

Patrick Munroe Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 5/24/1982
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Patrick Munroe (1916-2002) was a friend of John F. Kennedy [JFK] during service in the Navy and the commander of PT110 from 1942 to 1943. This interview covers JFK's military service during World War II and Munroe's coverage of the 1960 and 1968 presidential campaigns, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

PATRICK MUNROE

May 24, 1982
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon M. Stern

for the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't we begin if you could start with your first contact...

MUNROE: You want me to speak...where's the mike?

STERN: ...that will pick it up. Start with your first contact, when you first met J.F.K. [John F. Kennedy] and your first impressions.

MUNROE: He must have gotten into the Tulagi Area, which is across from Guadalcanal -- you don't have the exact dates -- probably in March or April of 1943. At the time, I was up at a forward base in the Russell Islands about fifty or so miles west of Guadalcanal. And so Kennedy must have been at the PT boat base on Tulagi for at least a few weeks before I came back and met him for the first time. We had a ship which was, had formerly been, I think, Barbara Hutton's yacht. It was called, then called the [?], it was rechristened the U.S.S. Niagara. And, our name for it was the U.S.S. Pelagra. But, I recall Kennedy as being a very warm guy whom I could play acey-ducey with, or perhaps bridge and perhaps some poker games. And one thing that had surprised me was that we had divided the officers into, more or less, what we called the ins and the outs. Actually, the Ivy Leaguers were obvious and the Weed Leaguers were the rest of us. The Ivy League is obvious; the Weed League would be people like me who'd gone to Stanford or perhaps, in my case Georgia Tech, or Northwestern. Anywhere but in the Ivy League. As a matter of fact, we had a crack among ourselves that if an order were given to abandon ship, the first to leave would be women, children, and then the Ivy Leaguers, in that order. And then finally the Weed Leaguers. That was our, I suppose, inverse snobism.

I was from near Tallahassee, Florida, but I'd gone to prep school in Tennessee and we didn't make distinctions among whites. It was the whites and then there were the blacks. But obviously if you're a Boston Irishman, and your

grandfather had been a saloon-keeper, even if your grandfather was a mayor, and your father was in the liquor business, even if he'd been ambassador... Kennedy must have had problems. I'm looking back over it now and of course I think it had a lot to do with shaping his personality. That he must have been actually snubbed by the Ivy Leaguers, by many of the Ivy Leaguers in the context of 1943. And of course I realize that through his marriage to Jackie [Jacqueline B.] Kennedy, Jackie Bouvier, and through his other things, you know the years passed and certainly he became most acceptable anywhere in the world. I'm just thinking back in terms of 1943, the way the world looked at that time.

STERN: Well what, if you could recall the first time you met him. Do you remember it?

MUNROE: I can't remember that, no.

STERN: Not specifically. Then if you could discuss your contacts during the whole PT episode, the coin toss, the whole thing.

MUNROE: He and I, I was skipper for the PT 110, he was skipper for the PT 109. We had a dry dock in Tulagi and our boats were put in for repairs at about the same time. They were reconditioned and made ready for combat, engines overhauled and that sort of thing, and six boats (Division 23) were being sent from the Tulagi area to New Guinea because there was supposed to be more action in New Guinea than there was going to be in the Solomons. And they were needed there. A Japanese float plane came along about a week before they were to leave and blew up one of them on the dock, so Commander Albert [P.] Calvert, the commander of the PT base there at Tulagi called me and Kennedy in and said, "Now look, we only need one of your boats. You're both skippers; which of you is it going to be?" Well, we both had friends in the group that was leaving. We said we both wanted to go. He said, "Well, I, you go outside the hut and flip a coin and come back and tell me who it's going to be." We came back in and I told Calvert, "Well, Commander, I won the flip." Well, I think this saved, this flip probably saved both of our lives because the story of what happened to the PT 109 is, of course, well known. Kennedy had been, I believe, on the Harvard swimming team and despite his injury at the time his boat was cut into, he proved himself to be more than an adequate swimmer. I was not that good a swimmer, wasn't then, never would be. I wasn't, I'm sure, as good an athlete as Jack Kennedy was. On the other hand, if he had gone in my place to New Guinea and been in the operation of the boat, he could have been blown up and almost all was lost on board. But not me because I'd been out long enough so that I had been cycled back and was at the time that that happened

back in the States. But Kennedy would have been, I'm sure, in the Rabaul operation because he'd come to the combat area relatively recently. It all would have been in October of 1943. (When the PT 110 was lost.)

STERN: Can you recall any specific incidents in which you talked to him, things you talked to him about, the kind of person he was?

MUNROE: Yes, I can. Yeah. We had mutual friends, an Irish Catholic family from Atlanta who were good friends. Their name is Haverty. They're very prominent there in the art field and have the Haverty furniture chain. And he had known, through the Hearsts, through Randy [William R.] Hearst, Katherine Hearst, Katherine Campbell Hearst, who was an Atlanta Belle and is now divorced from Randy Hearst and is of course Patty Hearst's mother. And he had known the Hearsts, and the Campbells, a very prominent Catholic family in Atlanta, and some of the Havertys. This gave us some sort of mutual understanding. I'm not saying that Kennedy was lonely or looking out, you know, looking around for friendships, but I think and I felt, all in all, that I had a friendship with Jack during that period of time, leading up to, of course, my going to New Guinea. And then you saw the letter, of course, which he wrote to me after he was rescued...I'll tell you how that letter happened. We were in New Guinea and we had a lot of friends on Jack's boat, the people in my group did. So when we got word that Kennedy's boat was lost with all hands, which was the original report...

STERN: I was going to ask you about that.

MUNROE: Yeah.

STERN: Your first impression was that he had been killed.

MUNROE: We, actually, I wasn't a Catholic, but we did have a couple of Catholic kids in the group--at this point I had become division commander of the Division 23 six boats--and we actually got together the ones that had known the Kennedys and his crew and had a sort of an informal, we didn't have a chaplain around, but just sort of an informal, we didn't have a chaplain around, but just sort of an informal head-hanging session. Someone made a little talk about them; we mourned the loss of these good men. And of course I wrote Kennedy on account of that, and then that's when he wrote his letter back to me saying that in effect the reports at our desk were a little premature.

STERN: Yeah. That's a great letter. Did, can you recall when you found out that he was not dead? Your reaction? How did you find out?

MUNROE: Well, it was pretty dramatic. There were news stories. We had some news correspondents who must have told us about the PT 109. It was front page news, as I recall, all over the place, when the boat was found, because of Kennedy's prominence. I was, maybe I just didn't know much about the world, but at the time, I just wasn't impressed with Kennedy being the son of a former ambassador. I wasn't impressed with Joe Kennedy. Maybe I was too worried about staying alive to be impressed with anybody. But I don't think that Kennedy ever tried to throw his weight around or pretend to be anything that he wasn't out there, certainly, under those conditions. I think it was probably a very natural, what we saw was real, was what we got. As a matter of fact, all...it seems to me, from my first contact with him in 1943 until the last time I really saw him and talked with him, which was at the showing of the "PT 109" at the White House that I mentioned earlier, he really seemed like the same guy. He was a relaxed, good-humored, very likeable Irishman. The photo of me flipping a coin with Jack was made about five days before the election at the inn at O'Hare Airport in Chicago in 1960. And I told Pierre Salinger I was then working for the Chicago American which was part of the Chicago Tribune -- and I told [Pierre E.] Salinger that I would like to get a picture reenacting, for the paper, the incident which I related about flipping the coin. And he said, "Sure. By all means. Come up in about an hour," which I did. And Kennedy was nervous as a cat, pacing back and forth. He didn't look really exhausted or tired, he just simply was extremely edgy. This could have been some medication or this could have been the fact that the polls were, you know, had sort of gone sour for him in the last few days before the election, and Nixon [Richard M.] always claimed that if he'd had another three or four days he could've won the 1960 election. So I think that Kennedy was under the kind of tension which was almost unbelievable. Must have been...because when I saw him later at the White House at the press conferences he was relaxed, and when I saw him, as I say, at the filming of the "PT 109" in 1963 he couldn't have been more relaxed. And I have a feeling that he genuinely enjoyed the release, the great release that must have come to him to get the race for the presidency out of his system.

STERN: During those early days, the PT period, do you have any sense of his health? Did he have any back problems, or any other that you could see, anything that was obvious?

MUNROE: No he did not.

STERN: He did not.

MUNROE: No, that's mentioned in a couple of the books here, you know, that he had a heck of a time passing his naval physical.

STERN: Yeah.

MUNROE: He flunked, I think he flunked the army exam, and then he finally passed the Navy test, but I was not aware that he had any trouble of that kind.

STERN: So he never indicated anything to you.

MUNROE: No, no.

STERN: Okay. After the PT 109 rescue, when was the next time you saw him, that you can recall, or communicated with him?

MUNROE: I would say it was here when he was a freshman member of Congress.

STERN: Congress, that's what I thought. You were with The Washington Post from '46 to '47?

MUNROE: Yeah, that's right.

STERN: He was elected in '46, so he came in in January of '47. Do you have any recollections of him as a congressman, any contacts at that point?

MUNROE: Well, he was...as I recall I have seen him, he was certainly one of the most relaxed guys there. If it were wintertime, he'd frequently, you know, have his...you could always tell his socks were sort of hanging down. He seemed to be a very relaxed kind of guy. I interviewed him from time to time, but he really wasn't...I didn't have any papers in New England and I really had no, no real contact with him in the forties -- I really began to come more in contact with him in '56 when he ran for the vice-presidential nomination, and [C. Estes] Kefauver was given it by Adlai Stevenson. And I think it's pretty apparent that from that point on, Kennedy had decided he was going to go after the big one.

STERN: Were you at the convention in Chicago in '56?

MUNROE: I was at the convention.

STERN: What was your impression of why he lost there, that whole very narrow defeat?

MUNROE: Well, I'm going to say that it's probably that Adlai was afraid of putting a Catholic on the ticket. And, of course, Estes Kefauver had shown, had run in more primaries, as I recall, and had shown....I think Adlai felt like he owed it to Estes. But it was certainly a lucky, a very lucky break for Jack Kennedy that he was not the defeated vice-presidential, which I felt sure Ike [Dwight D. Eisenhower] was going to beat anybody, beat Adlai, I think worse in '56 than he had in '52.

STERN: Right.

MUNROE: And Kennedy certainly could not have reversed that. I was covering the McClellan Committee...

STERN: Yeah; I was going to ask you about that.

MUNROE: Yeah, for the Chicago American, which was an afternoon newspaper, and Bobby [Robert F.] Kennedy was the general counsel. And Bobby performed brilliantly in that role; for example, I don't think...I've never seen anybody else do it as well, any person who was in charge of the staff of a committee. In the afternoon, say around five or six, after the hearing was over, Kennedy would sit down with us--that's Bobby--and say, "Well, now, we have about..." he'd give us a list of witnesses. And he said, "Now, now this one is going to tell us about da, da, da." So, it was...then I could go to my typewriter, bang out a story saying what was expected to happen the next day, and then, by that afternoon when some of it happened, just call the newspaper and update. He gave us terrific service. Jack was a member of that committee, and I'm sure was handed a lot of questions by Bobby. And I'm not sure that Jack could've ever been president or would have gotten his drive if he didn't have someone like Bobby along to help him. Bobby was a bear for details, remembering names, incidents, and...You remember the old, the old saying about Bobby Kennedy was, "Don't get mad, get even." Well, I suppose, I really suspect that Jack was not vindictive, certainly not as vindictive as Bobby was or his old man, and I want to use the word "mean," but not really as tough as either of those fellows. I'm sure he wasn't. Just wasn't. And I mean that as a compliment.

STERN: I see what you mean. Yes, I understand. Were you, did you have any contacts with him between the '56 convention and the '60 announcement, other than the McClellan Committee, and was it clear to you that he was

running for president? Did you ever go on any of those trips, or cover any....For example, he went into the South a number of times.

MUNROE: In January of 1960, I found myself at the radio and television news directors' annual meeting in New Orleans--at the time, I was doing some radio and t.v. work for a station in Miami and a couple of other places--and Kennedy was there making a speech and Jackie was there. And one night I saw something that almost made me fall off a bar stool. Blaze Starr, who was a very famous strip teaser--I think she's still alive--was performing on stage. It was on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. The doors of the saloon or whatever you call it, "dive," swung open, and in came Russell [B.] Long, then senator, accompanied by Jack and Jackie. And they climbed up the stairs and sat on the front row of a balcony. And they watched this show, they all, obviously, thoroughly enjoying it, and relaxing after the speech he'd made earlier somewhere in New Orleans. And I thought at the time, my God all a person needs now is to have a camera and get a picture of Jack and Jackie in that setting, and, I thought, pious old Dick Nixon would just have a field day with, with an incident of that kind. But, you know, once again, as I said earlier, he seemed to have a disregard for a lot of things that would worry ordinary people. And I do include...well, for example, going back to World War II. A friend of mine was his roommate back at Charleston, at Charleston (S.C.) Navy Yard. And he said that Kennedy had a convertible car, and one night around two or three o'clock in the morning, he'd left the top down, why it started raining and he said, "I woke Jack up and I said, 'You better get out there and get the top up on your car.' And he says, 'Oh, the hell with it,' and turned over and kept sleeping," ...Jack certainly had a careless attitude towards a material thing, like I gather never carrying enough money around, always expecting somebody to pick up the tab. I'm not saying that he was a deadbeat; I just think he, a lot of those times, why it just didn't occur to him.

STERN: You say you were on a trip on the Caroline in February of 1960. How did that come about?

MUNROE: ...Salinger called me one day, and he said, "The Senator is going down to Albuquerque, he's stopping in several places; he'll be on the Caroline. He'd like to have you along board because where he's going to end up is speaking to the Western Governors' Conference in Albuquerque." And I represented the Albuquerque Journal, which is the largest paper there. And, obviously, they thought it would be a good thing if the people who were attending the Western Governors' Conference got some stories to read every morning filed from various points along the way.

Most of the time Bob [Robert W.] Ruth of U.S. News and I were the only two reporters on board. We stopped and Jack filed in February, for the West Virginia primary, the first one he filed in. And I'll never forget going in because the weather was bad and Charleston, West Virginia, is a very crash-prone airport. But there we were. And the technique that we followed was to fly at night, and get into an airport and just stay there and Jack would have breakfast with local politicians, he'd make us eat somewhere. We went from there, West Virginia, to I guess either Chicago or in the environs of, anyhow--I also spent a couple of days in Gary, Indiana, with him. And among other things, we did go around the U.S. Steel plant there, and it's one of the few times that I ever recall seeing Kennedy with anything on his head. In that case, of course, it was a hard hat. We went through areas where there were cranes up above, operating overhead, and machinery going, and it obviously was the better course of valor. I understand that later on many, many efforts were made to have a picture taken of Jack with a hat. In fact, they would be given a sombrero in western Texas or somewhere southwest, and he always managed to have somebody there to hand it off to real quickly, or he would hold it, or sit it or lose it, whatever. He simply didn't seem to want to have a hat on. There are very few pictures, I guess, that were taken. . .

STERN: Just a few. And you eventually ended up at the Governors' Conference. Any recollections of that?

MUNROE: Yes, I do. Because the day before, Senator Clinton Anderson, this would have been on Saturday, had gotten the prime time and the prime spot so he could introduce Lyndon Johnson. And Lyndon Johnson made a speech to a crowd, not a very enthusiastic crowd, but I suppose the auditorium was about half full or whatever. Then, the next afternoon which was Sunday, Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico, introduced Jack to a group at the local civic auditorium which was jam-packed and Kennedy really did a great job. Chavez, it was all a very touchy thing because the congressman from New Mexico, Joe Montoya [Joseph P. Montoya], who was later a member of the Senate from New Mexico, now dead, had left town in effect so he wouldn't have to appear with his fellow Catholic on the platform. In other words, he did not attend the Kennedy rally. And this was much noted by a lot of people, people said, "Where the hell is Joe? He ought to be here with Jack!" Now, later that afternoon, as I say, I was working for the leading paper there, and the publisher had told me, he said, "I want you to stay over a couple of days, 'cause I have some people I want you to talk to," and so forth, go up to talk to and visit some people at the state capitol, and that sort of thing. I hadn't been out there in several months, so I agreed to do it. But, that

afternoon, Kennedy said, "Why don't you come on and go up with us tonight to Las Vegas?" And I said, "Geez, I wish I could get out of this other thing." "Well," he said, "it's too bad because Frank Sinatra and Peter Lawford have got a good party going, and we'd like to have you come in, come and join us." You know, by this time, we'd been on the plane for almost a week together, and the routine was that it will become airborne and he'd break out the Heineken beer and the good cigars and we would sit there and enjoy some for half or an hour until he felt sleepy and then he'd go sack out. The Caroline had two folding, two couches that would fold into beds, and that's where we slept.

STERN: We were talking about the conference. Anything else? Did you ever go to the party?

MUNROE: Oh, did I go to the party. I didn't get to go, but Bob Ruth, who now is retired and lives in Florida, did get to go. He said that Sinatra produced Judith Exner, and he met her himself. And that's the closest I ever came to meeting Judith Exner, then or later. But she did exist; I'm sure Bob Ruth is accurate about it.

STERN: Did, what was your overall impression of Kennedy on this trip on the Caroline? Did, do you think he enjoyed campaigning?

MUNROE: He enjoyed it very much, but I recall one incident in North Dakota. It was snowing and the weather was terrible in North Dakota when we were there. And, it's an old gag, but only when he told it in a Boston accent, the proper Harvard accent, would you especially appreciate it. It was a breakfast meeting and he had gotten an enthusiastic welcome from the group, and he said, "I feel like the cow who had told the farmer, 'Thanks for such a warm hand on such a cold morning.'" This from a Boston aristocrat was just the kind of story that those farmers loved, and they yelled. He got a very enthusiastic reception. There were also some rather pitiful things. We went to a school for retarded children. I guess he was interested even then; the Kennedy family must have been. This was an institution where kids were either badly crippled or mentally, they were kids with a lot of problems; I have an idea it was probably a Catholic institution there in Fargo, North Dakota. But Jack, by George, went in and did his rounds one morning. We all went through; he patted little kids on the head and smiled and talked to them. And that was a side of him I'd never seen. It was a compassionate side, really.

STERN: Did, did you get any sense of, during this extended contact like this, during this trip of his religious views? Did he....

MUNROE: Well, I like the story that somebody told me at one time that Kennedy was a house guest, I think the story was, it was in Charleston, South Carolina, or maybe Atlanta or somewhere, he was the house guest of some Protestants and he asked him if they could drop him off at the Catholic church. He wanted to go to the service. And they did -- this was probably in the forties, late forties, early fifties -- and they did, and dropped him off at the front door, and then they turned the corner and they saw Kennedy coming out of the side door. Well, obviously, he'd sprinkled himself with a little holy water and done a fast thirty seconds or a minute, perhaps genuflecting somewhere, and he really didn't spend all that much time in church. And the late Senator Paul [H.] Douglas of Illinois, I thought, had him down perfectly. He said, "Jack is not a Roman Catholic, he's a Harvard Catholic."

STERN: (laughing) How about the '60 convention, did you attend the convention?

MUNROE: I sure did. I was also there, had some memories of that. You recall Lyndon Johnson was furious about losing out to Jack. As I recall, they debated each other...

STERN: I was about to ask, it was a joint appearance....

MUNROE: Yeah, a joint appearance, right. Joint appearance. Okay, I was there. Kennedy, of course Lyndon had a short fuse, and he was the dictatorial sort of type anyhow. He had a tough time smiling sometimes. And Kennedy was just... I don't remember the stories that he told, but he obviously took it light and easy and won the crowd over. Well, he certainly had the nomination all sewn up. Kennedy had been relatively easy, not easy to see before then, before he got the nomination. But I will never forget when it became apparent that he was to get the nomination. There was no doubt, you know Adlai Stevenson and some others had shot their bolts. Mrs. Roosevelt had made some cracks about him. I remember being in his suite and having had not always easy access to Jack but some access, and being aware that morning before they went out to get the nomination, the acceptance that night, make the acceptance speech, that there was a sudden crush of people in the suite, the Kennedy suite, and that a guy named [Senator Henry M.] "Scoop" Jackson, who was technically the campaign manager at that point for Kennedy, or later was, and I and numerous others were waiting our turn and it looked like my turn was never going to come, so I just left. And I thought about the story that I'd heard about Kennedy, that they said that the poor guy, once he, you know, became a presidential candidate, he had almost no time at all. And they even told this story about Kennedy was in the toilet

doing the necessary for himself, and these two pols came to the bathroom door and just walked right into the can with him while this was going on. We've got to see, I'm sure they said, we've got to see you right away about a problem. And that's, it's a frenetic life, and yet I never somehow felt ... once the campaign was frenetic, feverish, but the Kennedy White House always seemed to be, to be a rather relaxed place. The Johnson White House, never; certainly the Eisenhower White House was, it was more like the Eisenhower White House, the style. There was, they were a friendly group. And I had an incident right in this very room where we're sitting. Ted [Thomas C.] Sorensen, I called him up one day and said, "Ted, you do me a favor? I've got, Fred Seaton," or somebody with some big people from Nebraska who was, he was a big publisher, former member of the President's Cabinet so forth, said, "You'd really do me a favor if I'll get about eight or ten people together, if you'd come over and have lunch with us and let us just ask you some questions off the record." This would have been about 1962. And Ted Sorensen, Ted did come over. He came over and talked with us for about twenty or thirty minutes and left. He was, at the time he looked so tired and fatigued, and, of course as somebody said, it's twelve o'clock noon. At the White House it's twelve o'clock noon all over the world, somewhere. And I think that, whereas the president might be able to pace himself, as I have the feeling that Kennedy jolly well did over there, that the aides, just, they need an escape. I also had an interesting experience which I'd like to tell you about. When Kennedy was nominated, and when he was elected, this would have been like February or March of 1961. You recall during the campaign, he had made fun of Ike's always being out on the golf course.

STERN: Right.

MUNROE: And, in fact I, Kennedy never told this story, but I've heard that, speaking of Ike, that story that went around, that Ike was at Burning Tree Club, and the walkie talkie set in his secret service man's golf bag started raising hell and he answered and he said, "Mr. President, Russian planes have taken off and they think they're headed for the U.S." and Ike is supposed to have said "Goddamnit, don't they know I'm only on the tenth hole?" (laughs) So, this is a golf story. As you may or may not know, Kennedy was a good golfer. Stuart Symington says he's probably easily the best golfer that's ever been, or natural athlete who's ever been president. George Smathers, whom you're gonna see later, and Red Fahey and Stu Symington, as I recall, and Jack had a foursome going at the Chevy Chase Club and Jack had given Smitty Merriman and all the boys at the White House the slip so he could go out and play golf with his buddies at the Chevy Chase Club. I had a young cousin in town from Florida who was a very prominent constituent of Smathers,

so Smathers said why don't you, you get a hold of a picture of Jack over at the White House and, or somewhere and bring it out and, to the Chevy Chase Club and I'll meet you there in about a half hour and I'll get Jack to sign the picture for you. Well, we did go out, Kennedy arrived, he didn't have any clubs, arrived with just himself, and we watched, he did sign the pictures very graciously and we watched on the first tee while he teed off. I had a camera, an expensive Leica camera which I'd been taking the kid's picture around various places and it was under my raincoat and no one could've seen me taking a picture, snapping a picture of Kennedy teeing off after all the criticism he'd given Ike. I resisted the temptation to take the picture which I was later told Time-Life would've given me ten thousand bucks for. The reason was I was a candidate for membership in the Club and I knew they had a rule about taking pictures on the premises. I didn't take the picture and I was assured later by a member of the board of governors that if I had taken the picture that I would roast in hell before I became a member. Happily I didn't take the picture and I missed the ten grand and I did get elected to the club. But he was, as I recall, he must've hit a drive two hundred fifty-three hundred yards. It didn't look as though his back was bothering him that day.

STERN: That's very interesting...

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

MUNROE: ...because I was covering "Scoop" Jackson, the Senator from Washington fairly closely at the time, for a paper out on the West Coast, and he had, I guess he and Stuart Symington, at least those two and perhaps others had, I gather, been assured by Bobby Kennedy that they were Jack's personal choice for running mate, but in order to keep Speaker Sam Rayburn happy or Lyndon Johnson or whatever, they had to offer Lyndon the vice presidency and of course he wasn't gonna take it. I think that might have been the true situation that Bobby was kind of chagrined when LBJ took the nomination, but in retrospect, it seems to me that it was brilliant and when you had the whistle stops special or whatever, going through the South, and Lyndon Johnson standing on the rear of the plane, of the train in Culpepper, Virginia and saying "What's Dick Nixon ever done for Culpepper?" Well, of course, what the local banker's comeback was "What's anybody ever done for Culpepper?"

STERN: Did you go on any of the campaign trips at all... either with Johnson or Kennedy?

MUNROE: Yes, I did, I did campaign with Kennedy, this would've been just a few days before the election. I joined Kennedy twice, let me think about that.

Whenever Kennedy was in Rockford, Illinois, I was there. I was there with him because I had been campaigning with Nixon and I recall when I showed up, I came over to say hello to Jack and he immediately said "Where the hell have you been?" he said "I've been looking, I've been expecting you." I think he had a phenomenal technique for, for being aware of who was around and he was just a very friendly guy you know, it was such a natural way with him that it's inborn. Nixon never had it, never could have it. I'm sure Lyndon Johnson never had it.

STERN: You used to say you were on some other campaign stop with him?

MUNROE: We were in, see, in 1960, well I mentioned earlier being in the West at the Governor's Conference and, probably not at the convention and then in Rockford, Illinois and then right before the election.

STERN: Right before the election...I'm not, I think you were talking about that election before we had the tape on. Yeah. The incident right before the election.

MUNROE: At the airport?

STERN: Yeah.

MUNROE: I guess it was in the airport inn in Chicago. I had wanted to get my picture made with him reenacting the flipping of the coin which we had done.

STERN: Oh, okay.

MUNROE: That was in late October or early November. I think I told you earlier that he seemed so very nervous, and not distraught, but certainly like a man who hadn't had much sleep for a month and he just looked like a very nervous guy.

STERN: What was your impression of the differences between the Kennedy and the Nixon campaigns? Since you were on the two, with the two of them. How, particularly in terms of their relations with the press?

MUNROE: Now this is 1960?

STERN: Right.

MUNROE: Now Kennedy really had a lot of friends among the press. He later cultivated them. He was a very likeable guy. Nixon just had a hell of a time....

For example, in 1959 I found myself on the Nixons' famous trip to Moscow, all over Russia as a matter of fact, when he was vice president.

STERN: This is the kitchen debate.

MUNROE: The kitchen debate, where he had the debate with Khrushchev. We all concluded then that he would be unbeatable, because he had that wonderful picture of him pointing his finger in Khrushchev's face and Khrushchev had a dumb look on his face because he didn't understand much English and probably for all I know, Nixon was reciting the alphabet or whatever, but anyhow, he came out of that looking good. I always felt that Kennedy with his throwback to some patrician forbearer really made Nixon extremely nervous. Nixon was, as we all know now was a fairly insecure type anyhow. And Nixon was made no more secure by the fact that Ike gave him a thorough snubbing and as you recall Nixon even refused to or said he didn't want Ike to campaign for him or Ike wouldn't do it or whatever, even campaign for Nixon in the last few weeks. I have a feeling that that would've made the difference. There were so many things that could've made the difference, but certainly if Nixon had played the Ike card with any sort of diligence and intelligence, it would've worked... incidentally the Presidential Years was published by my firm, Prentice Hall, by Bill Ewald. Eisenhower is the President and it covers the eight years and Ewald would agree with that summation of... I've asked sometime and said "Well, why...", Ewald was in the White House... I kinda said "Well, how did he get along with Nixon?" He said "Not very well. The chemistry was all wrong."

STERN: Any other contacts besides the PT 109 thing while Kennedy was president? Go on any major trips?
(Interruption)

MUNROE: I grew up, as I said, in Tallahassee, Florida, northern Florida, and I must say that we had limited contact with damn Yankees. For example, I recall being invited to parties at big estates outside Thomasville, Georgia and being treated by the students there from Ivy League colleges as a curiosity. A young Ivy Leaguer once exclaimed to me "Oh, at last I got to meet one of the natives." The class distinction as I grew up, as I think I said earlier, was in the South between white and black. Obviously, where Kennedy grew up, it was sort of a keen refusal on the part of his peer group and certainly I would think in the Boston area, perhaps in New York too, to really fully accept him as a bona fide... what he appeared to me to be on the surface, when I was first meeting him was another arrogant Harvard man.

STERN: I wonder if you might...this is a sort of a open-ended question, but one that interests me. Now that it's almost twenty years-nineteen years since the end of the Kennedy administration, how do you think today of Kennedy as President, from your perspective as a journalist and how different is the way you think today from the way you thought when he was President or let's say immediately after he was President. Let's say you were to evaluate him in '62, '64 and today.

MUNROE: I happen to be on the side of Mr. Schlesinger and Sorensen, perhaps others, who feel that Kennedy would have taken General MacArthur's advice very seriously not to get involved in a land war in Southeast Asia. His disparagers say that of course he put thirty, forty thousand people in there as a training measure, whatever, initially, so they could help out the crumbling Vietnamese position, but I always felt that Kennedy would have somewhere along the way been too smart to do that, now I have former Rep. Bill Maillard's word, he was the Congressman from San Francisco area, a Republican and member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, and he relates the following incident and I tend to believe it. He said that in January or February 1965, he was at the White House and Lyndon was talking to the group about the escalation of the Vietnamese -- he had just won the election, '64 -- escalation of the war, Vietnam, sending more troops there and Bill said "Well, Mr. President, the first thing we better do is go back and give you a big tax bill so you can, so we can afford this, so you can pay for it." And he said Lyndon said "Hell," he said, "McNamara says we'll be in and out of there in less than a year and I just don't...we're not gonna fool around with high taxes." I think that, I believe that story and I think that a lot of our inflation, the dismay of a whole generation, the draft dodgers going to Canada, ...I don't blame Kennedy... I have an idea if Kennedy would have lived, he would have somehow worked it out in a much more humane fashion than the really dramatic, terrible way it was handled by Lyndon Johnson.

STERN: What about on domestic things? Just as a general assessment of Kennedy as President

MUNROE: I would think that he was probably more conservative.... I cannot believe that he would've put through the wild social reforms that Lyndon.... You know, a lot of that came about because of the emotional feeling, the guilt feeling, or whatever about having lost the young President, and I think that Lyndon was a past master at orchestrating what he wanted out of Congress. As I recall in '64 he got some pretty good majorities going for him in the House and the Senate.

STERN: Right, sure he did.

MUNROE: And he pushed through legislation I don't think Kennedy could've gotten through and I'm not sure they were good ideas, I'm not sure Kennedy would have even tried. And the legislation might not be worth a damn. Now you haven't asked me about the Bay of Pigs.

STERN: Well, anything that you, in terms of your own sense of Kennedy and....

MUNROE: Yeah, I never understood and I still don't know how Jack allowed the Bay of Pigs to happen. I feel sure that if Eisenhower had gone in there, he would have gone in for keeps to win. And apparently, this idea of trying, going into the Bay of Pigs and trying to win on the cheap, get some sort of an uprising going against Castro was just inconceivable to me and of course I think it was heart-rending to Kennedy and if you recall he said, "I take all the blame, but now I'm gonna fire some people too." And he did, he cut some people out. And there was some very bitter people in the intelligence and in the military who said the assumption always was, this was Admiral Arleigh Burke, that if he's gonna approve a maneuver like the Bay of Pigs or an invasion of this kind, he'll know it's a commitment that he can't fall back on now. I would suspect that having learned that lesson he stood up to Khrushchev later in the missile crisis. We still don't know whether that's all gonna stay together but certainly at the time it, it appeared to be a success for Kennedy and.... I have an idea that, you asked me, I have an idea that he would have been quite successful in his last years.

STERN: What about something like civil rights- do you think he would have moved the way Johnson did?

MUNROE: I doubt it. Seems to me that Johnson really got a lot of things through Congress. I forget the technical details. Did Johnson break a Southern filibuster on the civil rights bill? Okay. Probably, that takes some maneuvering, you know I doubt if, I think Lyndon must have called in every chip he had on a thing like that and I. . . the fact is Kennedy just didn't have that, I'm sure he didn't have that kind of knowledge of or control over members of Congress. The truth is that he was, while well liked up there, he was really not, you know it's true that his record was paper-thin as a member of the Senate but of course he was sick a lot but I think he really displayed his leadership talents a) in getting the nomination and b) being elected and of course the years when he was president. I think he'd have been a damn good president.

STERN: I wonder, is there anything else you'd like to add?

MUNROE: Not a thing, no.

STERN: Okay, I would like to add just sort of an extra dimension to this if you might have any additional insights on Robert Kennedy. You mention the connections that you, the observations during the McClellan Committee. I was wondering if there was any other time during the campaign or even during the administration that you have any specifics about Bobby, or for that matter his own presidential campaign in '68 or his time in the Senate from '64 to '68.

MUNROE: Bobby was very well organized in that period when he worked as a committee aide, as the staff director of the McClellan Committee.

STERN: Did you think, for example, that he should have been appointed attorney general?

MUNROE: Well, I think Kennedy handled that beautifully. He said he ought to get some experience before he goes out and practices law, you remember that?

STERN: Yeah.

MUNROE: That's marvelous, that was understatement. It seems to me that he was probably a good choice. That is a confidential position, certainly Nixon had Mr. Mitchell down there and I think if you or I were president, we would like to have a confidante of sorts and of course it's quite obvious that Bobby, while very different people were extremely. . . . I think Bobby would have done anything he could for Jack, and I suspect the same is true the other way around.

STERN: Did you have any connection at all with his '68 campaign? Did you travel at all with him?

MUNROE: No. I was trying to think of, when they went. . . . Sirhan Sirhan did it to him and so forth. In '68 though, you asked about it, the aftermath of. . . . I was at the convention in Chicago, when Hubert Humphrey was nominated and when it became, when they teargassed the Hilton Hotel where we were staying, the Blackstone, next to the Hilton Hotel, and it was a terrifying experience because I could look out the window. . . of course the helicopters were all over the place, this was two or three in the morning, we were on about the twentieth floor -- my wife and I and one of my kids--and there was teargas in the ducts of the hotel, so you were coughing and sputtering and you could, as I recall there were bonfires out in the park across the way and it just looked like an inferno. Of course they had a hell of a time

over next door. If you recall, the mayor of Chicago, Mr. Daley, was roundly criticized from the podium by Senator Ribicoff among others. . .

STERN: Right.

MUNROE: . . .for the fact that [INTERRUPTION] his policemen had got out of hand. Well, I want to say this, that if you had lived through that experience and seen the mobs and being afraid for yourself and your children as I was, I would think you'd have to pin a medal on Mr. Daley. Even if you had to beat up a lot. . . . You can't believe the, that the dissent and the rumbles or whatever you call them, the speeches that were made. . . . I walked around and the, whatever the park is by the Conrad Hilton, two or three days before the convention itself and invariably you would have an older person with a pack, a mike pack, on his back, you know, a sounding machine, through which he would rally say twenty or thirty, fifty, a hundred college students. It was an older group. I would say fifty or a hundred, maybe a thousand, older people leading the young around. That's the way I analyze it. It was certainly a bad time, wasn't it?

STERN: Do you think that Bobby could have been nominated if he had lived?

MUNROE: I would think so.

STERN: You do?

MUNROE: Yeah.

STERN: Despite the fact that Humphrey had so many delegates?

MUNROE: Well, Kennedy certainly had a lot going for him and I think he had just won the California primary and the. . . wasn't he about to win in Washington and Oregon perhaps?

STERN: He won them on that day, I believe.

MUNROE: He won them the same day.

STERN: The same day.

MUNROE: I don't remember the exact figures about it. I wonder if he would have gotten the nomination, you know. Do you remember how far ahead Humphrey was?

STERN: I don't remember exactly, but he had a substantial lead. On the other hand, he hadn't entered the

primaries and Kennedy was winning the primaries.

MUNROE: Uh-huh, right exactly, and then Kennedy was still, there was still some primaries to go. I tell you, I've . . . going back to the, to Jack, I don't know all the details, I read about him and I hear about him, Kennedy's initial victory in West Virginia was supposed to have been, we know, greatly helped by Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., and perhaps others who did some pretty tricky stuff on Hubert who I guess Kennedy's opponent and, we're talking about 1960?

STERN: Right.

MUNROE: Yeah. They, they went down, they went down and said, "Well, now, here's Kennedy, he's a proven war hero, war veteran, wounded and all that sort of thing," and they had, "What did Hubert do?" Hubert sat out the war in, you know in a pharmacy in Minneapolis, somewhere in Minnesota. The Humphrey people were always very bitter, of course, by that, they felt that they were outspent and they were, and . . . certainly 1960 was, in the early phases, was a pretty . . . and the last phases, was a real tough year in Kennedy's life and it seems to me that Papa Joe or he or somebody had decided that they would do whatever was necessary to get him in the White House. Now, what all of that included who knows? Certainly, I don't.

STERN: Do you ever get any sense, personal observation of a relationship between Kennedy and Johnson? Particularly when Johnson was vice-president?

MUNROE: Oh yeah, they, I think they, the word around when Kennedy was killed, and I'll have to believe it, in that would have been October or November of 1963. .

STERN: Yeah.

MUNROE: Okay. The word around then was that, the skids were being greased through via Bobby Baker and other people to get Lyndon off the ticket, and that Bobby Kennedy was the heavy in the role, he was the guy, and of course, I tend to believe it because later on when he, when Bobby wanted to leave, run as vice-president with Lyndon, didn't he?

STERN: In '64, yeah.

MUNROE: Yeah, okay, and made other gestures of reconciliation of some kind that Lyndon had so resented the fact that he was treated as a corn pone by these Bostonian characters, the Harvard elite, he just

resented it in the same way that Dick Nixon must have resented the fact that someone had been born and obviously so with more privileges than they.

STERN: Do you think Johnson would have been dumped?

MUNROE: I have a feeling that he would have been dumped if Bobby had, if Bobby's advice had been followed. I know you'd get a thousand arguments on this, but in my opinion, and I don't have a bit of proof or, I don't even have a suggestion as to who his possible successor would have been, probably another southerner of some sort or other. I just have a feeling, speaking of Bobby Baker, as you know, you notice he's filed for bankruptcy?

STERN: Yes.

MUNROE: Okay. . . . Back when Lyndon was in the White House, Baker would periodically call people like me since I worked for a publisher and say the following, "Well, I'm getting a book together now and I think I got quite a story to tell," and of course we'd pass the word along and it would always get back to the White House that Bobby was ready to blow the whistle on LBJ. Then of course, then they would delay his sentencing or get a stay of trial, whatever it was, if you check it out, Baker. . . one of the first things Nixon did when he came in was to put Baker in jail. Lyndon didn't do that. And it's pretty obvious, I mean there are books, it's in books when Lyndon left the White House he accumulated quite a substantial amount of money, he said because of his wife's acumen as a businesswoman, but he'd accumulated quite a bit of money. There's one story they tell out at the Burning Tree Club that Lyndon is supposed to have, was playing golf, he hit a ball into the rough and he walked over and threw the ball out on the fairway where he can have a shot, a good shot, a better shot and the black caddy protested. He said, "Mr. President, that's cheating," and Lyndon said, "Hell, weren't nobody looking." I believe that, one of them told me that story, one of the caddies out there. I can believe it, I believe that story.

STERN: Well, do you have anything else to add?

MUNROE: Not a thing, gosh.

STERN: Well, thank you.

[INTERRUPTION]

MUNROE: Going back to the incident of where the PT 109 was sliced in half. Kennedy had no radar on board his boat. It was, I gather, a very dark night. He had

been bombed within a few days previously by a Japanese float plane. The standard operating procedure was, in those waters, that because the PT boat had large propellers on them, they would kick up a wake in the water that was very fluorescent and if you were going at any speed at all the Japanese float plane which flew at a slow speed would simply come along your wake and bomb at the end of it and had he had within a few days before when he was cut in two, he had had a couple of people wounded by a near miss from that very problem. So, he was actually following the standard procedure when he was going on one engine with two cut off at a very slow rate of speed and with, I'm sure with his mufflers to keep the noise down too, closed. Now, at those days, and I have a little engineering background, somebody said, "Well, why didn't he just slam the engine in," that he had going, and, I guess he had tow engines idling and one going, "Why didn't he just slam 'em all into high gear and get the hell out of there?" That would've, under the conditions that I described and with the engines that he had on his boat, they would immediately have stalled and then he really would have been run over. He had a very little time, reaction time, between, it became apparent that there was a destroyer bearing down on him at perhaps thirty-five knots, top speed, to get the hell out of the way. He was really a sitting duck.