether the House would be able to act prior to adjournment. That was an

2.

election year and both the leadership and a good many members of the House of Representatives were anxious to adjourn.

Also, the Kennedy-Ives bill was a highly controversial bill. It was opposed by some of the labor leaders. It represented a compromise measure that was designed to win support from the middle of both labor and management and, perhaps more significantly, to win support from the American public -- a public that was becoming increasingly concerned about abuses in the labor-management field.

My role, as it related to President Kennedy, was to do whatever I could as a member of the House Committee on Education and Labor to persuade Mr. Rayburn to program this bill for action on the House floor. There were two members of the House Education and Labor Committee that were especially interested in seeing that the House voted on that measure before we adjourned. One was Congressman Udall of Arizona who later became the Secretary of Interior. The other was myself.



3.

I must be very frank and say that my interest in that legislation stemmed primarily from two sources. First of all, I thought it was a good bill. Secondly, I felt it was important to my own campaign that fall. I was running against Governor Joe Foss of South Dakota who was challenging me for reelection in the House of Representatives for my second term. He and some of his opponents were strongly implying that I was too close to organized labor and I thought that this bill would dramatize my true position which was one of independence of either management or labor.

I think President Kennedy, then Senator Kennedy, recognized the political value of the legislation as well as the economic and social needs for it. And he discussed those aspects with me. I remember that on several occasions, during the efforts to bring the bill to a vote on the House floor, Mr. Kennedy came over to the House side and discussed the prospects with a small group of us. One particular session stands

4.

out in my mind when he came to Congressman Udall's office. There were three or four of the younger Democratic Congressmen who met with him that day and it was the first chance that I had had to see the then Senator Kennedy exercise his personality and his leadership in an earnest and effective manner. It was the beginning of a growing respect on my part for his ability.

Mr. Newhouse

Were you also aware then that he was a national figure? Did he seem to be emerging as a national figure?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, he was very clearly emerging as a national figure. It was unmistakable even in 1958. I got the strong impression as he spoke about this legislation that he had his eye on the nation -- not on the state of Massachusetts.

Mr. Newhouse

That bill passed the Senate 88-1, as I recall. Is that correct, Senator?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I think there was only one dissenting vote on the Senate side. It came out under a procedure on the House side where we had to have a two-thirds vote in

5.

order to pass it. And also it came out with a provision that there could be no amendments to the legislation since it was cleared for floor action. I may be incorrect on that. It may be that the legislative situation did permit one single amendment to be offered. I think on second thought that that was true. But we could not secure the two-thirds vote that was needed to pass the bill on the House side and it went down to defeat. But we did make the record. We did get a roll call vote. Those of us that were faced with close elections that fall were very grateful that we could go on record even though the measure did go down to defeat.

Mr. Newhouse

How did he react to the rejection of the Kennedy-Ives bill? Did you get an impression of that?

Sen. McGovern

Well, I think he was very disappointed. He indicated to us that another effort would be made again the following year and that was done. The measure was introduced again as the Kennedy-Ervin bill

6.

and was later modified and passed in amended form.

Mr. Newhouse

That was the Landrum-Griffin labor reform act, was it not?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, there was a substitute measure offered by two Congressmen over on the House side as a substitute to the Kennedy-Ervin bill, but a sizeable part of the original Kennedy-Ervin bill, the original Kennedy-Ives bill, was incorporated in the Landrum-Griffin bill. The Landrum-Griffin bill was more hostile, I would say, to the labor groups of the country by a considerable degree than was the Kennedy-Ives or the Kennedy-Ervin bill. And I know that this was a disappointment to Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Newhouse

Were you also involved with him during this period of the Landrum-Griffin bill, in conference, or otherwise?

Sen. McGovern

No, I had very little contact with Senator Kennedy after the 1958 effort.

Mr. Newhouse

You don't know whether he might have been surprised by the rejection of the Elliot bill in the House which was

7.

in effect I think the Kennedy-Irvin bill?

Sen. McGovern

I understand he was surprised and somewhat disappointed by the rejection of the bill on the House side. I gather that only from information I had from second-hand sources rather than from discussion with Senator Kennedy.

Mr. Newhouse

I see. Senator, what was the next stage in your relationship with President Kennedy?

Sen. McGovern

Well, the next step was the maneuvering with reference to the presidential nomination in 1960. Senator Kennedy made some effort to court support from Congressmen in the prairie states. I think he felt that in order to broaden his political base, in order to broaden his image, he needed to register some early support in the Midwest and the Far West and in the plains and Rocky Mountain states. And he was very much alert to those of us who were party leaders in that part of the country.

I found that on various occasions when

8.

I had reason to call him on the telephone, he always responded very promptly to telephone calls, no matter how busy he was. A call that went to Senator Kennedy's office from a Congressman on the House side was very promptly returned. That was not the case with some of the other candidates who were also bidding for the nomination.

He came to my state in January of 1959 in the dead of winter and made a very laudatory statement about me even though I had given no indication of support whatsoever. I became more aware in January of 1959 during that visit of Senator Kennedy to our state that he was campaigning with every ounce of energy and zeal that he could bring to bear on it for the presidential nomination. There was just no doubt about it in my mind after that appearance that he was going to go all out in his efforts to win the presidential nomination.

Mr. Newhouse

Did you then regard him as a serious contender at that time?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I regarded him as a very serious contender but I did not think that he

would win the nomination. I felt that if he did win it, it would be disastrous politically to the candidacies of those of us in the Midwest and in the prairie states; that he could not carry that part of the country; that he would lose it by a sizeable margin and those of us running on the Democratic ticket in 1960 might be dragged down to defeat in that part of the country. That turned out to be a partially correct analysis. He did win the nomination which proved me wrong on that point. But it was disastrous to a good many congressional candidates running in that part of the country in 1960.

Mr. Newhouse

Why did you feel that way -- merely because he was from the East and spoke with a different kind of accent?

Sen. McGovern

No, very frankly, I feared the impact of the religious issue on our part of the country. It is a strongly Protestant area. It was an area that very decisively rejected Al Smith's bid in 1928. I knew something about the religious character of the area and I feared the religious issue.

9 (a).

Mr. Newhouse

Is it predominantly a Lutheran country?

Sen. McGovern

Well, the Lutherans are very strong. They are the strongest group in our state. There are other very strong Protestant churches in the area -- Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists -- are all very strong in our area. The Catholic representation in our area is very small. I personally had the highest regard for Senator Kennedy. I thought he, if elected, would make a fine President. I thought the religious issue was highly unfortunate and should never have been injected in the campaign. But I was sure that it would be, and it was.

I, for various reasons, supported the candidacy of Senator Humphrey. I did what I could to help him win the nomination including the taking on of the leadership of a group of young Congressmen that were interested in his candidacy. I might say this was a source of understandable disappointment to Senator Kennedy's staff. Ted Sorenson made no



10.

bones of his disapproval. He said this was a great mistake for me as a candidate running for the Senate in South Dakota to become involved at all.

Mr. Newhouse

On what grounds did he feel that way?

Sen. McGovern

Well, he felt that I ought to be neutral. He said Senator Kennedy had some support in South Dakota. He recognized that it was not majority support but he had very active followers in the state and that as a candidate running for the Senate I ought to be neutral and not express any preference, because I would inevitably lose support if I did. He made no effort to hide his disapproval of my efforts to help Senator Humphrey and I am sure from that standpoint he reflected Senator Kennedy's view although the Senator at no time registered any disapproval of my activities.

Mr. Newhouse

That is interesting. Even though you were committed to Senator Humphrey at that point, you still maintained this contact with Senator Kennedy.

11.

Sen. McGovern

Yes, and immediately after the West Virginia primary when it became clear that Senator Humphrey could not win the nomination, I called and asked for an appointment with Senator Kennedy. I came over to the Senate to talk with him in his office and I remember his asking me to go downstairs with him and ride over to the House Office Building. He said he was going over there to a little reception that I think was sponsored by Congressman Macdonald of Massachusetts. We went down in the court where he parked his car. Incidentally, his office is right across from the hall from where my office is now located in the Old Senate Office Building. We went down and got into his car and drove over to the New House Office Building and sat there in the car for a moment and he talked with me about the 1960 campaign. I remember him saying, "George, if I can get that nomination, I can beat Nixon."

12.

Mr. Newhouse

How did the people in South Dakota react to President Kennedy on that first visit in 1959?

Sen. McGovern

Well, it was primarily a Democratic audience -- a Jefferson-Jackson day dinner audience, as I remember it. The tickets were sold at \$10 a piece. It was the largest dinner I ever attended in South Dakota. I think some 1200 people paid \$10 a piece to come and hear the Senator. It was an indication to me, that while he could not carry the state as a whole, he did have an extremely enthusiastic following in the Democratic ranks in our state.

Mr. Newhouse

Did his record on agriculture color your thinking as to what sort of effect he would have on prairie politics if he were to become the nominee?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, it did in part. I knew that while Senator Kennedy had supported the wheat bill in 1956 and had given his support to other parts of the Democratic

13.

platform, he had a record that was not entirely acceptable to candidates running for office in agricultural states.

Senator Kennedy came from a state where the Farm Bureau was easily the strongest farm organization and it was well known by farm groups in our part of the country that he had from time to time opposed high price supports for agricultural commodities. That did worry me for various reasons after the 1956 convention when it became clear that the Senator from Massachusetts had lost support in that convention for the Vice Presidential nomination partly because of his agricultural record. Senator Kefauver had won the nomination partly because of the backing of farm groups. It became clear that Senator Kennedy would reassess his position and he did that, and from that time on was a consistent supporter of high price supports for agriculture.

Mr. Newhouse

You mentioned before that your concern about his becoming the nominee, at least

14.

in terms of prairie politics, was partially borne out. When he came out to campaign for you when you were running for the Senate the first time -- is that an example of what you meant?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I thought it would be helpful to have the presidential candidate in the state and I think it was helpful. I think that the Senator improved his own chances in the state and he also helped those of us that he endorsed in 1960, but the overall result was not good. It was helpful to have him in the state. It was better to have him than to have simply the word that he was running.

But even his personal presence was not enough to offset the unfortunate anxiety that a good many people felt about voting for a Catholic for President. His agricultural record was not as strong as it might have been. All of those things produced a rather sizeable Nixon victory in South Dakota. Senator Kennedy got about 40% of the vote in our state. We

15.

have a lot of straight ticket voters. They look at the top of the ticket and they put one X. I think there is no doubt that his own rather poor showing in South Dakota contributed to the defeat of the entire Democratic slate in our state.

Mr. Newhouse

This may be getting a bit ahead, but do you think that the religious issue, if it arises again, will be as important in South Dakota after the experience of President Kennedy?

Sen. McGovern

Well, I think the remarkable record of President Kennedy on this issue both during the campaign and more significantly after his election, has allayed the fears of most people in our part of the country on that issue.

Mr. Newhouse

Did you run ahead of him in the 1960 election?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I did. I came within about 1% of being elected to the Senate in 1960. As I remember it, the vote spread between Senator Mundt and me was about 14,500; whereas Senator Kennedy lost the state

16.

by a margin of about 52,000.

Mr. Newhouse

The next stage, I assume in your relationship came shortly after the election in 1960. Is that true?

Sen. McGovern

That is correct. Either on Friday night or Saturday night following the Tuesday election, Senator Kennedy, then President-Elect Kennedy, went to Palm Beach to spend some time relaxing at his father's home. He called me long distance either on Friday or Saturday night immediately following the election. I have never had such a surprise. I thought that he would be exhausted from the rigors of the campaign. But he took the time to call me.

He began the conversation simply by saying, "George, this is Jack Kennedy. I'm awfully sorry about what happened up there in South Dakota on Tuesday." And, he said, "I think I cost you the election." I protested that there were lots of factors involved. He said, "No, I understand

17.

what happened. I feel very badly about it. But I hope you will come and see me before you make any plans."

I will never forget how grateful I was for that call. It is a shattering experience to lose a statewide Senate campaign. And a person goes into an emotional letdown. But this really put me back on the mountain top when I heard that fresh confident voice of the new President-Elect. I was aware then that he intended to offer me some kind of a position with the new administration. Of course, I had no idea what it was, and I don't think he did.

Mr. Newhouse

How did the Food for Peace program begin? Did you give him the idea or did you help in creating or organizing it?

Sen. McGovern

Let me say this. During all the time I was in the House of Representatives from January of 1957 until January of 1961, there was nothing that I talked about any more than the desirability of using our agricultural surpluses overseas.



Up until that time we had talked largely about surplus disposal programs as though the program overseas was a kind of an unpleasant necessity; that we had these agricultural surpluses and we needed to dump them somewhere. And the overseas surplus program, as it was called, seemed to be one way to do it. But Senator Humphrey in the Senate and a number of us in the House had been talking more and more about the desirability of using our agricultural surpluses as a constructive instrument of foreign policy; to reduce hunger in the world and to increase the health and strength of people in the developing countries; to use this as a dramatic foreign policy instrument; to illustrate the success of free American agriculture as over and against some of the failures in the Communist world.

And that concept is one Senator Kennedy had very quickly grasped during the campaign. I had the feeling that when he talked about agricultural price supports and parity and farm stabilization, that he was a little bit bored with those topics.

As a matter of fact, when he spoke at the National Plowing contest in South Dakota in September of 1960 during the campaign, I thought that his audience reacted rather indifferently and I felt that he was not at ease with the prepared manuscript that dealt with the problems of price supports, farm parity, farm stabilization, and so on. But a couple of hours later he left the site of the National Plowing contest and got on his plane and flew to Mitchell, South Dakota, to my home town, where a crowd had been waiting for him for about two hours at the Mitchell Corn Palace. He walked out onto the stage and I introduced him very briefly to the audience and without so much as a note he began to speak about the agricultural abundance as a blessing from the Lord. He spoke with great feeling and compassion about the role that the American farmer could play. He said, "I know of no group in the United States that can play a more important role in the next ten years in deciding

the course of world history than the American farmer, providing we recognize that food is strength, food is hope, food is life, food is peace." He threw out this great challenge to convert our agricultural abundance into an asset, rather than a headache -- rather than a liability.

So that I think even that early in the campaign I was aware of the fact that this was the issue related to agriculture that he really spoke about from the heart. It seemed to come right from the depth of his being and it was -- I heard him say later -- that this was the part of our whole agricultural program that really excited him. He told Senator Humphrey one time that he thought farm price supports was a kind of boring subject.

Mr. Newhouse

Was this before or after he became President?

Sen. McGovern

This was after he became President. Various other people from time to time told me that they had heard him make similar statements that he found the

subject of farm price supports a little bit boring and yet he knew it was important. Yet when it came to Food for Peace, this was something that excited him. He loved to talk about it.

So, I had indicated to him after he expressed interest in talking with me following his election, that there were two jobs that I was especially interested in. One, which I said with some degree of trembling, was that if he needed a Secretary of Agriculture, and was willing to trust that assignment to me, that I would be willing to take it on even though I knew it was one of the most unpopular jobs in government. But if he felt that this was too important an assignment to give to a defeated Senatorial candidate, that I would be interested in a Food for Peace office on the White House level. I thought that was where the office ought to be. As it turned out, he offered the Secretary of Agriculture post to Governor Freeman of Minnesota and at the same time asked me if I would take on this Food for Peace office in

22.

the White House.

Mr. Newhouse

It would be fair then to say that you and the President launched this Food for Peace program with the view to broadening it and making it more than a disposal program, which it has been, I think, since 1954, and as such had enjoyed bipartisan support.

Sen. McGovern

The program was very popular in the Congress, as you say from 1954 on with the passage of P.L. 480. But it had never really been sold to the country or the world as a constructive instrument to build health, and strength, and peace and freedom throughout the world. Nor had it been dramatized here at home. The American people knew almost nothing about our overseas programs. I think President Kennedy was anxious to put the public spotlight on this great asset as he saw it. I think he wanted to see more attention given to it overseas by other countries. And after I took over this assignment, he expressed interest from time to time in what we were doing to dramatize

23.

this program for the American people so that they could feel that they had a part in American foreign policy --- so that our farmers would feel that they were a part of our overseas aid program. He also wanted to make sure that we were giving proper publicity to these efforts overseas. He sent me a memo one day asking to what extent the recipients of our food were aware of the fact that it is American food. That was something that he was concerned about because he did feel that this would be helpful in putting an attractive face on our agricultural programs overseas.

Mr. Newhouse

You wrote an article for the Progressive magazine in 1961 that said that the average annual export of food under the P.L. 480 from the time it started in 1954 to 1960 was about 12 million tons. And you said in 1961 this increased to 33 million tons. You also said that the creation of the Food for Peace office was partly, at least, responsible for this.

24.

Well, just how did you manage to coordinate all of the various agencies that were then involved in this P.L. 480 program in the vast bureaucracy which is normally resistant to changes like this?

Sen. McGovern

President Kennedy issued a memorandum to the heads of all agencies of the government in which he called upon them to make a "maximum effort" -- and I'm using his words now -- a maximum effort to use our abundance overseas and he explained to them that he had personally instructed me as the Director of this program to coordinate our Food for Peace program with other aspects of the overseas aid programs. In other words, he put the full force of the presidential office behind our Food for Peace effort. He also dramatized it at the time he made the announcement of my appointment; that he attached great significance to this office. He explained that this was a great opportunity for our entire country to strengthen our foreign policy position around the world. And I think that acting

with the backing of President Kennedy we were able to bring a new sense of urgency to the various government departments. I was in constant telephone contact with members of the Department of Agriculture, the Department of State, and our foreign aid agency. Frequent conferences were held in my office or in the State Department or in the Department of Agriculture and there was a tremendous acceleration of prodding and pushing and new ideas that emanated from this little White House office.

Mr. Newhouse  
Sen. McGovern

Was Health, Education and Welfare involved?

They were involved only on the periphery and they have become more involved in the last year or so as more emphasis has been placed on the nutritional aspects of the Food for Peace. I think under Mr. Reuter's direction, the man who took my place, in Food for Peace, more attention has been given to the nutritional aspects of Food for Peace.

During the time that I was in the Food for Peace office, we concentrated on two



26.

especially appealing aspects of Food for Peace that also excited President Kennedy. One was the school lunch program overseas. The other was the use of food to pay the wages of workers engaged in community development projects. I discussed both of those programs with President Kennedy. He encouraged me to do everything I could to expand those two particular areas of Food for Peace.

Mr. Newhouse

Did these two programs require any amendment to the legislation?

Sen. McGovern

No, they did not. We did ask for congressional authority to use food for economic development purposes and we got that in the fall of 1961. I think the original legislation was perhaps broad enough to have given us that authority and some pilot programs were being carried on. But we felt it would be helpful to get a direct congressional mandate and we were able to get that in 1961.

Mr. Newhouse

This legislation, I think, has not really changed very much over the ten years it has existed. Did you and Presi-

27.

ident Kennedy find these limitations restricting and were you able to work within them?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, the P.L. 480 is basically a good law. I think that the Congress had given ample authority to carry out President Kennedy's mandate for a maximum effort. What was needed was a more imaginative administration; the elimination of some of the delays and some of the red tape; and this I think was the great contribution of President Kennedy's Food for Peace office.

Mr. Newhouse

I see. I think you also launched the world food program during your tenure as Director of the Food for Peace program, did you not, Senator?

Sen. McGovern

That is correct, and this is a good example of how in the early months of the new Frontier we were able to cut through the delays because of White House action. The world food program would not have gotten off the ground nearly as soon as it did had it not been for direction action by the White House.

I was sent over to Rome to head up an American delegation in April of 1961 to receive a report from Director General Sen of the World Food and Agricultural Organization in which he was going to propose the idea for a world food program. But there was nothing concrete offered. Some general principles were laid down indicating that it would be helpful to have a multilateral agency to deal with the problem of world hunger. But the Director General had no concrete proposal to offer nor did any of the other delegates. We had had a resolution approved in the General Assembly of the United Nations that previous fall, in the fall of 1960, supported by the United States, calling for the multilateral distribution of food surpluses. And it was that resolution that instructed the Director General of the FAO to issue a report outlining the possibilities of the multilateral use of food as distinct from the bilateral programs such as Food for Peace. But when we listened to this

report, which was a very good report, it became quite clear to me that if it were to get off the ground, somebody was going to have to make a concrete proposal.

So we went back from the meeting -- the second or third day of the conference -- to our hotel in Rome. My fellow delegates were Mr. Ray Ioanes of the Department of Agriculture and Mr. Sidney Jacques of the Department of State. We discussed the possibility of some kind of a concrete proposal. And I asked the two men, who were much more technically qualified than I was what they thought might be a reasonable offer for the United States to make providing we had the authority to do it. They said, "Well, it's too late, of course, now to do anything at this conference. But if we have the authority it would be wonderful if we could suggest a beginning of \$100 million in surplus commodities with some cash included as a sort of an initial world food bank. The United States would contribute about 40% of

this in surplus commodities with maybe another 10% in cash.<sup>3</sup>

Well, I said, "Why don't we try to get permission to do that?" They didn't think it was possible -- after we were already in Rome -- to get the clearance to go ahead on that kind of an offer. I suggested we call Ted Sorenson at the White House -- the White House counsel -- and see if he couldn't get clearance through the other agencies and authorize us to move ahead. I'll never forget Mr. Ray Ioanes, a highly intelligent man who has been with the government for a good many years, asking me who Ted Sorenson was. Apparently, the name registered not at all with him which is some indication of the gap between the New Frontier and the old bureaucracy. So, after I explained who he was, both Mr. Ioanes and Mr. Jacques agreed that if I wanted to make a transatlantic telephone call, this might be helpful. So we called my office at the White House and got hold of Jim Symington, my deputy, and I suggested that he talk with Ted

31.

Sorenson and see if we couldn't get this cleared.

Well, to make a long story short, within 24 hours we had a clearance to go ahead and to indicate to the conference that the United States was prepared to contribute 40% to an initial world food program of \$100 million in commodities and cash. That offer was made. It startled the delegates to the point where they temporarily adjourned to decide how to react to it. But in subsequent resolutions that were passed that fall and early in 1962, the world food program was put into effect substantially along the lines of this offer that we made in April of 1961.

Mr. Newhouse

It appears as if the program will take hold, I think.

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I think so. It is an experimental program. But it is one that personally pleased President Kennedy. I discussed it with him immediately after I got back from the Rome conference. He thought that it was an excellent idea and later gave it his personal public endorsement.

32.

Mr. Newhouse

Didn't he authorize very early in the administration a Food for Peace mission to Latin America?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, and this again is an indication of the speed with which the President moved. I sent over a memorandum before the State of the Union message was given in 1961, shortly after the President was inaugurated, in which I suggested it might be desirable to send small Food for Peace missions to Latin America, to Asia and to Africa to take a look at what we're doing in Food for Peace and then to make recommendations for improving it. I didn't hear anything further about that memorandum until the State of the Union message appeared a few days later and President Kennedy was announcing some of the things he planned to do and he said, "I am immediately sending a Food for Peace mission to Latin America;" to look into the problems of hunger in that part of the world and to devise better methods for meeting the problems. Within a very short time that mission was on the

way. Arthur Schlesinger, another White House assistant, and I went together on that first mission. A small group of technicians took off a short time later to visit a number of other countries in Latin America. I later learned that Mr. Schlesinger was along to try to get some feeling of the influence of Mr. Castro in Latin America. He talked with a large number of people about that subject, but he went to Latin America officially as a part of the Food for Peace mission.

Mr. Newhouse

I suppose much of what he learned emerged later in the so-called White Paper on Cuba.

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I think most of that White Paper was written on the basis of Mr. Schlesinger's trip to Latin America on the basis of discussions he had with intellectuals, and with journalists, business people and Latin Americans in general.

Mr. Newhouse

Is it fair to say that the President's interest in the Food for Peace program did not generate a much larger interest on his part in the subject of agriculture -- agriculture generally?



Sen. McGovern

Well, I do think that President Kennedy became more and more interested in agriculture after he came to the White House. He realized that it was a problem of national importance. He was concerned also about the growing budgetary cost of the Federal agricultural program. He was concerned about the role that agricultural trade played in the balance of payments. He also knew that it was an important part of the lag in our economy here at home and I think for all those reasons his interests quickened when he came to the White House. But never to the degree that it did in the Food for Peace program.

Mr. Newhouse

Did he have any strong views on the question of agriculture -- on the goals he thought we should be moving toward in our national agricultural programs?

Sen. McGovern

I'm not sure that President Kennedy ever developed long range goals in terms of American agriculture. He spelled out certain short term goals. He wanted to reduce the cost of the program; he wanted to reduce surplus stocks; and he wanted

35.

to accomplish those two things without any reduction in farm income. But those were short term goals. I have never been sure that President Kennedy had a long range goal in mind with reference to agriculture. I think this was not one of his stronger areas.

Mr. Newhouse

Did he attempt to delegate greater authority in the field of agriculture?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I think he did. I think he gave less attention to the problems of agriculture than to most major national problems and relied more on the Department of Agriculture for recommendations than he did in the case of some subjects.

Mr. Newhouse

When his supply management program was largely rejected by the wheat farmers in the spring of 1963, when they voted against 1964 controls, he said in a news conference on May 2, 1963 that the United States was attempting to persuade others to limit agricultural production so that we don't have a worldwide surplus and a depression in agricultural commodities. And when we made a choice for overproduction as the

wheat farmers apparently did, it is bound to be more difficult for us to persuade other countries not to open wide the gate themselves, in his words. Does this indicate that he had an interest in the international agricultural situation as it might have affected or influenced his overall foreign policy such as the grand design?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I think very definitely that he more and more saw American agriculture in its world relationship. He was very much concerned about the approaching negotiations with the Common Market, and I think that the President's first thought about American agriculture was the relationship that it had to our total world position. That is reflected in his statement in his response to the wheat referendum. I'm sure however, that he saw the failure of the wheat referendum as a personal political defeat for him. He had not become as actively involved in that referendum as the Department of Agriculture might have wished but nevertheless he was identified with a desire for a yes vote. The Secretary of

Agriculture had gone all out. There was no question that this was a political setback for the administration. I think the President saw it as such. But perhaps even beyond that he was concerned about the possible impact of unchecked production on our negotiations with the Common Market and our world position as a whole.

Mr. Newhouse

Did the President ever show signs of resenting the degree of the subsidization of the farms and the apparent inability of any government to deal with agriculture, as an economic and social problem rather than a political problem?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, he did. He expressed his frustration and his disappointment to me on several occasions, and I'm sure he did to other people. He was quite distressed that there was not more appreciation shown by the farmer producers of the country over the efforts of the administration to bring about a better farm program. I think this was one of the frustrating problems for the President -- that brought him more distress than satisfaction.

38.

Mr. Newhouse

This subject I think also introduces the question of President Kennedy's congressional relations. What is your view, Senator, of this aspect of his administration?

Sen. McGovern

Well, I am a freshman Senator, and I am not in as good a position as some of the Senators who have been around here longer to assess the President's congressional relations, but I would just make this observation. I think in this area, that President Johnson has demonstrated greater skill than the late President Kennedy. I personally was a great admirer of President Kennedy's restrained style. He was not a person who was capable of begging for support on anything. He would make a dignified, reasonable request for support usually from key members of the Congress. I think he would not be inclined to call large numbers of freshmen Senators or low ranking Congressmen for support on legislation. That was something that he would prefer to delegate to his congressional liaison men. He would have his regular

Tuesday morning breakfasts with the Congressional leaders from time to time. As I understand it, he would call certain key members of the House and the Senate but at no time after I was elected to the Senate, did I ever get a call from President Kennedy save in one instance. That was a personal matter involving Mr. Phil Graham, the late publisher of the Washington Post, which President Kennedy called me about shortly before Mr. Graham's death. But never on any legislative matter did I get a call from him. For that reason I am not in a good position to appraise his congressional liaison work. I do have the strong impression that it was less active, less complete, less far reaching, and less effective than the congressional liaison work of President Johnson.

Mr. Newhouse

You mean in a personal sense?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, that is correct. He depended more on staff than he did on the telephone and on personal contact.

Mr. Newhouse

Was the staff liaison work adequate, do you think, or as effective as it might

40.

have been?

Sen. McGovern

We have essentially the same men under President Johnson on congressional liaison that we did under President Kennedy. I would say the great difference is that President Johnson doubtlessly devotes much more personal attention to it. I will say this. On occasions when President Kennedy had members of the Congress come to the White House, he always seemed to me to conduct himself with a style and grace that was unsurpassed, from my personal standpoint. I don't know how it could have been improved upon.

Mr. Newhouse

Do you think he enjoyed the company of congressmen by and large?

Sen. McGovern

Not as much as President Johnson. I think there were certain members of the Congress that the President enjoyed being with but I always had the feeling that he enjoyed most the repartee with journalists and with artists and with intellectuals and with some of his old school friends, personal friends of a good many years standing. He was more inclined to enjoy an evening with

41.

an interesting artist or writer than with those who might be inclined to spend the evening discussing legislative matters.

Mr. Newhouse

Senator, you are in something of a unique position, I think, to discuss the Kennedy administration, in that you were an instructor of history and government and also had the experience of seeing the President from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue as a special White House assistant and as a Senator. I wonder if you could comment generally on his exercise of presidential power. For instance, his ability to deal with the bureaucracy. I think it is not known by everyone that a President's relations with the bureaucracy are often as difficult and less obvious than his relations with Congress.

Sen. McGovern

Well, I think President Kennedy brought a new sparkle to government on the Potomac that it had not had since the early days of the New Deal. The sheer energy -- the Kennedy style -- what has been described as the vigor of the New Frontier was a very real factor in government. It was



not easy for people to be indifferent or bored by government when Mr. Kennedy was in the White House because of his own energy, his own sense of humor, his capacity to make public problems seem interesting, exciting and dramatic. President Kennedy was never bored by the White House; he was never bored by the processes of government, and, I think, that his own vigor and his own dedication to good government did have an impact all down the line on government. I think the whole tone of the government in Washington took on a new brightness and a new excitement during the Kennedy years.

Mr. Newhouse

Richard Neustadt, in his book about presidential power, says that the office of the President confers on the occupant a good deal of bargaining power which must or should be used judiciously. How did President Kennedy use the leverage of the office?

Sen. McGovern

I think President Kennedy used the power of the Presidency with great restraint. I always had the feeling that he never quite used all the resources that were available to him. Somehow he felt that power had to

be conserved and used with great economy. The one exception to that that I can recall was the threatened increase in steel prices. At that point, the President used the full force of his office. I don't know that he could have gone any further than he did but some of the rather unpleasant experiences that grew out of that use of power seemed to cause him to revert back to his more natural state which was one of restraint in the use of power. The President had an appreciation for power. He wanted power. I think he wanted to be President of the United States mainly because of the power that it placed in his hands to do things that he thought were important. He had a great appreciation for that power and his respect for it also taught him to use it with great economy and great restraint.

Mr. Newhouse

Senator, this raises the question of the President's style. I wonder if you could comment briefly on how he operated and whether you could contrast his style with that, say, of certain of his predecessors.

President Roosevelt, for example. President Eisenhower.

Sen. McGovern

Well, I think the Kennedy style centers around a number of things. For one thing he brought a new wit to the White House that we haven't seen in recent years. The President had a sparkling humor that he displayed extemporaneously time after time. Secondly, the President had a great interest in the arts (I'm using that term in the broadest sense of the word); he was interested in everything from touch football to the great painters of our own country and other parts of the world. I think it was quite typical of President Kennedy that shortly after his election that the White House invitational list began to take on the names of great musicians, great stage stars, great writers, poets, authors. There was some tip off of things to come when Robert Frost was invited to participate in the Inaugural ceremonies. Also, the love of every aspect of life which the President seemed to demonstrate with such enthusiasm and such vigor I think brought a new interest and zest to government that it had not had in recent years.

45.

Mr. Newhouse

President Roosevelt was noted for appointing people to important positions often with conflicting points of view and seeing whether the clash of ideas and personalities would force decisions up to him earlier than perhaps they would be in the executive process. President Eisenhower by comparison introduced what he regarded at least as a kind of military staff system into the White House and I wondered if since you were in the White House from the very beginning and saw a new President in effect trying his wings, whether you could comment on his approach to this.

Sen. McGovern

Well, I think President Kennedy leaned more to the Roosevelt style. He was not particularly concerned about a neat organizational chart or a neat delegation of powers and responsibilities. In fact, I think President Kennedy rather enjoyed the combat that developed from time to time between various members of the government that were charged with overlapping areas of responsibility. And I think it disturbed

him when he got only one point of view on a subject. He wanted to see not the conclusions that people had reached after a number of conflicting points of view had been discussed. But he wanted to see that process of conflict take place and he wanted to be involved in it. He wanted to see the play of ideas and to follow the decision making process through from beginning to end. I suppose the classic example of that was the Cuban missile crisis. I wasn't involved in that directly but I knew intimately many of the people who were. And I know that President Kennedy was in charge of that from beginning to end. He didn't wait until a staff position was reached. He moved in on it from the very beginning and followed the arguments and conflicts and the various points of view right through until the final conclusion was reached.

Mr. Newhouse

As a President, do you think he could be described in any of the conventional images of American politics such as liberal or conservative, and if so, what sort of liberal or conservative was he?

47.

Sen. McGovern

Well, I think President Kennedy was almost the least doctrinaire President that we have had. He rebelled against accepting labels. I don't think he can be described as an out and out liberal. He couldn't be described as a conservative in the traditional sense of that word as it is used in American politics. I think President Kennedy was progressive minded. He wanted to meet new problems with new solutions. But he was not at all uncomfortable in the presence of conservatives; he appointed a number of conservatives to his administration -- to some of the key posts. And I think that by and large it would be difficult to pin a political label on President Kennedy.

Mr. Newhouse

I recall in urging the election of Adlai Stevenson once, he described Stevenson as being beholden to no group or section -- belonging neither to a right wing or a left wing. Would you agree that this is a course he marked out for himself?

48.

Sen. McGovern

I think very definitely that that would be the case. I think he prided himself on his independence.

Mr. Newhouse

I note he also told a Harvard lecture audience in 1956 that compromises and majorities and procedural customs and rights affect the ultimate decision as to what is right or just or good. He went on to say that the politician resents a scholar who in his words "can with dexterity skip from position to position, without dragging the anchor of public opinion." Was this a kind of wistful remark, or do you think, a reflection of his political style?

Sen. McGovern

I personally think that President Kennedy loved the art of politics. It is true that he was an intellectual in one sense of the word and that he had a great love for literature and for learning and reading and writing -- all the arts of the intellectual. But he was not an intellectual in the limited sense of the word. He was a man of action. I think he enjoyed as much

49.

the political action of being in the White House, of being in politics as he did the ideas with which he was dealing.

Mr. Newhouse

Senator, do you have anything you would like to add to this?

Sen. McGovern

There are two or three observations I might make about what I think are the most enduring contributions of the Kennedy years. I think domestically the great contribution that President Kennedy made was to allay the national fears on the religious issue. There was no question that this had been a great factor in the 1960 campaign. I think President Kennedy conducted himself in such a way that he pretty well destroyed the religious issue in American politics.

I think secondly in terms of our domestic politics, that he did bring a new zest into the art of government, into the art of politics. He challenged young people as they have not been challenged in my lifetime -- to become interested in politics, to become actively involved in current issues and to view their government and its processes with pride.



On the international scene it would seem to me the most enduring monument to President Kennedy was the limited nuclear test ban agreement. It may be that in the long range perspective, his handling of the Cuban missile crisis will emerge as of equal importance. I think that was handled with a combination of courage and restraint and represents a high water mark in President Kennedy's administration. He also had the quality to look at the Communist world not as a great unyielding monolithic bloc but as a rather diverse system. He saw the world in terms of a pluralistic system. He saw the possibility of dialogue with the Communist powers. He saw the various gradations of the Communist state and he dealt with it accordingly. And this may turn out to be a tremendously important contribution of President Kennedy.

Mr. Newhouse

Do you feel that approach is beginning to gain support?

Sen. McGovern

Yes, I do. I think the sharpening of the Sino-Soviet split, the differences within the Communist world have become

51.

more and more apparent and they have tended to make even more obsolete the old concept of viewing the world in black or white. We know now we do live in a world of diversity; that is, a vastly changing world. There are great changes occurring in the Communist part of that world, and we are going to have to adjust our policies from time to time to fit those changing circumstances. President Kennedy had a sensitive awareness of changing currents of opinion here at home. I think he was equally attuned to the changes that were going on in the revolutionary world in which we live. In his capacity to react to those changes, not only to react to them but in some cases to take the initiative in dealing with changing conditions, was one of his great strengths.

Mr. Newhouse

Senator, thank you very much. This has been a tape recorded interview with Senator George McGovern, Democrat of South Dakota. It is to be part of the oral history project for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library. The interviewer was John Newhouse.

*John Newhouse*