

George A. Smathers Oral History Interview—JFK #3, 7/10/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: George A. Smathers

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Biographical Note

George A. Smathers (1913 - 2007) was a United States Senator from Florida who served in office from 1951 to 1969. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s relationships with various members of Congress, JFK's political views and interests, and the relationship between Smathers and JFK, among other issues.

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By George A. Smathers

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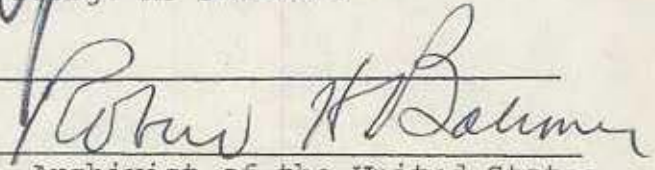
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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE A. SMATHERS

July 10, 1964

By Don Wilson

For the John F. Kennedy Library

WILSON: Starting out on this final interview, Senator, when you came into the House together with Kennedy and in those years you were in the Senate together, what attitude did he take toward being in politics and being in the House and Senate?

SMATHERS: I don't believe he was very serious about politics when he first got into it. At least I didn't get that impression. Under the Kennedy family set-up, young Joe, Jr., was supposed to be in politics -- and Jack, not anticipating the unfortunate tragedy to his brother, had prepared himself mostly in writing, reading and literature and things of that nature. And it seemed to me he was not interested primarily in politics.

It was not until after 1956, after he was in the Senate, that we really began to appreciate the fact that this fellow liked politics very much; that he was going to go all the way and achieve a top job if he could. At least he so expressed himself at that time. He liked the Senate. He talked many times about the fact that he thought the Senate was the best job there was to be found anywhere. I heard Teddy recently say the same thing. Naturally he got that from Jack. We kidded about whether -- when he was President -- if he could come back and be a Senator. We ought to go ahead and pass a bill which would make every President an honorary member of the Senate.

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We had discussed previously that it ought to be done. He was for it and I was for it. But in the early days I didn't get the impression -- in the House days -- that he was interested in making a career in politics.

WILSON: You got elected to the Senate two years before he did. Do you feel that your election spurred him to run for the Senate from Massachusetts?

SMATHERS: I am sure it did. We had become close friends, visited a lot with each other. I ran against Claude Pepper who was supposed to be invincible -- I didn't think so but everybody else did -- and won, much to the people's surprise in this area of the country. I think that triggered the idea in Jack's mind -- well, he might as well take on Cabot Lodge even though Cabot Lodge was a man of great importance and renown in Massachusetts at that time and throughout the nation. I think Jack was that competitive. When I won, he figured he could do it. And at the same time in 1950 when I won my race -- my big race was in the primary in May -- Nixon ran for the Senate in California against Helen Gahagan Douglas. However, they were both running for a job which was vacant. And I think all of that worked on Jack and started him with the idea that when the time came he would run. And he decided to take on Cabot Lodge.

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WILSON: Did he learn any specifics from your campaign -- did he question you about it -- and study your techniques?

SMATHERS: To a tremendous degree. He watched it much more closely than I dreamed that he had. Obviously when I was campaigning I don't get to see him, but frequently both his father and Jack made some contribution to my campaign financially. But he was in Palm Beach a good deal of the time that I was campaigning.

I recall during one speech in Palm Beach I saw him in the crowd and, as a matter of fact, I mentioned it to the crowd that Congressman Kennedy was there. Later on he talked a great deal about my campaign. When did we start doing it; how did we organize it; county by county, block by block, precinct by precinct, ward by ward, etc? He went through all of that and knew a great deal about it. As I said previously, I was constantly amazed by the fact that he would bring up some small incident about my campaign, or somebody else's campaign, which I even had forgotten myself. So he became quite a student of that campaign and I presume other campaigns, -- in preparation for his own.

WILSON: You mentioned previously in those days that he had little or no interest in his family finances and that his father once came to you and talked to you about this?

SMATHERS: It was rather obvious that Jack was not interested

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in financial matters at all. His income was set and that's all he cared about. He was concerned about other things. I think I said on one of these tapes earlier that we were on a couple of trips together and it got so bad -- he was so unconscious of the fact that you had to pay bills -- that I finally had to work out an arrangement with him where I would pay the whole thing and he would pay me back half later.

So on this particular item, Joe Kennedy came to me and said he was a little bit baffled in that he could not get Jack to take the interest in the estate problems, Joe Kennedy's problems, or financial problems, which he felt his son should take, and he knew eventually Jack would have to know something about it. Joe would like for me, as a friend of Jack's who was a lawyer, to have some idea how this trust operated and what it amounted to so I could pass this information on to Jack Kennedy at some opportune time. And so we sat there and talked for probably an hour and went over briefly how the trust was set up and how it operated and so on. I attempted to do what Joe Kennedy indicated he wanted me to do and talked it over with Jack, but I never met with much more success than his father did because every time I would talk about it he wasn't too much interested. His mind was just not geared to that sort of thing. He had not had the problem as a young fellow and just wasn't interested.

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WILSON: Did he know that his father had talked to you about it?

SMATHERS: Oh yes, he knew his father had talked to me about it because I think his father came to me directly from Jack's office and talked to me about it.

WILSON: But it really didn't do much good -- you didn't get through to him?

SMATHERS: I didn't get through to him. As a matter of fact, I don't really think he knew -- ever knew -- a great deal about it, or cared greatly. On some occasions we talked a little about it, but he never indicated a knowledge of it. I think I knew more about it and what the set-up was than he actually did. But in any event, later on Bobby's wife's father had a problem. I recall Jack Kennedy brought Mr. Skakel to see me. And we sat there and talked about his problem. It had to do with legislation actually, and Jack wanted me to advise Bobby's father-in-law and brought him in. And I told him what I thought he ought to do. So this was not an area of interest to him at all.

WILSON: What area of interest in those early legislative days -- would you say foreign affairs was what he was greatly interested in?

SMATHERS: Foreign affairs was probably the closest to him.

WILSON: Even when he was in the House?

SMATHERS: Yes. It was always of great interest to him. He

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read the *New York Times* religiously. He read the Boston papers. He read the Atlantic Monthly, the Saturday Review, and all those, particularly anything that had to do with foreign affairs.

But I never could get him interested in Latin America. He didn't develop any interest in that particularly at all.

WILSON: Until he began to run for President, did he get interested in the campaign--

SMATHERS: His interest was Europe -- Russia -- the Far East. He made a speech about South Vietnam and so on. France.

WILSON: How about civil rights? Back in the early days of this interview, did we discuss the problems of the Southern states in the civil rights field? What did you feel his attitude was toward the civil rights situation and discrimination?

SMATHERS: Always greatly interested in civil rights. Put it this way -- not civil rights legislation so much, but civil rights because he was against discrimination. I think he felt that as an Irishman somewhere along the line he had been discriminated against. I don't know -- I never really got that particular feeling, but I did get the feeling that he felt that other Irishmen had felt the sting of prejudice. He was concerned about that. For that reason, he was always interested in civil rights, being against any type of discrimination -- prejudice -- things of that sort.

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We used to talk about it a great deal. We would talk about the situation in the South. He had a very, as always, a very accurate understanding of what the conditions were there. But I don't think he believed it was going to be solved by just legislation alone. I don't think he ever thought that. When the 1963 bill -- as I said a moment ago -- I don't believe he really wanted to introduce that at the time he did, under the conditions that he did. Because he believed, and I think correctly so, that he really had the authority as President to bring about less discrimination.

In other words, he could issue an order with respect to the FHA and also eliminate discrimination with respect to any other agency of the government, and he was doing that. As you know, his record was one of great accomplishment in that field. But when we began to have these demonstrations -- when the Birmingham situation broke out -- he was very much opposed to anything which would inflame those situations, as he should have been.

He used to talk to Hubert. I know two times when he talked to Hubert Humphrey about the fact that Hubert should not make these rather inflammatory speeches because it was going to force Kennedy to come in with some particularly tough legislation he did not want to come in with at that particular time. Hubert responded that he had always been a civil rights advocate and that he was not going to retreat and hand over his position as a leader of civil

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rights forces to KEating and Javits and so on. When Keating and Javits would make a speech, which was almost every day, Humphrey would come out and tend to inflame, aggravate, excite the whole thing, and then some Southerner would get up and start going the other way. Kennedy could see this happening and tried, in some respects, to head it off. Not that he was against civil rights legislation, but I think he wanted to handle it in his own way and in the due course of events. The demonstrations and the outgrowth of it forced his hand.

WILSON: How about the trips overseas which you made. Let's talk a little bit about them. First of all, what countries did you go to with him?

SMATHERS: On one real good trip, I met him in London and drove to some port there and got a ship and went over to Le Havre, drove down to Paris, stayed there a day or so, and drove on down to the coast. That was the extent of that trip. About three weeks on that trip. He went over there earlier and visited somebody. As a matter of fact, some of his family were over there. I had never been to Germany, and I wanted to see it. We went to Italy -- we just cruised around. These were vacation trips.

WILSON: Pleasure trips.

SMATHERS: No calculated to develop anything of any great importance except just to enjoy ourselves, which we did.

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WILSON: Do you remember anything on those trips where you did get involved in discussions on serious matters or seeing people on serious, or was it strictly pleasure?

SMATHERS: Strictly pleasure.

WILSON: In your feeling at that time and actually up until the campaign, was his principle interest Western Europe or perhaps the Far East?

SMATHERS: Yes. He had no particular interest in Latin America until the campaign which started in 1956. Actually his campaign of 1960. When Castro took

over. Obviously, everybody became interested in Central and South America at that time, but this was not an area of great interest to him. He talked about France a great deal. I think Jackie interested him with respect to France. He was brought up to some extent in Europe and that's where his interest lay.

And then he got interested in South America, but more in connection with Fidel Castro and the realization that this was going to be a big problem and he had to think about it. Because he used to kid me about my speeches on Latin America -- always had. It was easy for me to be interested in Latin America. Miami is actually a very short way from Cuba and thousands and thousands of Latins were in Miami all the time. So I had always been extremely interested in it and talked about it a great deal, and under Eisenhower every week or so, or even less than that --

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every day or two -- I would get up and criticize him for the way he was handling the affairs of Latin America. I used to talk to Kennedy later about it. I said you're not human -- with Eisenhower in the White House I could get up and tell him what he was doing wrong and now that you are there I haven't been able to make a real good speech about Latin America for years. If you stay there for eight years I'll have to keep my mouth shut. We used to laugh about it. He talked with me about that -- up to a point, as I have already said.

WILSON: In the House, and particularly in the first term in the Senate, who were the men in the House and the Senate -- and I would like you to think about this and keep it very limited -- who were the men he admired the most and had the greatest influence on him?

SMATHERS: Well, in the House I think everybody had a tremendous respect for Sam Rayburn. We all expressed it to each other because he was an enormous man. He was just enough of a character, just enough of a provincial type of man in some respects to make him a character, but a very feeling guy. He looked at things primarily from his home area environment, and then of course he became broader minded as he matured and grew older. But anyway, we all admired him because he could swing the House. He was the man who could deliver votes. We couldn't help admire that type of guy -- we would always slaughter -- Marcantonio,

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who was a communist, bright as he could be, dangerous little fellow but a very attractive fellow, was always talking and laughing with him. And, strangely enough, John Rankin, who was just as wild on the other side as he could be -- but Rankin and Marcantonio were actually pretty good friends. They would laugh about each other, and I've heard Rankin say that "Well, better run -- I got to get Marcantonio to get up and cuss me out or I'm going to get defeated." But they would just depend on each other to help get themselves re-elected because every time Rankin attacked Marcantonio that strengthened Marcantonio and every

time Marcantonio jumped on Rankin that really made Rankin. Kennedy liked him. I remember I was with Kennedy when Rankin said to us one day -- "You young boys go home too much. You fellows -- I've got my people convinced that the Congress of the United States can't run without me. I don't go home during the Session because I don't want them to find out any different." He said, "You fellows are home every week -- you're never around here. You're always going somewhere. And your people are finally going to realize the Congress can run just as good without you as with you. And then you're in trouble." I remember we both sort of laughed at that and thought it was amusing, but I don't doubt that in some ways it was a very true statement. I don't recall anybody else in the House other than Sam Rayburn

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who stood out as a real great guy. When you get to the Senate, I think, of course, that Johnson immediately became the big factor. When I came to the Senate, Scott Lucas had been the leader. He was defeated, then they had Ernest MacFarland; he was defeated. Then Johnson took over in 1954, I guess it was, two years after Kennedy was elected. SO he served under the leadership of MacFarland, a sweet, lovely guy, but no leader.

When Johnson took over, things really began to hum. Everybody had to admire Johnson. And I am sure Kennedy did. If you didn't like Johnson, as sometimes was the case, you couldn't help but admire him, because he was the kind of fellow you always had the feeling he was giving you the needle and using you. But he was usually, generally speaking, doing it for a pretty good cause. He was getting you to vote, getting you to do this, to do something else, but he was always cultivating everybody who admired him.

So Kennedy talked many times about Johnson, even after he was elected in 1960 when Johnson became Vice President, he used to -- Kennedy and I talked many times about Johnson. I used to stay over sometimes after breakfast and he'd say how's Johnson doing, is he happy, boy he really looks miserable. It's tough to find things for him to do.

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WILSON: He genuinely wanted to --

SMATHERS: He tried to accommodate Johnson in every way. Johnson is the kind of fellow when he isn't happy you see it all over his face. He lets everybody know it. So he would sit there -- and Johnson took, in my judgment, the wrong approach to the Kennedy -- to his position as Vice President. I talked with Johnson about this many times. I talked with the President about it. I was -- I don't know any more than anybody else -- but anyway -- I would get it from both of them.

WILSON: [Says something here which Smathers inadvertently covers up by not stopping.]

SMATHERS: Jack Kennedy would say -- well, what do you think about doing this with

Johnson -- and so I would say -- Johnson would say to me something else -- and so I was constantly in the middle between the two of them. And Kennedy went way out of his way to try to accommodate Johnson and make him happy. And I think, in a great measure, Johnson finally began to realize it. He didn't realize it at first. There were a lot of guys around Kennedy who hated Johnson with a perfect passion. And these were the fellows who were constantly needling Johnson. Every time he was with Kennedy everything was great. Then he would decide to take a trip to India and that pleased him (Johnson) very much and he did a good job, as we all know. But there were those around Kennedy

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who didn't like Johnson and never tried to cover it up in the slightest. They constantly were needling Johnson. Kennedy was aware of it.

One thing I can say about Jack Kennedy, he had a great sensitivity and was aware of who was happy, who was unhappy -- I've never seen Jack Kennedy do an unkind thing -- unless he intended to do it and thought about it and wanted to do it, and tell somebody else. I've never seen him fail to pick up the ball, so to speak, as to what people's relationships were, whose nose was out of joint and why he should get it back in shape.

WILSON: Give me a little more on the relationship between Kennedy and Johnson when they were in the Senate together. What did Johnson think of Kennedy; he was his leader -- and then vice versa?

SMATHERS: I think Johnson liked Kennedy. Very much. Kennedy was -- as was true in all these legislative bodies it is very difficult to become a real heavyweight in as short a space of time as he was in the Senate before he really began to run for Vice President first and then the Presidency. He was on the Foreign Relations Committee and the Labor Committee and was pretty much the victim of what happened in those Committees. Then Kennedy was not a fellow who -- he had been ill a number of times -- he was not a fellow who was too regular in his attendance. He didn't bother; he was strong back in

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Massachusetts and probably could get elected any time he liked; I am sure he was right. So he took the job here, I think with much seriousness, but on the Floor when there was legislation that was not out of his Committee or of no particular interest to him, he was liable to be going some place -- down to Palm Beach -- or wherever he wanted.

But Johnson was the kind of fellow who wanted everybody to stay. Every leader wants his troops to stay there every minute. He fusses at you if you're not there; if you go off to dinner with your children, why, he's mad at you nevertheless. But Johnson liked Kennedy, respected him, admired him; he had a great respect for Joe Kennedy. He knew Joe Kennedy

better than he knew Jack Kennedy. But I don't think he ever thought of him particularly as a competitor, or as Vice President, or as President, or anything.

WILSON: Do you think that was one of Johnson's problems when it came time for the Presidential race -- do you think he never took Jack Kennedy seriously -- that he got started too late?

SMATHERS: That's right. He never took Jack Kennedy very seriously in this respect. Jack Kennedy had always gone out and won -- just like Goldwater -- won before any people took him seriously. It was very much true of Jack Kennedy. Kennedy admired Johnson very much; I don't think he liked

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him personally, but it was very difficult to be around Johnson. Johnson was a dominating figure to start with -- and as he got to be more and more successful as Majority Leader he became more dominating all the time. I used to be Whip there for a short time and so I had a full dose of it. I highly respect Johnson and like Johnson, but he is a very difficult man to be around because he doesn't play golf, he doesn't play cards he doesn't go fishing, he doesn't care about the seashore, he doesn't care about sailing, he doesn't care about anything, he just likes politics and he talks about it morning, noon and night. Now, Kennedy admired Lyndon. We used to talk about it. I said, Boy -- I don't know if I can stand much of this job I've got -- just pinch-hitting for Clements when he was defeated -- because this guy calls me in the morning at 7:30, he calls me at 11:30 at night. We used to laugh about it, but we had a very real admiration for Johnson's total dedication to the job, but he was not the guy you wanted to go off for the weekend with.

WILSON: Do you think there was any one Senator whom Kennedy looked up to the most.

SMATHERS: I think Kennedy looked up to Taft.

WILSON: Did he really.

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SMATHERS: I think he looked up to Taft greatly.

WILSON: Tell me about it.

SMATHERS: They were on the Labor Committee. They took various positions that were in opposition to each other, but he admired Taft, and -- I don't recall specifically his having told me that, but I know that he did. I bet my life that he probably told me that ten times in one form or another. But they never did agree. But

Taft was an able fellow. He was a dull guy, but an able man. He was an honorable fellow, and he was a good fighter. I think Kennedy admired those characteristics in him, just like most everybody else did. I recall Taft -- I was handling the bill -- I was on the Interior Committee, to keep ALaska and hawaii from becoming states. And this is just my own experience, but I remember Kennedy was on the other side. He thought they should become states like most everybody else did. Taft -- I was allocating the time and Taft -- I only had fifteen minutes left -- it was a very close vote and a very tight vote right before -- when was it -- 1952?

WILSON: He ran for President in 1952; he didn't run for Senator. It must have been 1950 he got reelected.

SMATHERS: Anyway, Taft -- I said, "Senator, would you take the last ten minutes?" He got up and spoke against the admission of Hawaii and Alaska, knowing damn well in so doing he was going to lose the delegate support at the Convention. I always admired him for that.

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Kennedy, I know, admired him. Because he used to talk to me about what a bright fellow he was -- a very bright fellow. And he enjoyed going to the meetings when Taft was there. Much more so than when he wasn't there. He highly respected Taft. The other Senators -- everybody liked Dick Russell. Kennedy had a very high admiration for Holland. We used to laugh about it and kid about it. Holland is a dogged, very determined, very dull fellow. But full of principles. Kennedy admired that kind of man.

We used to gossip about everybody, but I know that he highly respected Johnson, highly respected Taft; together we thought Dirksen was the greatest speaker either of us had ever heard -- but he was a fellow who could go either way at most any time -- Jack used to talk about that a great deal -- we'd laugh about that -- for both of us heard Dirksen make the best speech for the Marshall aid plan that was ever made in the House and both of us heard Dirksen made the best speech that was probably ever made against the Marshall aid plan when he got to the Senate.

[END OF TAPE I]

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WILSON: Can you tell me, Senator Smathers, about the relationship Senator Kennedy had with Senator Nixon -- when they were in the House and Senate together and I guess subsequently when Nixon became Vice President?

SMATHERS: I think the relations, of course, were very cordial. I think that Nixon had a greater admiration for Kennedy than Kennedy had for Nixon. As a matter

of fact, Nixon told me several times that he admired Jack, and I happen to know that was not particularly mutual. I don't think Jack Kennedy ever really thought too highly of Nixon, either of his ability or of him as a man of great strength of character or whatever, but they were very friendly. He felt that Nixon was a total opportunist -- more of the type of Dirksen -- who could be pretty strong and brave at a very strategic moment when he thought the tide was running that way. There may have been some other relationship I didn't know about, but that was generally the way it was.

WILSON: What about the McCarthy period? I'm sure Kennedy must have talked to you about this problem a number of times. Do you recall what his attitude was toward McCarthy and why he didn't come out more flatly against McCarthy -- which, of course, caused him a lot of trouble in his later career when he ran for the Presidency?

SMATHERS: Well, I got the impression that Jack Kennedy liked

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Joe McCarthy personally, but he didn't agree with several of the things McCarthy advocated, and certainly as McCarthy continued to go further and further out on a limb everybody saw he had become somewhat hysterical and unreasonable and irresponsible. But in my many conversations with Jack Kennedy about Joe McCarthy, I got the idea that Jack liked McCarthy. He thought he has a pretty good guy and figured that he had made an original mistake, which was to overstate his case. The press -- everybody -- picked him up on it and he fought back, but the press just finally proved that he was wrong and, in effect, destroyed him. But my opinion was -- I talked with Kennedy about it I don't know how many times, maybe just indirectly -- probably two dozen times -- and he was friendly to McCarthy all the way through. He apparently had known Joe some time before McCarthy became as famous as he became. I don't know whether it was through the Catholic Church angle or what it was, but I always had the feeling that Jack Kennedy was very sympathetic to Joe -- not with what Joe was saying -- but sympathetic with Joe as a person.

WILSON: What about -- after 1956 -- Senator Kennedy became much wrapped up in the labor field. Do you think he did that because he was genuinely interested in it or do you think he realized that if he was headed for a

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try at the Presidency he needed an accomplishment behind him and this seemed like a likely area in which to build a record?

SMATHERS: That's hard to answer. I think you would have to say both. I believe he realized that as far as the Senate was concerned and the House was

concerned, he actually was not the author of a great bill of any character. His name was not identified with any great project, and it is very difficult to become so identified. I think one of the reasons he wanted to be President was because, as he expressed it, when you get where all the authority is centered and you get the reins of the Executive you are in a position to really do something. I think he felt he had not been a particularly impressive Senator. He was totally realistic about himself, at all times. One thing about Jack Kennedy, he never kidded himself or had any delusions about himself. He saw himself about as candidly and accurately and frankly, as anybody could if not more so. So I think it would be unfair to say he did it solely because he wanted to have a record that would help him in his subsequent race for the Presidency.

I think that had something to do with it, yes, but at the same time he had had a long background in the labor field all the time he had been in the Congress, and I think he was genuinely concerned and interested

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in these labor problems. I recall some amendments which he accepted on his bill which I offered, I think just before he began to run. I think actually it was after the Convention. He took several amendments from me, and I was always impressed with the depth and the thoroughness of his knowledge with respect to these labor problems. So I think it would be unfair to say that he was interested in solely in order to set he background for his later running. But I do think he was conscious of that.

WILSON: Of course, all this time he was building a superb image for himself in the American press. Did he ever talk to you about reporters -- his philosophy of thinking about his dealings with the press?

SMATHERS: We talked about that a great deal. A great deal. He liked writers. As I've said, he instinctively liked writers. And I think they appreciated that. Of course, he was a very attractive guy about whom they could write, and he got an enormous amount of publicity. I don't know how much of it was promoted through some advertising agency with respect to some magazine articles, but dealing with reporters generally I think he liked all writers as such, but there were some guys with personalities he didn't like worth a damn and he used to talk about it. They used ugly words and so on. Once he started in 1956, he told me he was going to cultivate reporters.

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It was interesting to me that later on, Johnson and Bobby Baker dreamed up a little program where, around 1956, Johnson had a steady schedule when he would invite certain reporters in to lunch -- followed it religiously -- and visit with them and curry them up, you know. But, anyway, Johnson was running a steady program. Then later talking with Kennedy I found he was running a similar program, but not quite so regular -- not quite as all inclusive -- as was Johnson's. Johnson was taking them by numbers. He would assign them a number

and bring them in. Johnson was doing it to give himself a good press as Majority Leader at that time -- and Kennedy was doing it. I think he was thinking about running for the Presidency then. It was studied and calculated, but still he liked reporters. But he did realize he was going to have to get them on his side if he was going to get a kind press, but favorable press, that he wanted.

Now, with respect to certain reporters, he, like myself, was always a great admirer of Walter Lippmann. He used to talk about Lippman, what a smart guy he was. We both religiously read everything the guy wrote. Of course, Lippman changed his position some, a little bit; but I started reading him when I was in college at the University

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of Florida, and I can remember reading Lippman at that time in the Jacksonville Times Union. I thought he was great then. He spans my lifetime. I remember so well. I rode over to the White House one day, and the President -- (I think it was on the Civil Rights Bill) -- there was some confusion about it in the minds of the public, and Lippman wrote an article. I've changed my mind -- it wasn't the Civil Rights Bill, it was some other bill, but, anyway, the way he said it, it was so excellent, so clear. Of course, every morning that we went over there to see Kennedy he would have already read the New York Times, the Washington Post, and all the papers. So everybody made a practice of being certain to have read everything before we went over there at 8:45 because, you know, Kennedy would have read it. We were walking across by the Rose Garden -- he said, did you read Lippmann this morning? He said what a wonderful column. I wish now I could remember what it was about, but I had read it and I remember it really was good. He had taken a subject that was very obtuse and suddenly made it very clear and lucid as it could be. Kennedy liked him. The rest of them -- if they were for Kennedy, Kennedy was for them. If they went for him, why O.K. He used to talk pretty much about Arthur Krock, laugh and talk about it, you know.

WILSON: What kind of opinion did he have of Adlai Stevenson, particularly in 1952 and 1956 when he was the nominee?

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SMATHERS: I think he had the opinion that Adlai Stevenson was a very brilliant fellow but not a very strong man; a man who would not be a particularly good President. In fact, I know he did.

WILSON: Did he feel that way in 1952? Or was he pretty excited about Stevenson in 1952?

SMATHERS: I don't remember. I don't remember so well about 1952. That was the year Kennedy ran for the Senate himself. We didn't talk about Stevenson too much. Myself, I was more impressed in 1952 than I even was subsequently. Kennedy's attitude, as I said, was that he had a very good mind and could turn

a phrase better than anyone else, but that he would not make a good President. He was an indecisive man, and Kennedy used to talk about that. We sometimes talked about the fact he just wasn't masculine enough for Jack Kennedy. I don't mean to infer by that that there was anything wrong with him because there wasn't but he just wasn't the type that appealed particularly to Kennedy, even though Kennedy liked literary people, scholarly people, and Adlai Stevenson was all that. Adlai just didn't have the other quality, he just wasn't manly enough. We used to discuss that a great deal. Kennedy was very happy and flattered that he was asked by Stevenson to nominate him. He was our best candidate. If he didn't get it in 1952, he was certain to get it the next time. So there was no question about it. It wasn't a case

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of being disloyal or anything, but in his mind and in talking intimately with his friends, why it was pretty clear that he didn't think too highly of him.

WILSON: What about his attitude about President Eisenhower? Give me a run-down.

SMATHERS: He thought that Eisenhower was a great conciliator. It began and ended right there. no great ability. I recall I told Kennedy about going over to see Eisenhower one time just before I went on a trip around Latin America and we talked a little bit about golf. I told him about Cuba. When I came back I had this report I wanted to make to him about what some of the Presidents of Latin America thought about Fidel Castro and what we ought to do about him. Before I could tell him that, Eisenhower said have you seen this new Executive Model golf club Spaulding is putting out. And I said no. And so he said this is the first set that's been made and I've got it. And I was somewhat appalled. I like to play golf, but here I was somewhat appalled. I like to play golf, but here I was ready to report to him about what the Latin American Presidents were thinking about Fidel Castro and what we ought to do about it. I told Kennedy about it. And Kennedy used to refer to that all the time after that. I guess it had to be 1959. Years later he would bring it up. He'd say -- what about all that? Do you think he's still got those clubs? Then he'd laugh -- but it was very revealing about Eisenhower.

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His mind was not particularly on these things. His mind was on other things, and Kennedy didn't think very highly of him at any time.

WILSON: We touched on this in the past, but I just want to get it nailed down here because I think it's interesting. Your appraisal of your relationship with the President -- you indicated that it was a very informal one -- there was an awful lot of kidding and I think you even said you were relaxing to him -- he enjoyed your presence because he could relax.

SMATHERS: Right.

WILSON: I shouldn't put the words in your mouth.

SMATHERS: Yeah.

WILSON: Why don't you tell me again -- how you appraise your relationship and how it changed when he became President.

SMATHERS: Well, I think it was just what you say, that it was a -- I think Jack Kennedy liked me very much. For several reasons. And I liked him. We had a great deal in common. We differed critically on very few issues fundamentally. Jack Kennedy always impressed me as a fellow -- particularly after he got to be President -- not an extrovert; not a backslapper. He wasn't out to make a lot of new friends. I think one of the best illustrations of it was on his birthday a year ago when he had his party, there were no outsiders outside the family except the same guys who were in his wedding, who were

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Red Fay, Chuck Spaulding, myself, and no other outsiders. I think this is indicative of the kind of a fellow he was. He had a few friends, a few good friends, thousands of acquaintances, but very few good friends he felt totally comfortable around, with whom he could say anything he wanted to say and it wouldn't get in the papers the next day or two weeks later. Our relationship was -- I think he respected my political judgment. Even though the best joke that's going around about us is this joke this fellow wrote -- he did a good job -- in Esquire Magazine. Who wrote that story, do you recall? A good story -- about the real Kennedy -- I think the fellow did an excellent job in catching Kennedy's --

WILSON: Oh, Tom Wicker.

SMATHERS: Yeah, Tom Wicker.

WILSON: That was a good story.

SMATHERS: You know, about -- "Smathers told me not to run against Lodge, he told me not to do this, but I feel lousy today because he just told me he thought I could win." It was a good story.

I think he respected my political judgment to a pretty good extent, and I think he respected my judgment on things like transportation matters. We talked about that. We talked about certain matters he knew I was interested in. He didn't look on me as a great brain, as a particularly great crusader; I think he looked on me as just a hell

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of a good loyal friend, who would take a lot of risk for him and be glad to do it. He was a good friend. After he got to be President, I was no great counselor to him in the sense that he would call me over and say now we've got a big outflow of gold problem, how do we solve it. He would talk to me about some things -- we talked about taxes -- the things he felt I did know something about -- we talked in the early days a great deal about Latin America -- he never would do things I wanted him to do so I would keep punching him and he finally asked me to quit talking to him about it. But our relationship was always friendly and warm. And just tremendous. He'd call over here frequently. But, you know, I've done many more favors for Johnson, for example, than I ever did for Kennedy. I'm sitting in a funny position now but I'm still pretty close to Johnson. I respect Johnson greatly. I think he's a great President. He was a great Majority Leader. But I could never call over at the White House -- I'd ask Evelyn Lincoln if I could talk to the PResident -- she'd say I know he wants to talk to you -- so wherever he was he'd get on the phone and say Old Pal, what about so and so. There's a very good story that's going to be printed about the time he called over here one day for me and I wasn't here. John O'Keefe was my Legislative Assistant whom President Kennedy had known as a Senator and liked very much -- and he talked with

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John O'Keefe. I don't exactly remember what it was about. It was a labor problem about a bill we had -- and John was going to take his little boy to the World Series -- and the President said to John, "John, can you get this done?" And John said, "Yes sir, I can, but my kid is standing here and we are just getting ready to go to the World Series." And the President said, "Well, John, in that case you go ahead." So then the President talked to Juanita, whom he knew very well, and said, "Juanita, let's get this worked out -- and they worked it out." So he called me. I was down in Florida. He said, "I'm pretty damn tired having to run your office -- you know, having to run the United States of America with 180 million people and having to run your office too, it's just almost more than I can put up with." You see -- he was just a great guy. So we had that kind of a relationship and a most pleasant, cordial one.

WILSON: Was he unhappy, or was he realistic, after he became President, about some of your votes when you didn't vote with him?

SMATHERS: The only time he ever got annoyed -- when he was first President in 1961, there was one vote that came up and he called me on the phone -- when he was angry his voice went up two or three levels -- and he was given to slight profanity -- and just the minute I got on the phone he said, "What the hell are you doing?" "Well, Mr. President," I said,

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I told you that a couple of weeks ago not to count on me on that vote." "I'll be damned if I remember it," he said. I said that actually if they had to have me, if it was going to be that

close, I would agree to be absent -- give a pair -- but it was beaten anyway by 5 or 6 votes. It didn't make any difference, but he was pretty upset about it. That's the only vote and I don't recall now what it was. But that impressed on my mind that whenever I was not going to vote with him I would tell him long in advance and would say, "Now I'm going to do this and here's the reason why" -- and he was totally understanding and totally realistic about it. One thing about the guy besides his guts, on one hand, was his total tenderness and sensitivity on the other, which made him a great friend. He was a total realist. I don't have any memory of him kidding himself -- about anything. I don't ever remember him thinking of himself. I got the feeling he was totally self-confident. He figured if given the opportunity, if given the facts, he could come up with as right a decision as anybody could, but I don't remember that he ever thought he was God's gift to the world or anything like that.

When he was assassinated it was a terrible shock, but I can talk about it now. I almost want to cry. Tears came in my eyes. I found myself three or four times when talking about it with tears just starting to come right down my cheeks, because the guy was so sweet, such

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a terrific fellow, and thinking of him -- not in terms as President, but as a fellow -- that's when it really bothers me. I think Teddy is very much like him. I don't know Teddy very well. I wish I knew him better.

WILSON: A very sweet guy. A very sensitive guy. I've never seen a guy go out of his way to be so decent to people.

SMATHERS: I like him. Everybody around likes him. I told him -- Johnson will get elected this time in 1964. Some Republican might get elected in 1968. I doubt if Johnson will really live through another term -- I don't know -- He might. So 1968 a Republican might get elected, so in 1972 I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Teddy could not get the nomination, and certainly in 1976.

I think all he's got to do is just know what he's doing, keep his nose clean and work and be a good Senator, and he'll get it just on the basis of Jack Kennedy's....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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