Milton S. Gwirtzman Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 01/19/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Milton S. Gwirtzman
Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele
Date of Interview: January 19, 1966
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 47 pages

Biographical Note
(1933 - 2011) Adviser to the President for the 1964 election (1963) Chief speech writer, Robert F. Kennedy Senate Campaign, 1964; director of public affairs, Robert F. Kennedy for President, 1968, discusses the 1960 campaign, time on the staff for Senator Benjamin A. Smith and Edward M. Kennedy, among other issues.

Access
Open.

Usage Restrictions
According to the deed of gift signed January 9, 1973, copyright of these materials will be assigned to the United States Government on January 9, 2013. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

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
Milton S. Gwirtzman, recorded interview by Ronald J. Grele**,** January 19, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

by Milton Gwirtzman

to the

John F. Kennedy Library

I, Milton Gwirtzman of Washington, D. C., do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at Washington, D. C. on Jan. 19, 1966 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The interview is to be opened immediately to general research.

2. Researchers who have access to the transcript of the interview may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only. Researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote from the tape.

3. I retain literary property rights to the interview for a period of 40 years, or until my death, whichever is the later, at which time the literary property rights shall be assigned to the United States Government.

4. For so long as I retain literary property rights to the interview, readers may make brief quotations from it without my permission. Extensive quotations may not be made without my permission.

5. Copies of the interview transcript may be provided upon request to any researcher.

This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Milton Gwirtzman
Milton Gwirtzman

December 22, 1972
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

January 9, 1973
Date

Milton S. Gwirtzman – JFK#1

Table of Contents

Oral History Interview

With

Milton S. Gwirtzman

January 19, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Gwirtzman, do you recall when you first came into contact with the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] organization?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes. I was working in the Senate in 1960, on the staff of Stuart Symington [Stuart Symington II]. Members of his staff were friendly with people on the Kennedy Senate staff, particularly Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman], Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], and Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin]. Although there was naturally some feeling of competition, there was not nearly as much as say between Kennedy's and Humphrey's [Hubert H. Humphrey] staff since Senator Symington had declined to enter the presidential primaries and it was generally assumed that he would not be nominated unless the more active candidates failed to achieve a majority taking the primary route. Anyway, we on Symington's staff—myself, Edwin Jaenke [Edwin A. Jaenke], John Zentay [John H. Zentay], Edward Welsh [Edward C. Welsh]—would get together informally at lunch in the Senate cafeteria with Feldman or Sorensen and talk generally about the upcoming campaign, some of the issues and some of the problems. We were naturally guarded in our discussions. We were careful not to disclose strategies to the other camp, although we tried out themes and arguments in

support of our man. It was a good natured thing. We all had a common interest in the issues of the campaign because all of the potential Democratic candidates were stressing the same issues against the Republican Party, and so, to a considerable extent, we were all working on the same thing. So we got to be friendly.

To give you an example: during the period from December 1959 to the date of the West Virginia primary—a period when it was quite clear whom the Democratic candidates for the nomination would be, but not at all clear who would be nominee—the national Democratic Party held two or three fundraising dinners, at which each candidate was allowed to speak for about five minutes, simply to get exposure. It was in some ways a degrading exercise—each of these men, distinguished in his own right—forced to show himself as if he were making a sales pitch to a housewife at her front door—and at the end of five minutes a buzzer would sound or a light would go off and he would have to stop. The aim was to be more witty or profound in five minutes than the competition. Well, at one of these dinners, Senator Symington had had prepared for him—by Congressman Charles Brown [Charles H. Brown] of Missouri, who used to be a television personality, a very good speech of this nature, which Symington committed to memory and delivered very well. It was by far the best effort of that particular evening. Since I wrote most of Symington's political speeches, Ted Sorensen assumed I had written that one, and he made a special point of approaching me, after that dinner, to congratulate me. (I told him to see Charlie Brown.) I am sure he had spent a great deal of time on Senator Kennedy's speech for that occasion, and that is one example of how we were really working on many of the same projects.

The upshot of all of this is that when one of the candidates receives the nomination, and must thus greatly expand his staff for the national campaign, the people best qualified for this type of work are those who have been doing it for his competition. They need no training. They go right on doing what they have been, but for another boss. Those who have been closest to the unsuccessful

candidates do not do this; but beyond that circle is what I would call a floating band of more or less professional personnel, each skilled in one of the aspects of campaigning, whose talents are easily transferable from one man within their party to another, as long as there is no significant ideological difference between them.

About two weeks before the Convention, when it became quite clear to most people that Kennedy would be the nominee, Richard Goodwin approached me and said, "Would you like to work for Kennedy, if he's nominated, after the Convention?" I said, "of course, but I couldn't do anything without Senator Symington's permission." He asked me if I was going to be in Los Angeles and I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, why don't you see Mike Feldman after the Convention is over." I cleared all this after the Convention with Senator Symington, who, after Kennedy was nominated, was anxious to help in any way he could. So I joined the small team of people working on research and issues of the campaign, backing up the staff which traveled with Senator Kennedy on the campaign trail.

GRELE: Backing a little, to your work with Senator Symington, why had Senator Symington decided not to go into the primaries?

GWIRTZMAN: I was not privy to the deliberations behind that decision. My work for him consisted primarily of speech writing and work on domestic issues that arose in the Senate, such as Medicare and the Steel Strike of 1959. I would speculate that Senator Symington, having been in Washington for a long time, at a high level in the Executive since 1949, didn't have as strong a presidential bug as the other candidates. He'd been around long enough to know the burdens as well as the benefits of the presidency. While many people pressed the idea of running upon him, he wasn't as driven to it as Kennedy or Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. You will remember that there was a great deal of press comment at the time that Symington would be the perfect "compromise" candidate, having none of

the alleged liabilities of the others. He and his supporters believed this and so he felt that if, because of the way the situation evolved he were to be chosen as the nominee, he would run as best he could and if elected would do the best job he could. But he did not feel strongly enough about it in the early months of 1960 to go aggressively seeking it.

You should also remember that the general feeling among politicians at the time was that there was a distinct possibility that Kennedy and Humphrey would knock each other out in the primaries; Johnson would be un-acceptable to Negroes, liberals, and labor, leaving Symington as the nominee, unscarred by any primary battles and a person who could unite the party and win.

On a few occasions, I traveled with Senator Symington when he went into states to speak at political dinners. There was a great deal of evidence of what I have mentioned. The politicians were looking him over very carefully. Very often, the political leader who met him at the airport, or drove him back to the airport, would disparage the other candidates and strongly imply he would back Symington. He probably did this with the other candidates when they were in town—everyone wants the friendship of a potential President—but the significant thing was that, at least until the West Virginia primary, they all thought Symington had a very good chance of getting it.

GRELE: Were the relations between Senator Symington and Senator Johnson at that time as close as was implied by some of the press?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, their personal relations were close.

GRELE: What I mean is that so many people have charged that Senator Symington's candidacy was an attempt to disguise a Johnson movement.

GWIRTZMAN: And at an appropriate time he would step aside?

GRELE : Yes.

[-4-]

GWIRTZMAN: Definitely not. There was no communication between Johnson's people and Symington's people. Johnson's candidacy was a regional, not a national one. He had little support outside of Texas and the South. It was also a late candidacy, almost an afterthought. He didn't mount anything serious until two or three months before the Convention. He relied on his colleagues in the Senate rather than the state organizations. I was aware of no conversations or any approaches from one man to the other or between their key people which would lead me to think Symington was a stalking horse for Johnson. Even those Convention votes Symington received were from delegates whose second choice would have been Humphrey, not Johnson.

GRELE: Did you work for Senator Symington at the 1960 Convention?

GWIRTZMAN: No, I didn't. There was no need at the Convention for the kind of work I did for him and by that time, his candidacy had pretty well collapsed. Instead of being considered a presidential candidate, there was increasing talk of him running for Vice President on the Kennedy ticket. Around the Convention he was considered, from Saturday through Wednesday, as the leading candidate. But any negotiations along those lines, if there were any, would have been conducted either by Symington himself or Charlie Brown or Clark Clifford [Clark M. Clifford]. That was not my department.

GRELE: Did you work on the platform?

GWIRTZMAN: I sat in on one or two meetings of the Platform Committee staff, but James Sundquist [James L. Sundquist], Senator Clark's [Joseph S. Clark] assistant, did not wish to have me there, so he said it had been decided that anyone working for any of the candidates should not be involved. So I withdrew from that.

GRELE: I have been told that the platform plank on national defense came out of Senator Symington's

[-5-]

office. Does that square with your recollections?

GWIRTZMAN: I wouldn't know. Ed Welsh might. I think Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] was in charge of drafting the platform for submission to the Platform Committee. He requested planks on a large number of

subjects from the office of each potential candidate. I don't know which he chose, although since his appointment had been recommended by Senator Kennedy, I assume the platform was cleared with the Kennedy office.

GRELE: When you first came into contact with the Kennedy staff what was your impression of this staff?

GWIRTZMAN: I had no contact at all with the organizational part of Kennedy's staff which was mounting the effort in the primaries. It really wasn't until later on that I met some of these people like O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.] and Ben Smith [Benjamin A. Smith II] and some of the people who had given up their time to go out and campaign. My contact was with the "issue" part of the Kennedy group—the Senate staff as opposed to the campaign staff.

I thought they were very intelligent and skilled at their work, but I didn't think that they were that much superior to the staffs of the other candidates. It is not until a man is clothed with the responsibilities of the presidency and the problems of the presidency that his true worth shows. The same can be said of his staff. I remember, for example, Ted Sorensen would be in the Senate cafeteria with a newspaper man maybe two or three days a week. Those same newspaper men would be down the next week having lunch with somebody on Humphrey's staff or in Johnson's entourage, playing them all about equally, finding out what they could. A Ted Sorensen at that time was considered no more significant than a Herb Waters [Herbert J. Waters], and less so than a Bobby Baker [Robert G. Baker].

In fact the first part of Kennedy's campaign, when I first became active in it, it was just getting off the

ground. It was afflicted with all the difficulties campaigns have at that point. There was a definite lag in momentum, and a lag in optimism the first two or three weeks after the Convention. I remember that the Gallup Poll had Kennedy running well ahead of Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] during the pre-convention months. Then came the day for publication of the first post-convention poll, I remember Ted Sorensen, who had evidently seen the poll in advance, coming into a meeting and saying, "Well, I just saw the new Gallup poll," and when he was asked how Senator Kennedy did, his thumb turned way down. Kennedy, who had been ahead of everybody by a comfortable margin, was suddenly running neck and neck with Nixon, or even a little behind.

That was also the time that it first became evident the religious issue, which Kennedy had optimistically said had been "buried in the hills of West Virginia," reared up again. That was a discouraging factor. So at the beginning, the campaign consisted of a lot of people scrambling around, doing the best they could without too much semblance of order. But it dropped into shape very quickly after that.

GRELE: Had you ever come into contact with the candidate before this job?

GWIRTZMAN: Not directly. I had seen him on a number of occasions, in the Senate and before. The most dramatic, I think, was during the 1956 Convention I was standing just back of the podium during the balloting for vice president between Kennedy and Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]. As the balloting dragged on there was a tremendous crush of people right in front of me. A very large red faced man came running in from the left and almost collided with a tall, brown faced, very tan man coming in from the right. One was Estes Kefauver and the other was John Kennedy. As they avoided colliding with each other, they saw who they were. They quickly shook hands, smiled at each other and then went on their way, with their entourages. Because of the extreme confusion surrounding

that balloting—Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] having thrown open the nomination the day before—and because of its closeness, both men in order to solicit a few extra votes, were violating the custom that a candidate never appears at the Convention during the balloting.

Other than that, I used to see him around the Senate. I remember when Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev] was in the United States in 1959 he met with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, of which Kennedy was a member. I waited outside the meeting room with Fred Holborn [Frederick L. Holborn], who was on the Kennedy staff. After Khrushchev left in his car, Kennedy came out and he took off with Fred and went back to the Senate Office Building.

GRELE: Was there any conversation after the meeting with Khrushchev?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, if it was, it was with Fred, not with me.

GRELE: You worked for Myer Feldman during the campaign?

GWIRTZMAN: That's right.

GRELE: How was this operation organized?

GWIRTZMAN: Shortly after the Convention, Mike Feldman had a dinner at his home in Washington to which he invited about eight or ten men, most of whom had been working in the Senate, and all of whom had asked to work in the Kennedy campaign. These included people like: Ben Reed [Benjamin H. Reed], who at the time was working for Senator Clark; Frank Sieverts [Frank A. Sieverts] who at that time was working for Senator Proxmire [William Proxmire]; Sot Horwitz [Solis Horwitz], who at that time had been working for Senator Johnson; Ben Stong [Benton J. Stong], who was on the staff of the Senate Interior Committee; Bill Brubeck [William H. Brubeck] who was with a private economic organization; all of whom had experience in certain issues from their work in the Senate and elsewhere.

After dinner Mike suggested that we make a list of all the possible issues that might come up in the campaign. It came to be more than a hundred. He then asked people which ones they were interested in working on. In that way, he assigned about eight or ten to each person. He was to be the staff expert on that issue. That meant that when anything came up anywhere in the campaign organization on that issue that person would be called upon. It could be a request for information from the candidate or someone in his entourage, that, of course, had first priority. Or it could be a request from newspapers for the candidate's position on the issue; or a request from the advertising agency for help in the preparation of their scripts or fliers; or any of the other ways in which issues are used in the campaign. Mike suggested that first we prepare a position paper on the subject, listing what the issues were; what the problems were; how the Republicans had failed to solve them; and what John Kennedy's position was. These papers were prepared, and they became the basic reference documents from which we worked throughout the campaign.

GRELE: Do you know where these papers are now, offhand?

GWIRTZMAN: No.

GRELE: It would be a good acquisition for the Library.

GWIRTZMAN: I don't think they were put into a book. Mike might have them.

GRELE: What areas were your areas of problems?

GWIRTZMAN: All of mine were domestic issues: education, defense, housing, small business, civil service, and a few others.

GRELE: Do you recall asking for outside help or did you draw up these position papers on your own?

GWIRTZMAN: All of us having been working in the Senate on these issues, we knew pretty well what the main problems were. You must remember that our work did not have to be as thorough as if we had been asked to prepare a position paper for an elected President who wished to announce a policy. Ours were only for political campaign purposes—ours were only for talking, not for action. So, with the experience we had—I had worked on two Fact Books of a similar nature for the Democratic National Committee, in 1954 and 1956—we could write them up fairly quickly. We did call on outside help where necessary for specific detailed information. But again, they would be the same people whom we were used to calling upon in our discharging our Senate duties. You get into habit patterns here. There was another set of position papers prepared by the

Archie Cox [Archibald Cox] group that we had access to. Theirs had been prepared by experts at universities. They went into much more detail than ours.

GRELE: You say you worked on defense. Do you recall the evolution of the missile gap issue?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, I think that Kennedy had made that part of his campaign arsenal earlier. He had made a couple of speeches in the Senate on it, and his position in the campaign came out of those. Senator Symington had first raised the issue a few months before. The Symington office stressed increased procurement of the Atlas missile, a land-based liquid fueled missile that was part of the Air Force arsenal. The Kennedy position was less favorable to Atlas and more so to Polaris, a submarine based missile which, while not as far along in development, was more mobile and less vulnerable to attack. So I had to shift gears, from Atlas to Polaris.

GRELE: Any reason for the difference?

GWIRTZMAN: I don't know. They both proved to be good missiles.

GRELE: What were the relations between the group you

worked for and the academic advisers organized under Professor Cox?

GWIRTZMAN: Professor Cox worked right downstairs from us, at the building at 1737 L Street. One of his responsibilities was to prepare a draft of each major speech Kennedy was to give, and send it to Ted Sorensen to assist him in preparing final drafts. I remember helping Cox to write a speech to be delivered in St. Louis, before he sent it out to Sorensen. Working on the same floor with Cox was the group originally put together to draft speeches—not the academic group—but people like Joe Kraft [Joseph Kraft], Bill Attwood [William H. Attwood], who's an ambassador now in Africa… John Bartlow Martin, who had been a speechwriter for Adlai Stevenson. There were three or four of them originally drafting speeches, and we would try to furnish them information. Let me back up a little. Another of my assignments for Mike was to supervise a group that was preparing information on each city and town Kennedy was going to visit. For this I got together a group of three or four girls and one or two fellows, headed by Donald Reis [Donald Jeffrey Reis], a doctor in New York, who had been working with Bill vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel] when he ran for Congress against John Lindsay [John V. Lindsay]. What they did was to get a list of the cities where Kennedy was going to speak, go through books looking for local color about those cities; also compile statistics about unemployment, rising prices and the drop in farm income and other problems that could be shown statistically for that particular area; and put these into a fact sheet on each setup. That was then turned over to the writers under Professor Cox.

Some of the instances of local color were used in the early part of the campaign by Senator Kennedy in his speeches. But as he got more into the swing of it and got a better sense of the audience, and more adroit at making impromptu speeches, he got his local references from a brief chat with the local people accompanying him, and laid stress on more basic themes.

[-11-]

GRELE: At one time I had been told that there was disgruntlement among the academic advisers that their material wasn't being used. Do you remember anything about that?

GWIRTZMAN: As I said, I worked with Cox and the writers under him. The academic advisers were in other cities. They sent things in to Cox. I remember he had a filing cabinet of position papers they had sent. I know that Professor Cox very conscientiously sent out to the campaign train a draft for every speech that was on the schedule. Maybe those speeches were not used, or not used in entirety. I don't know. I do know that academic advisers who sent material directly to Senator Kennedy, or to Ted Sorensen, saw it crop up a good deal. Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] used to pepper the campaign train directly with great numbers of ideas, each day. So it might have been a problem in logistics—one's material going through too many hands. It seems, from my experience in campaigning, that short memos are a better way to get your ideas across than by preparing a large paper, because the man who you want to use them, and those with him, are under tremendous pressures of time and fatigue, and cannot read long presentations on any but the most vital subjects.

GRELE: Did you travel with the campaign train at all?

GWIRTZMAN: Just at the end of the campaign in New York City.

GRELE: What was the reaction in New York City to the campaign?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, by that time—this was 6 or 7 days before the election—there was tremendous enthusiasm at all the stops. There was only one exception—the Negro areas of the Bronx where Kennedy did not stop to speak but rather just drove through, on his way to somewhere else. Everywhere else he went, the streets were packed with people, but up there the crowds

[-12-]

were rather light.

GRELE: Was this anomaly ever commented upon?

GWIRTZMAN: About the Negro areas?

GRELE: Yes.

GWIRTZMAN: No. I don't think the press observed it. This tour was on a Saturday. He had an incredible schedule. He did the Bronx first. Then he went out to Queens to speak at the Elecchester [Apartments]. It started to rain and the crowds started to leave. He got up and he said, "It may be raining here in Queens and the sun may be shining on Mr. Nixon in California, but on Tuesday the sun will shine on us." The crowds appreciated this. They stayed through the rain. Then he went farther out on Long Island. He got lost coming back. This was the Saturday before the election. He was to make a television speech at the Coliseum, a nationwide speech. Why he got lost I don't know. There was some thought that the DeSapio [Carmine G. DeSapio] group did not want him to get back to the City to go to a rally sponsored by the Reform Democrats led by Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman] and Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt]. I suspect that, as in most such matters, it was just a matter of chance and traffic, and someone dreams up a political motive afterwards. But Kennedy was furious. I was in one of the press busses with Marty Friedman, a Washington attorney who was the advance man for this particular trip. He said that the President had seen him earlier, when they were running way behind and said, "Marty, I love you, but you really loused this one up."

GRELE: Did he get to the Mrs. Roosevelt-Lehman rally?

GWIRTZMAN: I think he went after the broadcast at the Coliseum. The people just waited in the street for him. People, waited 3 or 4 hours. That was the same night that he finally got up in Connecticut at 2 in the morning, and the people were still

waiting.

At the Los Angeles Convention, the New York City liberals had opposed him, and were very upset with him for taking Johnson as his running mate; by the week before the election they were fighting with their enemies within the party to get his appearance at their rally. He had become a prize to be sought. This was an indication of the success of his campaign.

GRELE: Did you have any personal contacts with him during the campaign?

GWIRTZMAN: No. I only saw him at one brief meeting when we began our research operation.

GRELE: He came in?

GWIRTZMAN: He came in at one point. It was in his Senate office, very early in the campaign. Mike Feldman briefed him on what we were going to do. He talked briefly to each person. I remember him saying that this was the key. This was the key operation. Then he went out. I hope he told that to every group, because it really stimulated us in our work.

GRELE: Did you work at all on the television debates, the briefings of the candidate?

GWIRTZMAN: Not the briefings of the candidate. The procedure on the television debates was this: we condensed those issue papers into maybe one or two pages, sent them out hoping they would be of some help to Sorensen or Goodwin, who were briefing the candidate. Then we waited for them to call and ask us to supply any additional information the candidate wanted they didn't have. These calls came frequently, because he was always asking for information. I remember once, before the second debate, he wanted to know what percentage of Negroes do not graduate from high school.

[-14-]

Since this was a question in the field of education, it came to me. This was at 5:30 at night. The debate was at 7 o'clock. The regular sources were closed: the NAACP was closed for the day; the Library of Congress, which we had previously opened up on a Sunday to try to find out how many Catholics had died at the Alamo, was closed. So we had to try a guess. We knew the percentage of white students that didn't graduate from high school and we knew the Negro percentage had to be higher. We knew the percentage of Negroes that did not go to college. So we could tell the requested percentage would be in between. To cover ourselves we gave a range of between 60 and 70 per cent. We thought that would be the end of it. However, in the very first question on the debate that night, Senator Kennedy managed to make use of that figure. It was fresh in his mind. It was a shock to us. We could only cross our fingers and hope we were right, or, if we were wrong, no one would pick him up on it. The next morning we checked and found that we were right.

He made many requests of that nature—very specific, for the specific figure or bit of information which was one of the things which impressed people so much about his speaking.

GRELE: Who in this operation was concerned with the touchier issues—say religion, civil rights?

GWIRTZMAN: Religion was handled by a separate group, the Jim Wine [James W. Wine] group, consisting of Mr. Wine, Arthur Lazell [J. Arthur Lazell], who had worked with him at the National Conference of Churches, and two girls, Nancy Thorpe and Mary Heeset Taylor, who worked in their office on research and press relations. Of course, Ted Sorensen had been so thoroughly steeped in that issue, having

spoken to so many theologians, Catholic and Protestant, that he could advise the candidate directly about it, and I understand Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] assisted with his knowledge of the Catholic point of view.

GRELE: There was no one in your office then?

[-15-]

GWIRTZMAN: No. When you say "touchy issues" you may be confusing our function. It was not to deal with the groups who were interested in these issues, speak to their leadership and try to get their support. That was done by others. Our job was merely to get factual data and make it available. For example, the civil rights issue was something the candidate had been worrying about for a long time. He had worked out a pretty definite position on it, through his speeches and voting record. If he needed anything more, he wouldn't come to us, but probably ask someone like Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr.], who was spending all of his time in that area, and was in close touch with the organizations most concerned. This happened, of course, when Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] was jailed.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the events of the last few days before the election and the election night? Where were you? Did you go to Hyannis Port?

GWIRTZMAN: The last few days before the election our group did two things that might be helpful to show how we operated. About ten days before the election, Nixon put out what he called a list of 18 specific misstatements of fact Kennedy had made in the campaign. When reporters told Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] that Nixon had done this Pierre immediately said that, "Everything in the Nixon statement is false and we will have a complete rebuttal by 10 o'clock tomorrow morning." This was at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. He then called Mike Feldman and told him what he had said, and asked if the rebuttal could be ready by the next morning.

We didn't have the Nixon statement until about 7 o'clock, but we were so well geared up for such a task that we simply divided up the Nixon statements by subject and each person responsible for that subject looked them over, evaluated them, prepared rebuttal material and sent it in to Mike. He looked it all over, made changes, asked for additional material, and prepared the rebuttal for publication. It was ready at the time that Salinger had promised it.

[-16-]

But from the public relations standpoint, the important thing was that Salinger's statement was carried equally with the Nixon statement, neutralizing it, and Salinger's credibility with the press was sustained by the rebuttal. Again, two days before the election Nixon went on a marathon television show. Mike announced, through the Democratic National Committee that rebuttals would be published to all of Nixon's statements as he

made them on his show. We sat there, in the middle of the floor at our office, watching the show. The minute Nixon said something, we would get something up and shoot it out. By that time we could do it in our sleep. It proved a rather effective device.

GRELE: Were you convinced that Nixon was in fact in error on most of the work he did on statistics?

GWIRTZMAN: In Nixon's case it wasn't so much false statistics; it was often false emphasis. Some of his statistics were, however, plain wrong: He said that Kennedy's farm program would increase food prices at the market by 25 per cent. This just wasn't true, and we proved it. Then there was the debate going on about whether Russia's power capacity was growing faster than our own. This was a complicated issue, involving as it did the kilowatt ratings of Russian dams, something only the Soviet Union knew for sure, although American power experts had visited Russia and seen for themselves dams with a far greater capacity than anything we have. Nixon would give his side of that and we would give our side of it. This was a typical type of charge and rebuttal. We were convinced that our position was more in accord with the facts than his and was also more persuasive from a political standpoint. Another thing we did very often was to point out, when he announced his support of a program, that he had voted against it as a Senator or as Vice President. This was especially true in the field of education.

GRELE: Your operation kept up with Nixon's voting record.

GWIRTZMAN: The Research Division of the Democratic National Committee kept this up on a regular basis. In addition there was a lady named Mrs. Evans who put together what was called the "Nixopedia"—an index of all of the public statements he had ever made on any public issue. This was a massive book, and we each had a copy of it. Another thing we did—and this was my responsibility—was to follow Nixon's speeches on the newswire; pick out the parts I thought Kennedy might be asked about the next day by reporters, or the parts it would be helpful for Kennedy to rebut, and get the statement with my suggestions to Sorensen wherever the candidate was stopping for the night. For example, Nixon would be making a major speech in the evening. He relied on these for his major news stories, depending on where the speech was made, the newswire would move it some time between 7 and 11 o'clock. I would see what was in it, and how it should be answered. I checked with my colleagues if he was covering areas in which they were expert. Each night we sent a telegram to Sorensen, wherever the campaign plane was, with a digest of the Nixon statement and those facts and figures needed to treat it in the most helpful way. All of this was part of the running debate that develops between two presidential candidates in the course of a campaign—a bundle of charges, countercharges, programs, promises and replies to these programs and promises.

GRELE: When did you sleep?

GWIRTZMAN: During campaigns you don't sleep much.

GRELE: Was this kind of operation an innovation in political campaigning or to your knowledge had you detected it before in other campaigns?

GWIRTZMAN: To my knowledge, it had not been done before. I worked for the National Committee in the 1956 campaign and there was nothing like that.

GRELE: Who was responsible for this kind of organization? Do you know offhand?

GWIRTZMAN: Mike Feldman—you've got to give him the credit.

GRELE: It was his idea…

GWIRTZMAN: He was coordinator of research for the National Committee. And, as such he used the research division of the National Committee which consists of two or three people and added to them with these people who worked in the Senate.

GRELE: What did you do election night?

GWIRTZMAN: I was in Washington.

GRELE: Then after the trip through Connecticut you came back?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes. I actually didn't go up to Connecticut. I was just in New York. But I don't remember anything unusual.

GRELE: Why didn't you go up to Connecticut?

GWIRTZMAN: I had no real function there. I was just in New York as an observer. Research operations generally, three or four days before the election, slow down markedly. All of the material is already in the field, the candidates are just repeating themselves, the public has probably stopped listening and there is really not much more you can do except pray. By that time the role of the issue people is over, and the get-out-the-vote people take over.

GRELE: Do you recall any other incidents besides getting lost on Long Island that would illuminate the conflict within the New York party that John Kennedy sort of stepped into?

GWIRTZMAN: No.

[-19-]

GRELE: I asked that question because at one time right before the election there were statements that the split in New York—people were afraid that the split in New York right before the election…

GWIRTZMAN: May cost him votes? Well, I think John Kennedy showed that in a presidential election in this generation, there is created, through the media, such a powerful, direct relationship between the candidate and the voters that the intermediary of the political organization is no longer critical. The organization no longer plays the role of convincing voters how to vote; to a large extent it is not even needed to get them out to the polls. Voters know where to go. It is usually just a couple of blocks away, although an organization can still help by providing rides for the infirm and baby sitters, and reminding people it is election day. These are some of the reasons why Kennedy was able to win in New York even though there was a lot of conflict within the organization. In fact, insofar as organization work can still help, the very conflicts in the organization might have spurred each conflicting faction to work harder to get their people to vote for him.

GRELE: After the election what did you do?

GWIRTZMAN: Got some sleep. Then I took a ten day vacation. When I came back I had a note from Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] to get in touch with him. He said that Ben Smith, who had been appointed to President-elect Kennedy's Senate seat, was badly in need of someone to help him with the legislative work. I went on to see Senator Smith, and talked to him about it, and then started work with him. That was just prior to Kennedy's Inauguration and he had one room in Kennedy's old Senate Office, at the time that part of the planning for the Inaugural was going on there. Senator Smith had one room, and the Kennedy staff, which had not moved to the White House yet were working out of the other rooms. So there was a lot of excitement. The Inaugural Address was being

[-20-]

proofread at one desk, in a monotone that made it sound very uninspiring; in another room President Kennedy's father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] was deciding who would sit where at the Inaugural Gala.

GRELE: Were you ever informed of various background events that led to the appointment, or the selection, of Ben Smith for Senator?

GWIRTZMAN: No. I never met him until he had been appointed.

GRELE: He never told you who else was looking for that position?

GWIRTZMAN: No.

GRELE: Why was he selected?

GWIRTZMAN: First of all because he had had experience in public life. He had been a mayor of a city. Secondly, because he had been extremely active in the Kennedy campaign. He had given up a great deal of time to work in Wisconsin and West Virginia and upstate New York, in a very important capacity. Thirdly, I think, because his appointment would not be considered a victory for any one of the factions in the Democratic Party in Massachusetts. Part of the reason for this was the wide-spread feeling, at the time he was appointed, that he was a seat-warmer. He did not create this impression. Governor Furcolo [David Foster Furcolo] created it when he announced Smith's appointment. Furcolo said, out of the blue, "I'm appointing Benjamin Smith at the request of President-elect Kennedy. Mr. Smith will not run for re-election." Senator Smith had never said anything like that.

GRELE: Did he ever comment to you about it?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes. He was quite upset about it.

GRELE: Did he want to run for re-election?

GWIRTZMAN: He certainly did not want to be precluded from running. That would have hampered his effectiveness as a Senator. They called him a seat-warmer, but he actually worked very hard, did a great deal for Massachusetts, and moved around the state as someone does if they are going to run. This was because he did not know what the future would bring, and, as of February of 1961, it could well be that in fall of 1962 he would be running. Naturally, because of his loyalty to the Kennedy family, he felt that if Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] decided to run for that seat he would step aside. But in 1961 there was no certainty that Ted was going to run for the seat in 1962. There was a feeling in some quarters that he might not run for the seat because of the awkward situation it might create for President Kennedy in Washington and certain members of the White House staff held this viewpoint. A lot of people in Massachusetts were speculating that he might run for Attorney General in Massachusetts, or some other office. Ted Kennedy never indicated his intentions to Senator Smith during 1961. Senator Smith

wanted to be in a position where he could run if Ted did not. He worked very hard. He sponsored some important legislation for Massachusetts, in the fields of area development, fisheries and minimum wages improvements. At the end of the first session of that Congress, he made an extensive trip through the state, visiting factories and radio stations and newspapers, just as a candidate does in Massachusetts. The Press, at the time, commented on this activity, as indicating a change in his position. I am certain that by December of 1961 he was seriously considering running if Ted Kennedy decided not to. Ted did not make up his mind until January or February of 1962, fully a year after Ben Smith had been appointed.

GRELE: Did Senator Smith ever comment to you on any discussions he had with the President about whether or not he should run again?

GWIRTZMAN: No.

[-22-]

GRELE: There were reports at that time that he had been pressured out.

GWIRTZMAN: No. That did not happen. As I said, he had always felt an obligation to step aside if Ted Kennedy made the race. His relationship to the Kennedy family was so close he would not have stood in Ted's way. The only pressure could have come had Ted not run, and the Kennedy group in Massachusetts decided to run another candidate.

GRELE: It wasn't always assumed it would be Edward Kennedy; there was some speculation at one time that it might be Robert F. Kennedy.

GWIRTZMAN: There was some speculation that Robert Kennedy might run for Governor of Massachusetts, but never for the Senate.

GRELE: Do you remember any incident that showed the relationship between President Kennedy and Senator Smith?

GWIRTZMAN: They were very old friends. Their relationship went back for twenty years or more, to when they were at Harvard together. I remember at a testimonial dinner for Ben Smith in Gloucester in 1962 that Robert Kennedy, who was the main speaker, began his remarks by saying, "I've been hearing about Ben Smith since I was in knee pants," an older man that he always admired.

Senator Smith had a good personal relationship with the President. He didn't impose upon the President's time, but he was often invited to the White House on social occasions, and the two of them went sailing off the coast of Maine in 1962. He also helped secure passage of legislation that the President, as a Senator, had introduced prior to 1961 but had not had a chance to finish. Particularly the bill to make parts of Cape Cod a National Seashore. This was a significant piece of legislation on

the field of recreation for it first established the principle that federal parklands could be created close to urban areas, on land where people already lived, and the residents would be fully protected in their property rights while the undeveloped parts were preserved for free public use. This had been the Kennedy-Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] Bill. It became the Saltonstall-Smith Bill and was passed in the summer of 1961. Of course, a large number of Congressmen went over for the signing of the bill. That took place on a Monday morning. Now Ben Smith is a very good yachtsman, one of the best in Massachusetts. Usually when he entered a race over the weekend at Marblehead, he would win. This particular weekend he didn't. The President was signing the bill and Ben Smith was standing in back of him. The President would take a pen, from a sheaf of pens on his desk, scratch a small part of his signature and put that pen down, take another pen and make another scratch, so he would have enough "signing pens" to pass out to the dignitaries. While he was doing that, without looking up from his signing, he said to Ben Smith, "Heard you came in second." Senator Smith said, "Yes, the wind died in the last two minutes." The President, head still down, still signing this bill, said, "That's the old story."

There was also a more significant situation when Senator Smith made a very strong bid to have Greater Boston chosen for the Manned Spaceflight Center, which is now in Houston. Many people within the Administration felt the national space program would be speeded up considerably if use could be made of the electronic and space research resources that were located in the Boston area. They felt that to create an entirely new complex in a new part of the country would lose us valuable time in our effort to place a man on the moon by 1970. Senator Smith organized a strong bid by Massachusetts, and made things difficult for the White House. The President was from Massachusetts, and yet Albert Thomas, who was chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee that determined the amount of the NASA budget was from Houston and wanted the center in his district. And he had been working on getting it for many months before Senator Smith

got into the act, and had arranged for Rice University to offer a free parcel of land. Thomas might well not have been as generous with funds for NASA had the center located somewhere else. Nevertheless, Senator Smith got cooperation from members of the White House staff in making his case. It was really a very close decision, much closer than most people thought.

GRELE: Was Mr. Webb [James E. Webb] opposed to the Massachusetts site or was he in favor of Massachusetts?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, he finally decided on Houston. I believe he had made a prior commitment, before Massachusetts had made its bid, and before he was really fully informed of the advantages of locating in the Boston

area. Senator Smith, in cooperation with the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, organized a team headed by the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the acting president of Harvard, Charles Cabot, (President Pusey [Nathan Marsh Pusey] was in India that year) and a number of scientists to come down and make a presentation to Webb. He was extremely impressed by their presentation. I think he gave Massachusetts very careful consideration after that, but he didn't change his mind.

GRELE: Wasn't the President at all drawn into those negotiations?

GWIRTZMAN: I think he tried very hard to stay out of it. Deciding between one part of the country and another for a major government facility is a very difficult thing for a President to do, especially if he is from one of the areas, and could be accused of favoritism. But may I say that two years afterwards, Greater Boston was chosen as the site of the NASA Electronics Center, an important facility in its own right; and the fact that it had come in second for the Space Flight Center had a great deal to do with its choice as the Electronics Center site. Thus, Senator Smith deserves much of the

credit for this, even though the decision was made after he left office.

GRELE: Did you go to work directly for Senator Kennedy from Senator Smith's office?

GWIRTZMAN: No. Ted Kennedy announced for the Senate early in March. About two weeks before that, he came down to Washington—for the first time in over a year—and stayed at the White House, prior to appearing on the program Meet the Press. He came in to see Ben Smith and told him he was going to run. Senator Smith acquiesced, and offered him whatever help he could. One aspect of this assistance was that I would go up to Boston once a week to help Ted, while still continuing my duties on the Senate staff. I would also send up material on the issues facing the Senate, the issues Ted would have to deal with as a candidate. It was rather easy to do this because it was the very material I was working with in the Senate. I would often send up duplicate copies of some of the memos and speech drafts I prepared for Senator Smith. I also prepared a Fact Book on the issues, modified version of the type that had been prepared for the 1960 campaign for President Kennedy.

GRELE: It was the same type of organization now applied to a local level?

GWIRTZMAN: In some respects; although much less elaborate because it was a senate campaign rather than a presidential campaign. Senator Kennedy had John Culver [John C. Culver], now a Congressman from Iowa, helping him on issues in Boston. John, at the time was a third year student at the Harvard Law School, and also Chief Counselor to Harvard freshmen; but he volunteered a good deal of

time to Ted, who had been his friend, classmate and football teammate in college. John also enlisted some members of the Harvard faculty and a few students to help on an informal basis, and I helped them from Washington.

[-26-]

Once a week I would go up to Boston, or to Hyannis Port, with John and we would spend the day with Ted Kennedy going over some of the material.

GRELE: Did you work during the primary too?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes. I went up once a week until the June Democratic pre-primary convention. I was there all the time during the convention, and then about a month before the Senate recessed I began to devote full time to the campaign in Boston. The primary was the 17th of September. I went up there about the middle of August and stayed through the November election.

GRELE: At the time of the primary there were statements by both Speaker McCormack [John William McCormack] and President Kennedy that they would remain neutral. Did they, in fact?

GWIRTZMAN: They themselves stayed out of it. There was some evidence that the influence of their offices was used in behalf of their relatives, especially in connection with obtaining pledges from Convention delegates. This does not mean that anything specific was offered: rather a man who was a delegate to the Convention, and therefore someone active in political affairs in Massachusetts, was forced to choose between the McCormacks and the Kennedys. If such a man had a political favor he wanted done, he would call Speaker McCormack's office and ask him to do the favor, and if McCormack helped him the assumption was that he would become a McCormack delegate; the same for the Kennedy delegates. So things were being done to win the favor of the delegates.

GRELE: Was the convention particularly bitter?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes, I think so. There had always been antagonism between these factions. It was particularly intense in western Massachusetts

[-27-]

where the contest between them was quite close. The Berkshire County delegation was almost evenly split. The primary was further embittered by the personal attack McCormack [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.]made on Kennedy in the first debate.

GRELE: What was that attack and what was Edward Kennedy's reaction to that attack?

GWIRTZMAN: The first debate between McCormack and Kennedy was held in South Boston, at McCormack's old high school on the last day of August. Ted Kennedy spoke first, and tried to relate the problems of Massachusetts to the United States Senate. He talked about the need for a Democrat in the Senate and a need for someone who could work for Massachusetts in the Senate.

When McCormack's turn came, he turned to Kennedy and said, "You have never worked for a living; you have never held a public office. You are running on a name; you're not running on your own. You're running on a slogan which I think is the most despicable slogan ever used in Massachusetts politics. You say you can 'do more for Massachusetts,' and what does that mean? It means you have connections; you have relations." And then McCormack said, "I say no. I say you vote for a man on his qualifications." And he ended up by saying, "If your name were Edward Moore instead of Edward Moore Kennedy your candidacy would be a joke." Ted Kennedy's reaction to this was shock. He turned white and bit his lip. But he remembered what his father had told him about a person with class never engaging in a personal attack. He retained his composure. He did not swing back. He spoke instead about the grave situation facing the United States as a result of the blockade of the access route to Berlin. The closest he came to personalities was to say, "I don't think we should be talking about families or personalities. We should be talking about the people's destiny here in Massachusetts." That response won him tremendous applause, the respect of the many voters watching, and the election.

GRELE: Did he ever confer with his brother, the President, on the election?

GWIRTZMAN: He talked to his brother on numerous occasions during the pre-primary convention and during the primary. He was on the phone with him during the actual convention balloting, telling him how it was going. He had been so used to asking his brother for advice, on day to day matters, that he continued to do so at that time. He would see him each weekend in Hyannis Port. The President would always be very interested in what was going on because, in a way, Ted was travelling the same road that the President had taken in his Senate campaigns, going into the same cities, meeting the same people. The President was interested in Ted's reactions. You remember, the President once said Ted was "the best politician in the family," and in many ways this is true.

I remember being with Ted Kennedy in Hyannis Port once when we had worked through the afternoon, he would be leaving and he met the President's car coming in the other direction. They stopped and for a long time had a conversation about how the campaign was going. It was natural interest that every member of the family shared.

GRELE: Was it "Meet the Press," or "Face the Nation" where Eddie McCormack, Ted Kennedy and George Lodge [George Cabot Lodge] appeared together?

GWIRTZMAN: The three of them were on together on "Meet the Press."

GRELE: On that program, as I watched it, it seemed the big issue was federal aid to education and the stand on aid to parochial schools. Was it the feeling at the time among the Edward Kennedy staffers that his position on that was limited by the President's position on the issue? At the time…

GWIRTZMAN: To some extent, yes. He felt that while certain types of nonsectarian aid could be extended to the children in the parochial schools,

the schools themselves should not receive aid.

GRELE: At that time the other two candidates came out for aid to parochial schools.

GWIRTZMAN: There was the constitutional issue, which Ted had studied in detail with the help of some of the Harvard Law professors; and also the political consideration that the President had taken that position without causing any great outcry among Catholics, so that Ted could safely take it too. But the overriding consideration was that it was the right thing to do from the constitutional viewpoint.

GRELE: There were claims at the time that the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Mr. Celebrezze's [Anthony J. Celebrezze], appointment was made to satisfy the desires of the Italian elements in Massachusetts. Was that ever your impression?

GWIRTZMAN: No. That was just some columnist's dream. It was so far from the fact that the brothers could even joke about it. It may have been that one factor in the appointment was the desire to satisfy Italians nationally, with the appointment of an Italian to a major post; but the race in Massachusetts was just so close at the time the appointment was made, and Ted Kennedy's position, judged by the polls he took, among Italian voters was very strong. They did joke about it, at one point, after the appointment was made. Ted Kennedy went over to the house the President was renting on Squaw Island, and while he was talking to him about things, asked him that very question. He said, "What do I say when people comment that Celebrezze was appointed to help me with the Italian vote in Massachusetts?" President Kennedy looked at him and said, "You tell them

that you have it on very, very good personal authority that when the President of the United States undertook to choose a Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, he wasn't looking for an Italian or an Irishman or a

[-30-]

Jew. He was looking for the best man for the job. And that man was An-to-nee Che-lay-bree-zee."

GRELE: We'll look into the spelling of that Italian intonation. After the election, do you recall any comments the President made to Senator-elect Kennedy?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, the President was always the second person Ted would call after anything important had happened.

GRELE: Who was the first?

GWIRTZMAN: His father. He called them during the convention, and after the first debate. He called him during the night of the primary, which was much more crucial than the general election. Ted Kennedy got more votes in the primary than is usually needed to win the general election. This demoralized the Republican opposition, for they realized that there had arisen in Massachusetts a new Kennedy who was a powerful vote-getter in his own right. After that it was clear sailing. He called him as soon as the first returns came in, in both the primary and general election. Each time he told him what was happening. In fact, there were some areas in which Ted ran a little better than the President had run in 1958, and he made sure the President knew about it. They would kid back and forth like that.

GRELE: I'm just going to turn the tape over.

[SIDE II TAPE II]

GWIRTZMAN: One particular conversation, which throws some light on the way President Kennedy looked at the race, took place after the first debate. Ted went directly to his home from the debate, and arrived there still shaken from the attack

[-31-]

that had been made upon him. He called the President, whose first question was how it had gone. Ted had difficulty rendering an opinion, uncertain as to how the voters had reacted, and asked me to get on the telephone with the President and give my view. I told the President that if the viewers had taken McCormack's points at face value, Ted was probably hurt by the

debate; but if they had reacted against the crudeness of McCormack's tactics, he was helped. The President was a bit annoyed at me. "Don`t give him a dispassionate analysis," he said, referring to Ted. "He's the candidate. He's the one under the gun. You've got to make him feel good." In other words, the debate was over. Nothing could undo it. The important thing was to buoy the candidate's spirits to continue the campaign. Another indication of the strong interest the members of Ted's family had in his campaign was the fact that before both of his debates with McCormack, Robert Kennedy worked with him extensively on the presentation of the issues. Before the second debate he made a special trip to the Cape with Ted Sorensen, they worked with Ted in the afternoon and the evening before the debate. The Sunday before the election, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, at a time when it looked as if Khrushchev had backed down, but he could not be sure that the crisis was over, the President instructed Ted Sorensen to come up and work with Ted Kennedy in preparation for the appearance on "Meet the Press." Sorensen specifically advised him what to say if asked how the missile crisis was going. Why did they make these extraordinary efforts? Not because they didn't think Ted would win the election, but because it was important to the President's own prestige that Ted do as well as possible. This was an unprecedented situation—the brother of a sitting President running for the Senate. When Ted Kennedy went on national television, some of John Kennedy's prestige went on with him. So he wanted him to have the latest information, and he wanted him to have the benefit of these men who had done it before so many times. The President felt that it was in his own personal interest that Ted do as well as possible. That's why the effort was made.

GRELE: This would be true particularly at a time of a crucial crisis?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes, but even at other times. The debates with McCormack created a great deal of national attention for the campaign. Reporters came from all over the country to cover it. Ted had not done that sort of thing before. His brothers were not certain he would perform up to the standards of the very critical national audience. So they wanted him to have the advantages of the best possible resources in his preparation. And I think they were very pleased by the way he used those resources, and performed.

GRELE: When he came to Washington were his relations with other members of Congress necessarily colored by his relations with the President?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, they didn't turn out to be, I don't believe. Let me say that first of all, members of Congress have a lot of things that they want and need from the White House, and so they always look for help to anyone who has a special relationship with the White House. I remember sitting in on a meeting of the Senate Labor Committee with Senator Smith, when in the middle of the meeting, the late Senator Patrick V. McNamara of Michigan passed a note to him saying, "Please put in a word with the President about the nomination of Thaddeus Machrowicz [Thaddeus Michael

Machrowicz] as federal judge in my state." And Ben Smith was not even a relative—just a close friend. But in Ted Kennedy's case, I think senators and congressmen expected the worst and were very, very pleasantly surprised. Ted Kennedy had not received favorable press. It had heavily emphasized the assertion that he had been elected because his brother was President. It had not emphasized his own merits. Most of the senators and congressmen didn't know him. A few did because he had campaigned with them in the West, but they were just a handful. But what happened was that they were very favorably impressed, all the more so because they had expected the reverse.

[-33-]

Many of the senators were old enough to be his father. Part of the answer is that Ted Kennedy has a marvelous way of dealing with older people. It comes from the fact that he's the youngest of nine children. He's always been dealing with older people—all his life—and instinctively acts in the proper way toward them. He showed the senators a great deal of respect. I remember a conversation I had with Stuart Symington, after the Senate had been in session for about a month in 1963. He said, "That Ted Kennedy is one fine fellow." I said, "Well, you know, it's not easy for him. You have two sons who are his age." He said, "Yes, but he's just such an attractive person." That's a word Symington always used to show a high degree of admiration. Ted just naturally handled things in a way that made him friends among people whom you wouldn't think would be friendly. A lot of this involved the deference I mentioned. As things got going it involved working very hard on Senate business, and not trying to be showy. He realized there is a natural tendency for the press to concentrate on the Kennedys rather than the other senators: and they, the others, might resent this, since all senators want attention. So whenever he was working on a project with a colleague—as in the case of the Teacher Corps legislation—he would push the other senator forward and give him the publicity.

GRELE: Were his familial relations with the President at all affected by the fact that he was a member of the Senate? Did they change any?

GWIRTZMAN: Not to my knowledge. He had purposely absented himself from Washington after 1961. He stayed in Massachusetts. I think he came to Washington once and got pushed into the swimming pool at his brother Bobby's, and that drew a lot of publicity; so he decided he better not be around. This means that he hadn't spent much time with the President in the two years prior to his election to the Senate. When he came to Washington he would see him occasionally, but not a great deal. I'm sure that the members of the President's staff saw him much more than his brothers and sisters

[-34-]

did, because the members of the family did not want to take up his time when the President was busy on affairs of state. I think they saw him most weekends or up at Cape Cod or down

at Palm Beach. Those were family occasions. The relationships between Ted and the President was one that had been fixed many years back, and it didn't change much. There was no change in their personal relationship. Ted was, however, always careful not to do anything in the Senate that would embarrass the President. On the one or two times that he voted against the President's position on legislation, but it was on minor issues, where the Massachusetts interest, because of some special condition, was averse to the President's recommendation. When this happened, he made sure the President knew about it. He would twit him about it. He did the work of a Massachusetts senator.. On things like protection of certain industries or a defense contract for a Massachusetts company he would lead a delegation and make a plea to the President, even though the Administration's position varied with his. In other words, he did not let the fact that his brother was President interfere with discharging his duties as Senator from Massachusetts. But he could discharge them without any significant conflicts with the President because the interests of an urban industrial state like Massachusetts, and the interests of a Democratic president are very similar.

GRELE: Did the President, to your knowledge, help him do more for Massachusetts?

GWIRTZMAN: No. The slogan "He can do more for Massachusetts," which caused so much critical comment on Ted's campaign, was not a new one. It had been used by John F. Kennedy in 1952 when he first ran for the Senate. Ted debated whether to use it for his campaign. He realized it could be interpreted as if he would use his influence with his brother. But there was no other slogan which really projected what the people of the state needed and wanted. Massachusetts is a small state, on a corner of the country. A state that had just gone through a severe loss of jobs, and it

badly needed the most effective representation in Washington. By the use of the slogan, Ted was really saying that because he was a hard worker, and was a Democrat, in a Democratic Administration, he would be able to get the State its needed share of Government programs.

GRELE: Did you work on the position papers Senator Kennedy used, or the background materials that he used to buttress his arguments for aid to ailing industries in Massachusetts?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, most of that was done by John Culver who was the legislative assistant at the time, and William Evans [William J. Evans], who was Executive assistant. But the arguments were the same as the ones I had made when I was Ben Smith's legislative assistant.

GRELE: You left the Senator's staff in 1964 to join the National Committee?

GWIRTZMAN: No. In 1963, I spent most of my time working with Ted Kennedy, and some of my time working with Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] at the National Committee. The plan was that I would, in 1964, spend most of my time in the national campaign assisting Steve Smith.

GRELE: What did you do with Mr. Smith?

GWIRTZMAN: Over the Christmas holidays in 1962, Robert Kennedy had said to Steve: "Would you take a look at what is going on at the National Committee? I haven't had time to check into what is going on there. See if it is in shape for the next campaign." As Steve remarked to me, this was Bob's off-handed way of saying, "Would you be campaign manager for President Kennedy in 1964?"

Since I had worked with him on Ted's campaign, he had some confidence in me. He asked me to watchdog the research effort, and also work with him on some of the more political aspects. We started with a determination

[-36-]

of whether or not the President should allow his name to be entered in the 1964 primaries.

GRELE: Was he going to allow his name to go into the primaries?

GWIRTZMAN: I don't think any decision was ever made on that. Customarily Presidents do. There were a few cases in which they did not. You could see the Wallace [George C. Wallace] situation coming up. That would have presented a problem, because if you don't let your name go in and you run a favorite son instead, the Wallace slate could win. I prepared a memo on this, reported what Presidents had done historically. Then I worked with Paul Southwick, who was in the Executive Office of the President, getting up a complete book on the accomplishments of the Administration in each field. He would get material from the agencies and try to put it into a form that was more politically useful. There was a group—they had a meeting once a week at breakfast at the National Committee. One person from each agency and a few of the people from the National Committee on some of these problems. Once we met in the White House office of P. Kenneth O'Donnell. Finally, Steve, myself and William Keel [William A. Keel], Research Director of the National Committee, began, about September of 1963, to meet once every two weeks in the White House with Ted Sorensen and Mike Feldman to get guidance on how to coordinate the Committee's issue material with the President's strategy and program. It was anticipated that all this would intensify as we approached the 1964 campaign.

GRELE: At that time was there worry about the vote in the South getting into the activities of civil rights…

GWIRTZMAN: Yes. There was worry about a third party and who would lead it. Various politicians and public figures from the South came in and talked to Steve and gave him their views on it. One

[-37-]

of the things that we had planned but never went through with was that Ted Kennedy would make a series of speeches in the South, including an address to the Georgia legislature. I was to go down there with him and we were to talk to leaders, get a feel of what the situation was, and report it back.

GRELE: Were there any other particular problems that you recall as coming up, as the situation in New York?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, New York was a problem that Steve handled himself because he was from there. I think there were other problem states. Ohio was one.

GRELE: Why was Ohio a problem?

GWIRTZMAN: Because there was no Democratic governor, and so the leadership was scattered. Problems occurred in states where the leadership was factionalized. In 1960, what would be done was to send in someone from outside the state, someone close to John Kennedy personally, to act as the coordinator. The advantage of that was the people knew that person would leave after the election, and wouldn't get a leg up on them in the state politics. That was tried in Ohio. Steve sent Helen Keyes [Helen M. Keyes] in there to spend some time there and report back on who we would be able to work with and who not.

GRELE: This was in '60 or '63?

GWIRTZMAN: This was '63. I think. Pat Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey] was doing some of that too. Steve was getting them involved, but it just was getting started.

GRELE: Was there ever any discussion about John Kennedy's chances against various Republican

[-38-]

candidates—Barry Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] for instance?

GWIRTZMAN: They had come to the conclusion that Goldwater would be the candidate. This was before any primaries were held, of course, which can always change things. The decision was based on their knowledge

of what the Republican state organizations were doing and who the Republican delegates were interested in. This was after Rockefeller's [Nelson A. Rockefeller] divorce and remarriage. Prior to that time, they were convinced Rockefeller could well be the candidate. We started a Rockefeller project to pull together specific things in Rockefeller's record that would be vulnerable in a national campaign. I worked on that. Pat Moynihan [Daniel P. Moynihan] worked on it independently. I also visited Anthony Travia [Anthony J. Travia], Speaker of the New York State Assembly, and got his advice on how to handle Rockefeller. But then at the end of 1962, when Mr. Rockefeller was remarried and his stock plummeted, at that point they wrote him off and concluded Goldwater would be the candidate. So we started working on the Goldwater project of the same nature.

GRELE: What in particular did they feel were the weaknesses of Barry Goldwater?

GWIRTZMAN: That he was just too conservative for the voters.

GRELE: In particular? Did any one ever relate to you John Kennedy's feelings about campaigning against Goldwater?

GWIRTZMAN: My impression was that he relished the thought of doing it. In October of 1963 Ted Kennedy made a speech in Detroit at a Democratic political dinner and worked over Goldwater some. It was well received. When he came back the President told him he had read about it in the paper and he advised him not to do that sort of thing because he didn't want Ted doing

anything that would give the impression that John Kennedy thought Goldwater would be the opponent, or that he wanted Goldwater to be the opponent. At the New England Salute to President Kennedy in October 1963 (a fundraising dinner) the President remarked how Senator Saltonstall, in introducing Goldwater in Boston, had used weaker praise than he had used to introduce Kennedy—and then he said, "But we want to wait—we want to wait. This campaign will be most pleasurable and we are looking forward to it."

GRELE: How did Mr. Smith assess the effectiveness of John Bailey [John Moran Bailey] as national chairman? Or were you privy to it?

GWIRTZMAN: I don't know, although I assume that if he were the best possible chairman Steve wouldn't go over there. I never heard him say anything. You must remember that the Kennedys owed John Bailey a great debt. He had been a leader in the move for the vice-presidency at the 1956 Convention, and he had been the first state chairman to announce for Kennedy in 1959. So they were not going to ease him out.

GRELE: Before we move on to the assassination can you think of anything we missed? Oh, I can think of one thing. With three very powerful public figures all related, all having different offices, was there ever any kind of competition between the three Kennedy brothers in Washington in terms of their staffs, in terms of their policies, etc., that you can think of?

GWIRTZMAN: Not at that time, because the three offices were so dissimilar. There's a difference in degree and the nature of the concern between the Senate office and the White House office. The Senate office is small potatoes, comparatively. I remember that when John Kennedy's staff first got over to the White House in 1961, they couldn't find the mimeograph machine, so they called Senator Smith's office and used ours. The only staff athletic competition I can remember were a

couple of touch football games at Robert Kennedy's house in Virginia between his friends and Ted's friends.

GRELE: Who won?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, we won, but he claims that he won. This is what happened. We won in the regular time. He said, "Well, let's play a little more." And then they got a couple touchdowns. So he claimed that he had won. Some of his team were his staff, and some were old friends of his such as Dean Markham [Dean F. Markham], Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett], and Paul Lazzaro from Boston.

GRELE: Was there ever any conflict between the President and Senator Kennedy over the potential nomination of Judge Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey] as a US district judge?

GWIRTZMAN: No. I knew nothing about the Morrissey nomination until I started working for Ben Smith. So I have no real knowledge of whether the President shelved the nomination in 1961 after news of its possibility had been published in the papers. I do know that Senator Smith was told Morrissey might be nominated, and was prepared to be his sponsor in the Senate. We had already prepared a statement in support of Morrissey in 1961. But nothing happened in that year, or for the next two years. I believe Ted Kennedy felt that Judge Morrissey's chances for the nomination died with the assassination of his brother. He felt President Johnson would never nominate Morrissey. I also believe Johnson nominated Morrissey as an honest favor to Ted Kennedy. He likes Ted Kennedy. Ted had done important work for him in 1964 and 1965 in the Senate in connection with the Immigration Bill and other things. The story that President Johnson submitted the nomination to embarrass the Kennedys is nonsense. The President realized the nomination was potentially controversial, and he deliberately submitted it when he was in Texas, and Congress was rushing toward adjournment, and the New York

City newspapers were on strike, in the hopes that the publicity would be minimized for all these reasons. He miscalculated the storm it would kick up. The nomination was in, although just pro forma because no one thought anything would be done.

GRELE: Was it your impression that President Kennedy wanted to nominate Morrissey to the post?

GWIRTZMAN: At some point they were set to do it because they had, as I said, involved Senator Smith in it, because he would naturally have to be the one to defend it in the Senate.

GRELE: On the day of the assassination were you with Senator Kennedy?

GWIRTZMAN: The day of the assassination I was in his office. We heard the rumor. Shortly afterwards he appeared.

GRELE: He had been in the chair…

GWIRTZM.AN: He had been presiding. He was very distressed. He had heard his brother had been shot but he didn't know the nature or extent of the injuries. His first thought was to get home to his wife and make sure that she was all right. For some reasons his car was not available. So I took him in my car to his house, he and I and a personal friend of his from Houston, Texas, Claude Hooton [Claude E. Hooton]. We drove down Virginia Avenue to get over to Georgetown, and I remember we had the radio on. At that time the radio was saying that the President's condition was critical, but that he was still alive—which, of course, was not the case. Hooton kept saying, "The President was shot…and in my state." Of course the immediate reaction was it was done by some right wing element. We went on to Georgetown. I remember I tried going fast, going through red

lights. Ted cautioned me to watch out. We got to his house. His wife wasn't there. She had gone to Elizabeth Arden's salon on Connecticut Avenue. He tried to call his mother to find out if his father was all right. His concern then, just as always, was for these other people. But the phones were not working, having been overloaded by the immense surge of calls by people asking their own loved ones whether they had heard the news. I went to the beauty shop and picked up Joan [Joan Bennett Kennedy] and told her that the President had been shot but that I thought he would be all right. Her first reaction was dismay that President Kennedy and his wife had so much trouble that year—Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis] losing the baby, Patrick [Patrick Bouvier Kennedy], and other family things. We got

back to Ted's house. He was very distressed because all the phones were dead—his phone, the one next door. He was very distressed that he couldn't get through to anybody. So I said, "Well, let's go to my house." We got into the car. Just as we were leaving I heard the television—I don't think he heard—I heard on television that the President was dead.

We went to my house and my phone wasn't working. So he decided to go right to the White House so he could get hold of a reliable means of communication. There was a crowd gathering around the White House as we drove in. The police, on seeing who it was, waved us right in the entrance on East Executive Avenue. No one had to tell Ted. Just from the look of the people's faces—the women sobbing—you could tell the President was dead. He went into Dr. Travell's [Janet G. Travell] office where Taz Shepard [Tazewell T. Shepard, Jr.] and Dr. Travell and some others, including Eunice Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver], had gathered. They were able to make contact by telephone with his mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] at Hyannis Port and with Bobby at McLean. They had a conversation. They were all quite calm. Dr. Travell asked Ted if he wanted a sedative. He refused it. They seemed, in a sense—you know, before the thing had hit them—they were responding to this in the same way that they would respond to a crisis in a campaign or anything like that—dividing up the assignments. They decided that Bobby would

take care of Jackie. Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who was there, would take care of the funeral arrangements. Ted would go up to Hyannis Port and take care of his mother and father and also tell his father what had happened. So they got a helicopter for him and Eunice, and then took off. I didn't see him again until he came back the night before the funeral.

He came to the White House from the airport. He looked as if he had not slept since Friday. The late Ed Moss [Edward Moss], his close friend, his cousin, Joe Gargan [Joseph F. Gargan], and I were with him. He said, "Let's go up." He meant up to the Capitol, where the President's body was lying on the Lincoln catafalque in the Rotunda. No other words were said. As the car neared Capitol Hill, we began to see the enormous line of people waiting in the cold and the dark to pay their respects. The car dropped us off at the new East Front, and we went up to the Rotunda in an elevator. When the guards saw who it was, they quickly let him through the line; and when the people at the catafalque saw who it was, they stood aside. The slow, shuffling line halted for a few minutes, while Ted went right up to the casket, kneeled, and prayed. Then we left. The entire incident, in the night light, the utter silence, and the atmosphere of the time, was eerie.

GRELE: Can you think of anything we've missed?

GWIRTZMAN: Well, a couple more things about the '62 campaign, and the President's participation in it. There were a couple of meetings up at Hyannis Port—one on Labor Day and one prior to that, of personal interest.

GRELE: The '62 campaign in Massachusetts?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes.

GRELE: What was discussed at the Labor Day meeting?

[-44-]

GWIRTZMAN: The meeting took place on the Marlin, in the Bay. The President, Ambassador Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], and Robert Kennedy were aboard. Well, how things were going. That was between the first and second debates. They went over the first debate and the President told how he would respond to some of those questions, if they were raised again.

GRELE: How did he say he would have responded? Did he talk about Eddie McCormack's attack? Did he say how he would have…

GWIRTZMAN: He thought that it would be appropriate to say a couple of things about Eddie McCormack, such as the increase in crime in Massachusetts while he had been Attorney General. Ted disagreed. The members of the family were a little embittered by McCormack's attack and some wanted to respond in a personal vein if Eddie renewed it. Of course, it was an academic question because in the second debate Eddie McCormack was very gentlemanly and respectful to Ted.

GRELE: Did the bitterness outlast the election between—the bitterness between Eddie McCormack and Kennedys, did it…

GWIRTZMAN: The two families have been, of course, rivals in Massachusetts for a long time. The relationship between the President and the Speaker, which was the vitally important one, was maintained very well. The personal relationship between Ted Kennedy and Eddie McCormack was never warm. And the relationship between the people who worked for them or with them was even cooler.

GRELE: Can you think of any other times when you saw the President besides this one?

GWIRTZMAN: I don't think so.

[-45-]

GRELE: Did you ever go to the White House?

GWIRTZMAN: Yes. Usually to have lunch. That was with people on the staff, not with the President.

GRELE: Who?

GWIRTZMAN: I would see him up at the Cape from time to time. I'd just be passing by.

GRELE: What were your impressions of him at that time?

GWIRTZMAN: I thought he was a great man. The contrast, I remember—and this was indicative of what the office and the performance in the office does for a man—is the way that people in Washington changed their regard for him. During the 1957-60 period he was just another person campaigning for a nomination that maybe was worth something and maybe wasn't. The candidates, because there were so many of them, in a sense were not treated with deference that a potential president should be treated, as I showed earlier in discussing the joint appearances.

But then came a dinner just after the nomination. It was a fundraising dinner in Washington. The same men spoke. The candidates who hadn't made it were there, and they spoke, for the usual five minutes. But the difference was that Kennedy came on last and made the major speech. It was then that you could begin to see the transition in their response to him. It was not complete. A lot of people in that audience had been for other candidates and they still hadn't completely accepted Kennedy as their leader. You could see it also in his response to them. More of a feeling of control of the situation, as he could sense the change in his stature in their eyes. People in Washington revolve, to a great extent, around the Presidency, and are quite adjustable. Then, of course, once he won and when he was vested with

the dignity of the office, and was performing in it, an enormous change took place. Then it became almost unreal—at least to me—to see this man whom you had seen so much on television and who was your President, with all the pomp and power that implied—see him in the flesh. You'd see him at Hyannis Port wearing a blue blazer and white duck pants, enjoying his leisure amid the stimulation of the company, behaving in every way like an extremely intelligent, articulate, very winning man. All eyes were on him, not just because he was the President, but he was head of the family—the oldest and wisest.

I was terribly impressed by the job he did as President. But also by the kind of person he was. I think he matured a great deal, as a person, while he was President. He was much more free with his comments, his humor, his analysis—more sure of himself. There was the sense of leadership and command about him, even in his personal relationships, and there was the feeling that he was using all of his faculties in the pursuit of excellence, living life with all its joys and responsibilities—and suffering, for he had that too—to the fullest. I just think that he turned out to be a very great man, and one who will be remembered for a long time.

GRELE: Do you have anything else you'd like to…

GWIRTZMAN: No.

GRELE: Thank you very much.

[-END OF INTERVIEW-]

Milton S. Gwirtzman Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List