

**Gale McGee Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/16/1982**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Gale McGee (1915-1992) was a United States Senator from Wyoming from 1959 to 1977. This interview covers the 1960 Democratic primary campaign in Wyoming, the Kennedy administration's foreign policy, and legislation that was debated by the Senate during the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Gale McGee

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

GALE W. McGEE

November 16, 1982  
Washington, DC

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: ...with JFK. I assume they must have come when you were running for the Senate, in '58 or perhaps earlier.

McGEE: Uh, my first, yeah, my first recollection, uh, of face to-face meeting would have been in the, in the spring, early spring of 1958, when, uh, through contacts here in Washington, namely the senator from Wyoming, Joseph C. O'Mahoney, who himself was from Massachusetts originally, had arranged for Kennedy to stop by Laramie on his way to a California appearance.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: As he was preparing his own campaign contacts. And because I was, uh,--though not formally announced--was the agreed upon candidate for the Senate that spring. And he, so he put down this, uh, it would have been a Convair aircraft--I think it was the family plane at the time, again, this just goes back quite a while. Now--time at the Laramie Airport and we just met at the airport and he wished me well and made a small contribution to the campaign effort. Let's see, my wife and number two son and my campaign manager were the only other ones present. But that was the official, that was the first face-to-face, meeting in rustic circumstances, because it's a... Laramie had a primitive airport in those days, but it could accept airplanes. [Laughter] And, it was a, it was a special effort on his part. He had no reason particular to make that particular diversion.

STERN: Was it clear to you that he was running...

McGEE: Oh, it was very clear...

STERN: ...for the '60...?

McGEE: ...that he was...

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: ...running, yes it was clear. Of course, I'd been following things nationally anyway and knew that that was his goal, or had read that it was, and it.... I hadn't been in Washington for a number of years, several years--that's not quite true, I was in, I spent the year in Washington in '56,'57 as, on our senior senator's staff so he could prepare me for getting ready to run in the race. But I didn't get to see Kennedy while I was there that year due to the fact that he was on the road probably more than I was in town.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: It was a busy year for him. So this was the first personal meeting with him and [I] never forgot it.... Well, I can fill it in right now in terms of the national convention--which is jumping ahead to 1960 in Los Angeles. That became a critical factor in my judgment about which way the Wyoming vote should go, aside from my admiration, because by the time I arrived in the Senate in 1958, I had also developed a great admiration for the majority leader, Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]--who came out to my state later in that campaign and...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...made a great contribution to the fact that it turned out, luckily, fortunately. But, when you got you had that down to the national convention you had that....

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ....Well, which way do you tilt the vote, and I made the basic decision, which was difficult, on the basis of who was there first. And, uh, that had a fortuitous aspect to it for the reason that at the convention in Los Angeles in 1960, the voting was, uh, not decisive. They had to have more than one ballot in order to do it and as we were going through the, uh, second or third ballot--I've forgotten which number it was, but a rerun--Wyoming had split her votes in the first roll call. And half of them for Kennedy, some for Johnson, and a few for Symington [W. Stuart Symington III], from one of the sections of the state....

STERN: You mean the roll calls within the...

McGEE: Roll call...

STERN: ...Wyoming delegation?

McGEE: ...within the Wyoming delegation. And so when they were going through the second, third or fourth time in the calling of the roll, uh, they got the Wyoming group together in a huddle when New Jersey passed--a number of states were passing, they wanted to see who the winner likely would be and they'd played it cool and not commit all their votes....

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ....And New Jersey passed. That meant that by going on down the, those who had not yet voted, they came to Wyoming. It took nine votes to put Kennedy over. We had eleven. And so it was at that point that, uh, that basic decision was resolved in his favor by me. And, uh, it would've happened anyway further on. Somebody else would've.... But it just happened that this very small state at that moment had a little footnote to the...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...history of the successful nomination.

STERN: I remember Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] deep in the delegation as they voted...

McGEE: That's right. That's right.

STERN: ...watching it on television.

McGEE: Yes, Ted was, uh, the president's western man--that is, in the Rocky Mountain states in particular--and was very popular out there in those days. In the first place he was just gracefully young a vigorous and one of the.... Made his mark in Wyoming, aside from the time he spent there, actually riding a bucking bronco in a rodeo up in Lander, Wyoming, and, uh, that, if he'd had all other things against him, that would've [Laughter] endeared him to the people of Wyoming instantly, you know, just because of the identification.

STERN: Right. Now, I know he spent--Ted Kennedy--spent time out there in '59, organizing a central committee.

McGEE: Right. It was his--became his assignment. But this would've been, uh, that would've been, when the incident that I'm referring to....

STERN: Um.

McGEE: But he was already by '58 sort of, uh, at least, being the target man in the western states, in the Rocky Mountain western states. I don't think it included California...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ... or the coastal states out there but...

STERN: Uh, I gather that according to some of the recollections, for example, Congressman Teno Roncalio recalls that, uh, Governor McCracken [Tracey S. McCracken] was not particularly enthralled by having Kennedy at the head of the....

McGEE: No, he wasn't the Governor. It was Tracy McCracken who owned the newspaper, but he was the democratic national committeeman...

STERN: That's right.

McGEE: ...and he was a very fine person as well as the head of the board of trustees that had hired me at the university. But he would have preferred Lyndon, right off. That was his, uh, inclination, but....

STERN: Do you.... Could I just, if I could interject one point.

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: Roncalio argues that he thinks McCracken's basic reason was that he that he feared having a Catholic at the head of the ticket....

McGEE: Well

STERN: Do you feel that was...?

McGEE: I think that was one of Tracy's misgivings, but I think his basic one was that as a member of the national committee he felt that Lyndon Johnson had more of an earned record in the party mechanism in terms of national politics...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...because of his majority rule.

STERN: Right. Uh, would you...?



McGEE: I think that would've been a heavier factor with Tracy. I think the Catholic factor in Tracy's mind, uh, was lurking one out on the fringe somewhere, one of those things you grasp for when you, uh, if you have to go that far to figure out some reason not to do something.

STERN: Uh, apparently, Kennedy did visit the state in '58 while you were running for the Senate.

McGEE: That's right.

STERN: Do you recall that?

McGEE: Yes. Not only that, he did very well. We had superb rallies for him and it had made him....

STERN: Were the rallies for you or rallies for him? [Laughter]

McGEE: Well, I think the rallies were for me.

STERN: Um.

McGEE: I mean I was the benefactor, but because after all, uh, three electoral votes aren't the most momentous thing in the world. But it was the symbolism again.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: And so because it was a Senate seat, I think that he, uh, he thought it might be of some potential use even....

STERN: Right.

McGEE: If you wanted to think selfishly.

STERN: Sure.

McGEE: Aside from the campaign that he was in the midst of and that was the, the luckiest thing for many of us was that Teno Roncalio was the state chairman of the Democratic Party. And we'd had dead chairmen for a long time. By that I mean they went the routine because the Democrats were in such a disproportionate minority among the two parties.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: But Teno had bounce and fire and really, I think, put that whole thing together successfully. No reason in the world for me to win, for example. I mean I was not even a dark horse, I was a hopeless horse. But he got the party mechanism put together, that made a difference. He was a key factor in, uh, moderating Tracy McCracken when it came time to cast the votes for Jack Kennedy at the national convention.

STERN: Were Johnson's people active in Wyoming also between the two candidacies?

McGEE: Oh, my yes. Not only that, Lyndon never let me forget it. [Laughter] And, in his, one of his books, he responded by saying, hey, in effect, that I'd let him down, you know. In any deal he apologized for that little clause in his first book later, but he had bitter feelings about it. And it was understandable in many ways. I mean, he felt I owed him a great deal as majority leader, but he got over it. But it was, uh, my basic thing is that it's one of these things in a national convention--my first national convention 'cause I'd never been a politician, I'd just been an academic...

STERN: Imagine that.

McGEE: ... for twenty-one years and had never been to a precinct meeting, let alone a state convention. Not to mention national convention, so Los Angeles was the first such experience after I'd been swept ashore there by the events of the time.

STERN: Do you have any specific recollections of the convention, particularly, uh, what was your reaction to Johnson accepting the vice presidency? Were you consulted at all on that?

McGEE: Well, I'm on record, yeah, I was consulted about it, and I thought it was a good idea. I just thought it was absolutely impossible. Not only that, by the accident of events--I think maybe Tracy McCracken had a hand in setting it up with some friends--I had a national television interview with two of the three networks wanting know what my opinion was and, uh, [Laughter] the record is very clear. I said, "I know Lyndon Johnson well, having known him for two years now.[Laughter] And I can guarantee to you that under no circumstances will he ever accept a vice presidential post under Jack Kennedy." [Laughter] That was how I distinguished myself. [Laughter]

STERN: A lot of people were surprised that year.

McGEE: Oh, yes, yes they were, but, nonetheless, I put it in print. I put it on the record, on camera. [Laughter] But....

STERN: Some of Johnson's people told me how surprised they were.

McGEE: Oh, my, they sure were. And, uh, now, that caught up with me later when I went for Jack Kennedy in one sense. I, uh, we had a vacant spot in a court post,

appellate court, the western states' tenth court of appeals district. And I had a strong candidate, a state chairman, Wyoming State Democratic party chairman and fine lawyer. And we had in Wyoming when I won, the Democratic governor won at the same time by a very narrow margin, Joe Hickey [John J. Hickey]. And then Joe appointed himself to the Senate when the, uh, Republican senator, a young fellow, died of a heart attack on the trail. And so Joe appointed himself and there was a lot of criticism of him having appointed himself. And so when Joe was defeated at the end of filling out that term that had belonged to Keith Thomson [E. Keith Thomson], Joe wanted the seat at the tenth judicial district, but I felt that Walt Falen [ ] had, uh, tilled more in the vineyard, as it were and was a slightly younger man, a bit younger and uh, would have been more appropriate. I pressed hard for Walt Falen, but Lyndon gave it to Joe Hickey. Joe was in our delegation at Los Angeles but he was one of the three dissenting votes or whatever it was, four dissenting votes, three at that decision to give the thing to Kennedy....

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: So Lyndon rewarded him. So that's the way the game, the way the ball...

STERN: That's how it works, true.

McGEE: ...bounces in those things, yeah.

STERN: I gather from some of the sources that you had been asked to put Symington's name in nomination.

McGEE: I had been asked by the Symington people and I was also--no, that would have been the later convention when the great drive to nominate Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] occurred; I didn't want to mix up the conventions--yeah, I would, I had been asked to put in Symington's name....

STERN: And the.... You can go ahead, yeah.

McGEE: No, and Symington had come out to the state also to campaign and made a couple of appearances, so had Hubert [Hubert H. Humphrey] but Symington was making a serious run, I mean, he thought he was. But I didn't think he had any practical chance and there was no point in splitting Wyoming, a very small vote to begin with and I thought this was, this was too good. I can give you a footnote to that that also ties in. When we all were sworn in, in January of 1959, the class of '58 was the largest Senate class in history when you counted their accumulations around there. And Lyndon Johnson put me on the Appropriations Committee--the first time an uninitiated freshman that had not come over from the House, even...

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: ...let alone any other experience, was put, for starts on the Appropriations

Committee. I'd applied for it--Fulbright [James W. Fulbright] had asked me to go on Foreign Relations--but my mentors had advised me that would be suicide in Wyoming, don't get on the Foreign Relations Committees, which was my career, I mean my....

STERN: Sure.

McGEE: Foreign relations was my academic career and that would have been my dream, but I listened to them, unfortunately at that time and went on Appropriations and Lyndon put me on that because there was one vacancy. But there were three fellows applying for it, seniors--I mean they'd been around for a while--Stu Symington, Hubert Humphrey and Jack Kennedy. And, as he reminisced once, sometime a little later, he said, "I'd be damned if I was going to put one of my potential rivals [Laughter] on the Appropriations Committee so they could make hay out of that." So that's how I bumbled into that one just by the absence of, or the stalemate, that the three leading contenders for the one spot represented as far as Lyndon Johnson, the majority leader was concerned, you see. And even I, at that time, hadn't imagined him being seriously interested in the presidency at that stage, that didn't seem to be his personality, but I think he was a great majority leader and so I didn't suspect that until much later on.

STERN: Apparently--Roncalio says, look, that he, he thought that you were very annoyed that McCracken, uh, seconded Johnson's nomination, because there had been sort of an agreement....

McGEE: There had been an agreement on it, that it would go otherwise, but I was annoyed, but I was annoyed as a freshman in the political arena, rather than as a rival for jurisdiction, you know, because, Tracey McCracken was a senior in national Democratic politics. I mean nation-wide. He was highly respected, much experienced and ultimately became a, a very fine friend when we got our pecking order figured out [Laughter]. You know, but you have to go through some of these little abrasive things to, uh, discover where your place is.

STERN: Yeah. It's a fascinating thing when you look at the way the Wyoming delegation went for Kennedy at the last, literally at the last second, considering how close it was...

McGEE: Yes.

STERN: ...that had, had he been, let's say, fifteen votes short, or twenty votes short may--  
....

McGEE: Yeah, we might not have plunged in at that.

STERN: That's right.

McGEE: That's right. No, and....

STERN: He could have fallen short and perhaps not been nominated on that ballot.

McGEE: It could, it could be. It depends on what the other lurking were...

STERN: That's right. So it is....

McGEE: ...among other delegations. So it was one of those accidental little developments...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...that just blossomed right at that time.

STERN: Sometimes history is turned on those little things.

McGEE: Yeah. You, um, I'm glad you had a chance to talk to Teno, because really was deeply involved at all times with the Kennedys. He was one of their greatest admirers and vice versa and, uh, and still is. I mean, any study such as this, involving that period at all, Teno Roncalio would be an important factor.

STERN: Right. Right. Uh, apparently, uh, what chance did you think Kennedy had of carrying Wyoming? Uh, Roncalio, for example, flew all over the state with the Houston Ministerial Association speech...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...showing it to audiences, because he thought the religious issue was going to be decisive in the state...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...although he then throws up his hands and says that it just...

McGEE: No.

STERN: ...didn't work. It didn't matter.

McGEE: I didn't think he could carry Wyoming for good, practical reasons.

STERN: Which were what?

McGEE: Numbers. Basically, it was not the religious question, it was the ultra-conservatism of the whole state in its registration, party traditions, uh.... The Democrats were.... When we had a good year, we were two-to-one behind.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: It was, they, the cautious rancher, agricultural, oil, mining sort of com--complex that tied it together. The only Democrats were generally found in what we called the "solid south," that's along the Mississippi Railroad where you had the labor vote.

STERN: Yeah.

McGee: No, I didn't think that Mr. Kennedy had, had any chance. The only president, the only Democrat in recent times that ever carried the state was Lyndon...

STERN: In '64.

McGEE: ...1964.

STERN: Yeah. Right, uh. From your point of view then, was the fact that he got forty-five percent of the vote fairly good?

McGEE: Oh, that would be exceptionally good, yes.

STERN: Of course, the final result was...

McGEE: In fact....

STERN: ...seventy-seven, sixty-three counted...

McGEE: That's right. That's right.

STERN: ...which was fifty-five, forty-five in percentage terms...

McGEE: Right

STERN: ...which is not that bad.

McGEE: No, no. It isn't at all. It's, uh, that was very good and that was because, again, he was such a scintillating, new personality on the, for this sort of race.

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: There hadn't been many.

STERN: He apparently visited Wyoming once during the campaign--I was going through some material about a trip he tried to make to Cheyenne in which the, uh...

McGEE: The weather was so bad, yeah.

STERN: ...fogged prevented him from coming. Were you with him at the time?

McGEE: No, we were waiting for him.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: Waiting for him. Ultimately got him in, but they, it was a long delay. It was mean weather. He'd come up from Denver, as I remember...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...on that occasion. Uh, but he did make it in, finally, I mean, after perseverance.

STERN: He had to land at Denver and drive....

McGEE: That's right. That's right. Uh, on that occasion, I remember, uh, when he made his speech that day, uh, there was a little incident at the beginning of the speech, he.... 'Cause it was the first, formal speech he'd made of that sort, you know, and by that time I was a senator, and, uh, no I wasn't, either, I was, uh, we were just, I wouldn't have been senator, yet....

STERN: Oh, sure you were.

McGEE: Yeah I was, sure I was. That's right. This, this would have been in, probably, it would've been in '58 or '59. If, I think it was probably in the.... Well, you'd have to check the date, but it....

STERN: Well, the visit I'm talking about was during the '60 campaign.

McGEE: The '60 campaign, oh.

STERN: This was when he was running for president.

McGEE: Oh. I thought, what I thought, I thought he was, when he was running in '59. I thought he came in early.

STERN: No, I have record of him coming in during the campaign....

McGEE: Okay. Alright. Well I, well, that's more valid than mine. My, uh, Loraine [Loraine B. McGee] and I, my wife, were talking about it and we thought he was there maybe in '59 because he was already running by that time, but he hadn't been Formally nominated. But in '60 when he was there, that was the occasion when he, uh, that had to be the occasion when we had that weather, that mess....

STERN: That's right.

McGEE: But when he was, uh, the meeting, the rally was held in the, in the Frontier Pavilion out north of town which was the only big facility they had in town in those days. And he had the place jammed, but it's.... In, in starting out, he talked about my friends in Wyoming, with its three-hundred thousand, odd people, and I whispered something to him that, uh, "You ought'a, uh, refer," I said, maybe I said, "Three-hundred-and-fifty thousand," just whispered from behind him. He said, "Oh, are there more?" [Laughter] And the audience was already tittering about having alluded to three-hundred-thousand "odd" people, you know. [Laughter] And he, so he, and that just brought 'em down when he said, "Oh, are there more?" [Laughter] But it really, they got a roar out of that.

STERN: But you had a big crowd, but, uh, but you...

McGEE: Oh yeah, oh, jammed.

STERN: ...still didn't think you could carry the state?

McGEE: No, no, because Cheyenne is a misleading place. That's the, that's the largest percentage democratic colony in the state.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: Uh, they get, it produces more Democratic votes than any.... Rock Springs, Sweetwater County, would be second, Laramie would be third, and those are all on the U.P. [Union Pacific Railroad Co.].

STERN: Right.

McGEE: So you never started really seriously counting your votes 'til you left the Union Pacific to see how much you could cut down those overwhelming three-, and, four-, and five-to-one Republican majority counties, you know.

STERN: Right, right. Do you, did you have any role in getting Mike Manatos [Michael N. Manatos] onto Larry O'Brien's [Lawrence F. O'Brien] staff in the interim?

McGEE: Yeah. It was easy, but I had a role in it because they cleared with me in doing it.

STERN: Uh-huh.



McGEE: And, uh, you see, Mike first had brought me to Washington, had arranged with Joe--he was the A.A. [administrative assistant] for Joe O'Mahoney.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: And so, he had, and he'd been in Washington for a long time. He'd been there under Lester Hunt [Lester C. Hunt], uh, who was our senator who shot himself, back then. And that's how O'Mahoney got back in the Senate. He ran to fill in the term that Lester Hunt had left, and so Mike was taken from Lester's class, uh, staff, and brought in to his own staff as his A.A. And so one of the things Mike envisaged was, uh, with the agreement with O'Mahoney, building up Gale McGee to become their candidate in '58.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: And, uh, so, when Kennedy won, why, uh, we interceded immediately with Larry to recommend Mike Manatos at the White House level. It turned out to be a darned good recommendation. Uh, but Mike was a pretty savvy political type--he was from Rock Springs, it didn't have the must Democratic votes, but it had the most one-sided Democratic votes [Laughter]. Uh, Republican's almost a dirty word in that labor town, mining town.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: But, uh, Mike was, Mike made a fine....

STERN: What was your general sense of the O'Brien operation in the Senate, uh, Manatos's operation and people like, uh...

McGEE: Oh, I thought, uh....

STERN: ...like, do you really think he really did a good job?

McGEE: I thought it was excellent. Yeah, I thought it was excellent. I thought they had a, had a good performance record. Plus the fact that they worked at it the right way. They didn't come to town with the.... Well, I often contrast it with later, later groups...

STERN: Such as, such as....

McGEE: ...such as Carter [James E. Carter] where they ran against Washington and to their credit, they--I mean, if that's a credit--lived up to it. [Laughter] They opposed Washington all the time they live here. And, uh, they had no competence, uh.... It could have made all the difference in the world, I think in the kind of

track record that Jimmy Carter would've had...

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: ...if they hadn't fought Washington. I think it was a sad, uh, a sad thing. And, and stupid, but it, uh, it at least suggested--well, let's say it demeaned--the old habit in our history of picking governors to run for president. Uh, because it's, it did remind us that sometimes they were too provincial. They hadn't, uh, didn't have a wide enough range of interest. And, of course, it was that interval at the same time where you began to get more and more senators running for president, largely I think because of the explosion of events around the world and our being projected onto the world stage after World War II and all that kind of stuff. Maybe, working back the other way now, it's hard to say, but...

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: ...Jimmy Carter didn't leave a good image for governors, succeeding in that.... Let's say it was too introspective, too provincial. I think he could have corrected it, by, uh, identifying with people that were suspected of having lived in Washington and could've given him advice, but he waited much too long and the only real breakthrough he scored was with our friend from Texas, party chairman...

STERN: Yeah, right.

McGEE: ... Strauss [Robert S. Strauss]. But, uh, he, uh.... I served under him. I was at the OAS [Organization of American States] as our ambassador. But there's no doubt about it, I wouldn't have made it if we'd gone through the White House. Cy Vance [Cyrus R. Vance] and I were long-time friends under the Johnson years.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: And, uh, Cy insisted on, asked me to take that job and I did and we had that all settled at Christmastime before the Georgia mafia--as they sometimes liked to call themselves, which was an overstatement--uh, they, uh, before they were aware that it happened and I don't think I was, either I nor Cy, were forgiven for that bypass. But it wouldn't have happened if we'd waited.

STERN: That's interesting. That's consistent with an interview I did with someone who was a labor lobbyist...

McGEE: Oh.

STERN: ...during the Kennedy years and he just, as an aside, said that the Carter operation was the worst he'd ever seen.

McGEE: Well, it had to be, and it didn't need to be. Hey, there were talented people here in this town and it was really botched. They talked to each too long, too much, and had no outside experience.

STERN: That's very interesting. Do you have any anecdotes about the inauguration, the Kennedy inauguration? I assume you must have been there and....

McGEE: Well, I'll tell you where I was. No, I wasn't there.

STERN: Oh, you weren't?

McGEE: I was in the hospital.

STERN: Oh, my goodness.

McGEE: I, uh, the day before the inauguration, we'd, uh--well, let me go back one step. After the president was elected I was not only on the Appropriations Committee, but I was the youngest, uh, member and the most freshman member, I didn't have a committee. Everybody else was chairman of a committee. I had a good selection of subcommittees that I served on but I wasn't the chairman of a subcommittee and so they invented one. That's how they put foreign aid into a subcommittee status. Up 'til that time, under the Eisenhower administration, from its creation it'd been the full committee's jurisdiction and the chairman always handled it as well as the full committee subcommittees.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: But they, uh, they invented the foreign aid subcommittee, with the subcommittee and I was the first chairman. And one of those first assignments was to start exploring the world on where the money was going and examine the projects and bring, quietly, kind of a report back. It ultimately took us a million miles around the world many times. It was a very busy spot, but nonetheless, it was enjoyable. And it was in that role that in the summer of '61 I was being sent by the committee to, uh, the summer of, the fall of '60, excuse me, the fall of 1960, right after the election.... I'd already laid it on before the election and Gale McGee was heading for Africa and the president called me to ask if I would consider taking his kid brother along and showing him that the world was round, that it wasn't just set in Europe and the United States.

STERN: Right. I know Ted Kennedy went with you.

McGEE: Yes, and uh, that's how he went along. He wasn't a member of the Senate. He was the only non-member of the Senate that didn't, that went along.

STERN: Frank Church [Frank F. Church] went too, didn't he?

McGEE: Yeah, Frank Church. Frank Church went.

STERN: All right.

McGEE: Uh, he was on the Foreign Relations committee and, uh, was senior to me except that this was an Appropriations, uh, function. Frank, most of Frank's, many of Frank's travels were through the Appropriations Committee, because he had to rise up through foreign relations first before, uh, they...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...turned him loose. But I lucked out only because of the accident of being a chairman of [Laughter] a committee that no one wanted to serve on because it was an unpopular committee.

STERN: Right. Right. So, uh, you did not attend the inaugural then?

McGEE: Well, uh, as we....

STERN: You're getting there.

McGEE: I got off the track. Uh, and so, uh, when we got back from Africa.... We had taken a lot of movies on the trip, and so I had Ted up to my office to see them-- and they had a lot of good stuff in them, reminiscing about the great trip that it was, you know--and while he was there, I became ill. I'm a diabetic.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: I wasn't, uh, I just could hardly get through showing the film, but I didn't want to reveal it.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: But I was perspiring and all those things that are symptoms of going into shock and stuff. And so we got through the four reels [Laughter] which had to have been a torture for him, that much, too. But he, and he left, and he hadn't been gone five minutes 'til I collapsed and so they, my staff would know immediately what it was. It was a diabetic coma as it turned out, rather than insulin shock and, uh, so they got me in an ambulance and rushed me up to Georgetown Hospital. And that's where I spent the inauguration day.

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: But I was out, those things, you bounce back very quickly as soon as they correct the imbalance, so I was out, uh, two days.

STERN: Um.

McGEE: That's how, that's how I celebrated the inauguration. I was very bitter about that in terms of the chanciness, except we had that blizzard going on...

STERN: Yeah. Yeah.

McGEE: ...and it's a lucky thing I got to the hospital at all in time because the ambulance was blocked by the traffic that was stuck in the snow...

STERN: Oh, wow.

McGEE: ...going up. So it was a touch-and-go situation at that moment, but everything worked out fine.

STERN: What were your--this is a sort of more general question--but, uh what were your expectations in January of '61 for the Kennedy administration? I mean, what did you expect, what were your hopes?

McGEE: Well, I was excited. I had great hopes, because I was fresh and young, also. And, those are the blessed things that keep our country bubbling, I think, is the hopefulness of youth. And so JFK really epitomized that; of course, cause he did it world-wide. I mean it wasn't, this wasn't unique here but it was that vibrancy that I thought really suggested a genuine new era. And to think of being a part of it, I still couldn't believe that, you know, because of the chanciness of the election business.

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: And to think that it happened to little old us, you know, and that sort of stuff with no political experience, no money. Uh, to illustrate that--and this is what boggles my mind these days--I was advised by our senator at that time, O' Mahoney, and Tracy McCracken, that the most money that, a Democrat had ever spent in the state was O' Mahoney. He'd spent \$27,500, the campaign before when he won. And they thought that mine might take a little more and Tracy McCracken offered to help me--he could raise a little money for me--and he raised \$750 for me. [Laughter] And we, so we tried to gear toward that twenty seven-five maybe thirty thousand if we got reckless, you know.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: Well, we ended up with a campaign of \$60,000. [Laughter] Which seems utterly ridiculous, you know, in these days, but, uh, that was how it was. We mortgaged the house, mortgaged the car, and that sort of stuff, and spent the first term paying off the campaign debts. But, uh, Eleanor Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] came in on that campaign...

STERN: Yes, I think....

McGEE: ...and of course, Jack Kennedy was in there again for the, for, uh--let's see, that would've been, no, that would have been after he'd become president, he was back again for another rather substantial tour of the state.

STERN: Yeah. I'll get to that later.

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: I want to ask you a few things about that. Uh, did you have any, uh, any luck with, uh, trying to get people appointed, uh, in the early days of the Kennedy administration? I did find some letters, uh, from people. You were trying [to have] somebody appointed as patent commissioner, and someone to the Federal Power Commission, that sort of thing. Were you successful at it?

McGEE: I'd have to think. I'd have to think. I think we got some people in Interior.

STERN: Yeah. I found--that's right.

McGEE: Yeah, which would be a more likely spot. The only reason I was interested in the Federal Power Commission primarily was I was one of the, I was on the Commerce Committee. Because it had a lot of things that were of interest in the west. That was before I discovered that when I got on the conference [*sic*] committee, everybody else on the committee were still, uh, relatively young people and after four years on the committee, there hadn't been a single move on the committee. I mean, uh, seniority wise.

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: And I had no, I had no genuine, personal interest in it. I wanted on Foreign Relations. I left it for Foreign Relations...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...by which of, by which device there had been a trade--through which device there'd been a trade. Russell Long [Russell B. Long] was on the Foreign Relations Committee and foreign relations was not his bag and he wanted to be on Commerce and I wanted Foreign Relations. And, uh, the Senate Rules Committee ruled that if uh, nobody else senior to me could come up with a trade with somebody on Foreign Relations, why I was the next guy on Foreign Relations.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: And that's how I got on the Foreign Relations Committee in those days.

STERN: You don't say.

McGEE: That was a trade off from Commerce, which--when we're alluding to Commerce there, it brought that back, which has nothing to do with Jack Kennedy.

STERN: No, that's very interesting. Uh, I found--going through, for example your correspondence, uh, with, the Larry O'Brien files and various other things--that there were a series of letters that you wrote, uh, trying to get more money for forest development and for alleviating unemployment in forest resources. The sense I got from looking at the letters was that you were not overly successful.

McGEE: We didn't, they didn't move very fast in those days....

STERN: Yes.

McGEE: No, it wasn't, uh.... They started at the end, well by the time Lyndon was finishing the term there, it did begin to move. But it was slow moving. I think the, uh, I think the concept at that time--it was still kind of a pioneering concept; I mean, it's become very popular in these last twenty years, but it was beginning to break through, the first place, there were lots of debts that needed to be paid off. I mean political debts and all.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: A state with three electoral votes wasn't the, wasn't the, didn't have the biggest clout. And I think that delayed it. But, ultimately it began to fit into place and, and through Udall [Stewart L. Udall] we were well taken care of, ultimately.

STERN: Ultimately.

McGEE: I think they had to get their act together.

STERN: Yeah, but it did, as I say....

McGEE: It was slow.

STERN: The latest one that I saw was September '63 and it seemed that, from looking at them, that you were not terribly satisfied.

McGEE: Well, we'd, uh, we'd had, under Udall we'd had.... Of course, he stayed on awhile, it began to fit, but, as I say, it was mostly getting the act together. Because, they had, they didn't owe us any big chips, in terms of producing the election result, not the nomination result.

STERN: Right. The report that came out of your, uh, trip to Africa in the fall of 1960, which I saw, uh, did you ever talk to Kennedy about that? Do you recall? Uh, I can....

McGEE: I don't, I don't remember now. I really don't remember.

STERN: Basically what you recommended was that the new administration should be cognizant of African nationalism and neutralism and should distance itself from colonialism. Which, I think, was very good advice.

McGEE: Oh yeah. No, well, I think we probably submitted--I couldn't, I wouldn't verify this--if I didn't talk to the president, or we didn't talk to the president to make a report on the committee, then we filed a report for his attention.

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: And I couldn't, I couldn't answer that right now, without looking it up myself.

STERN: It is in his file, so obviously, he did get it.

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: Were you generally satisfied with the administration's performance in, in terms of Africa with Soapy Williams [G. Mennen Williams], uh....

McGEE: Well, Soapy Williams took some adjusting to among the Africans. It was, in the first place, this was a flamboyant fellow who, uh, worked very hard at it. But I think it, he did score a breakthrough. Of course, this was at a primitive time in Africa also. To wit in that, those days--in both '59 when I was first in Africa and then in '60 when I was going there for the committee--uh, they, uh, they were.... To illustrate, they were insulted in African government if you send a black ambassador.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: Because this was "second-class" in the United States--they'd all read about that--and so you were sending 'em a second-class citizen and they were offended. And so, Soapy was able to capitalize on that fact of mak--.... He was a committed, uh, reformist in the U.S.

STERN: Uh-huh.

McGEE: But he was white and our ambassadorial corps almost totally at that time, I think, was white and therefore they took a different pitch than they would have when, after another stage in our development--I was also chairman of the African Committee [Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs] in the Sen--in the Foreign Relations



Committee, later on.

STERN: I'm aware of that.

McGEE: But the only reason for that was, by the time I got on Foreign Relations, I was the lowest ranking member, a Democrat and needed a committee, and we invented the African committee. There was no committee, and I was the only member, thus the chairman, because nobody wanted to touch Africa. They wanted to be in the sexy places, you know, Europe, the Far East, India, and so on. And, uh, finally, Karl Mundt [Karl E. Mundt] agreed to be on it--it wasn't a great addition, but then he was finally ill so he couldn't really live up to it--and then, Jack Javits [Jacob K. Javits] ultimately volunteered to join the committee, but uh.... Dick Clark [Richard C. Clark] had to come along to give it dignity. He came, he succeeded me when I went to the Latin American committee.

STERN: Uh huh. Uh huh. I found some evidence, for example, that you were, uh, pleased that the U.N. [United Nations] voted, uh--Stevenson voted at the U.N., for example--on Angola, uh, against...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...against the NATO [North American Treaty Organization] allies, essentially...

McGEE: That's right.

STERN: ...in favor of Angolan independence.

McGEE: Well I thought.... Yeah. I was a strong devotee of the independence movement around the country, around the continent. When we arrived in Africa, that, uh--I mean in the Congo. It used to be the Congo, Zaire--uh, in that trip with Ted Kennedy, uh, we got in, uh, at a different time because we had had to split up due to an illness in my family and rejoined in Cairo. And we drove in from the airport, we got in behind a parade that was going on and the truckbed in front of us, as we were trying to get around, had, Patrice Lumumba chained by the neck to the neck to the back of the truck and they were taking him in. They were going to hang him, you see.

STERN: Oh. Oh.

McGEE: So that's how we were introduced to the Congo, at a very violent moment.

STERN: That was at a very bad time.

McGEE: And uh.... But in any case, we were kind of pioneers in the, in institutionalizing the African sector...

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ...in the American policy process and it was not at all very popular then. But, fortunately, there, in the private sector, a lot of, uh, milestones had been, uh, passed successfully, largely by the Rockefeller group. And, uh, some of the Ford group had been over there, in, in programming, you know. So it was, uh....

STERN: It'd been pretty much ignored during the Eisenhower administration.

McGEE: Oh, yes, it was not.... Well, it was one of those places that would go away if you just didn't bother with it, you know.

STERN: Kennedy, himself, was apparently quite successful with his meetings with African leaders....

McGEE: Yes. Well, in the first place, he was a thrill to the African leaders that we talked to, even in that first trip. They were all excited about Kennedy and the fact that Teddy was along with us...

STERN: Sure.

McGEE: ...enhanced it, you see, because they knew about him too. They knew about all the Kennedys. And it was, uh, it was a real breakthrough with these revolutionary leaders. [We] had a little trouble, uh, not very far, not much later than that, with, uh, Ted. While we were in Nigeria, for example on that trip, we visited some of the rebel leaders in the boondocks--uh, and they were, they were good guys, too, you know--but, when we came to a showdown on the Nigerian civil war, where, uh, the administration--and where I was convinced that there was more going for a united Nigeria than splintering it into more bits, particularly in Biafra, that was a very emotional question in this country and Teddy was leading the Biafra drive. And, uh, we, I think we made a contribution by snuffing that out, because, as proven since, some of them had gone a bit far. They haven't, if you were to divide all of Africa, along tribal lines, you'd have 150 independent entities of sorts, you know. You'd penalize them all. That was one place where Teddy and I broke, in that, as a result of that trip. Javits and Kennedy led that drive for them to cut off all aid to Nigeria and I really felt that what superficial ways that I'd formed opinions in Nigeria there--two trips by that time--it seemed to me there was more going for Nigerian national things that have the differences absorbed within the national structure...

STERN: Uh huh. Right.

McGEE: ...you know, among the various tribal groups. That's easy to say. It's tough to implement, but it seems to have worked okay.

STERN: So your general feeling then, is that the Kennedy administration did make a significant turnaround....

McGEE: Oh, a very significant turnaround toward Africa. And Soapy had much to do with that because of his basic, exuberant philosophy. It, uh, it was a wise selection even though the pros in the state department criticized the sending of a nonprofessional--and that has some, some relevance. But I think, on balance, it was one of those few cases that we have in political times, when a political appointee could strike the sparks that were, they were craving. Uh, that anybody stodgy might have been dragging too much and created worse explosions, you know. So I just think that was a happenstance of timing that reflected JFK's outlook on these things and was expressed by a personality that also caught fire in Africa.

STERN: Do you feel that was also to some degree true of Stevenson at the U.N., that the Africans also thought of him as a....

McGEE: Yeah, they did, because of his, uh, general, uh, openness to them. Really openness, I mean as equals, not as somebody that they were doing a favor for.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: No, I think there was no question. I, I knew, I thought I knew him fairly well. And, uh, we got along very well in these things. He was very helpful. I have to put a footnote in without any solicitation, but I think it probably would have been the wrong moment for him to be president, have been president in '52--even though I said I hadn't been political, I was in New York in 1952 as a fellow on a council on foreign relations, doing a special project for Jack McCloy [John J. McCloy] on Soviet intentions, when Stalin up and died on us in the middle of it and threw everything out the window, you know [Laughter]--but it was while [I was] there that I got involved in the Stevenson campaign and read only the *New York Times* and lay in total shock the morning after the election to discover that Stevenson hadn't won 'cause all I'd known were those articles the *New York Times* was printing. That shows you how out of touch you'd gotten with the boondocks, you know, which is a crime that men of evil commit or fall into. But I was so shocked. But as historian, as I began to reconstruct the pieces, the lectures and stuff, I think it was a, I think Stevenson probably wouldn't have been able to cut it at that moment because I considered that moment to hinge on the Marshall Plan for a lot of reasons. And I don't think he could have brought Bob Taft [Robert A. Taft] and the reactionary Republicans in the senate to the endorsement of it. Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] could, even though Eisenhower didn't know whether he was a republican or a democrat and generally didn't care. But he symbolized the kind of unity that came out of the war and he could--through his agents--could crack the whip that brought these guys into line.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

STERN: ....created March 17th in which the president, each year, would send birthday congratulations both to you and your father, who apparently had the same birthday...

McGEE: Yes.

STERN: ...and apparently you had a meeting with him March of '61...

McGEE: Sure did.

STERN: ...with your parents.

McGEE: Evelyn Lincoln set that up, bless her heart. My father is forty years older than I am but he was born on March 17th and I was born on March 17th and his grandfather was born on March 17th. And both of my parents were militant, militant free enterprise right wing Republicans and I always kidded my mother about that, "Why," I say, "you say you're opposed to planning? How do you explain this coincidence of birth on the same birthday? That had to have been the most careful bit of planning?" [Laughter] "Oh, now Gale," she says, "you shouldn't say that." She's still alive. She's ninety-five now. [Laughter]

STERN: Do you recall the meeting with them?

McGEE: Oh, very much. Yes, I have pictures of it on our wall at home. Yes, it was a fine occasion. Dad was just carried away with it. Both parents were, but Dad let the cat out of the bag, too, while he was there. He confessed to the president, in public, that, uh, that, uh, we really weren't Irish, we were Scotch-Irish. We'd come from the Orange and he made that as a real point, 'cause he had had to.... Well, neither mother nor dad supported, uh, voted for Kennedy, but my mother always reminisced with me about how she felt guilty about that, because she really felt it was prejudice--not her Republican party affiliation--but her prejudice that had finally dominated and she said she felt that she had done wrong.

STERN: That's especially interesting when you'd said about her siding with the Democratic Senate.

McGEE: Oh yes, right. Right. Well they'd have had to apologize for me, because I was the only derelict in the family. But, uh, when we uh--[I'll] give you another little story which doesn't pertain to the Kennedys, but it's relevant only in this whole philosophical attitude there--when my mother and father came back from my inauguration in January 1959. That was when CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] invented the new show which they run every two years, called "Meet the New Senators," and they get them all together. We got together in the Carlton Hotel--they had eighteen of them at that time--and then each senator would get four minutes to tell how he was going to save the world and the whole world would hear about it, you know. And so when it came down, and then--you were at a separate table with your family, if you brought your family, and I had my mother and father there with us and my kids--and Neil Strauser [ ] was the one in charge of my table and after they got through McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] alphabetically, why McGee was next. And so, uh, Neil said, "Now we have a very interesting new senator coming up

here. He's a liberal Democrat from Wyoming, a professor, yet, for many years. And his mother and father are with him and there is where the interest lies. They are both Nebraska Republicans. And with that, Senator McGee, tell us how you're going to save world." He said, "First, before putting the senator on, I want to ask a question of his mother." And my mother had never made a speech, has never been on radio or TV. She's a button-holer and a doorbell ringer and a stamp-licker, you know, all that. She's a fanatic, but she's never opened her mouth in public. And she turned, uh, Neil turned to her and said, "Mrs. McGee, you're a Republican. Gale's a liberal Democrat. What happened to Gale?" That was his question and she--without batting an eye, or flinching or tightening up--she said, "Well, Daddy and I have often talked about that and we decided that we made our mistake when we sent him to college." [Laughter] And it just brought down the show, you know. I mean, it was a, it was a phenomenon. But that's how they always rationalized me. They hadn't planned it that way, but she concluded saying, you know, "The Democrats, we have a two party system, but the Democrats really have to have a few good people," she said to him. So they made missionary's sacrifice. That doesn't belong in here, I was just....

STERN: Well, that's nice, a wonderful story. I wanted to talk a bit about some of the, the, uh, major Senate, uh, fights during the Kennedy years. For example, the "Aid to Education" bill, which I know you supported strongly...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...and, uh, do you have any specific recollections on why it ran into so much trouble, specifically, the problems over religious, federal support for religious education?

McGEE: Yeah, sure. Well, I mean that was, it was that, plus the, the prejudices of people, uh, more heavily, I suppose in the South, but they were nationwide. They were real.... It was prejudice, I think, that was more than anything else.

STERN: Prejudice against...

McGEE: Uh....

STERN: ...the concept?

McGEE: ....Both race and the concept of more government involved in education. This was a prerogative of, uh, the very local level, you know...

STERN: Uh huh.

McGEE: ...and a reluctance to leave the past and go into the tomorrows.

STERN: Yeah, and what do you see as the racial side to it?

McGEE: Well education was to be a selective thing. Public education was to be a selective thing and there were two levels. I mean, there were unequals. "You couldn't clutter up the system by having primates," to quote one of the senators in Louisiana, "entering school at the same level of expectation as the others." That was Ellender [Allen J. Ellender] from Louisiana.

STERN: Did he say that in public?

McGEE: Yeah. Worse than that if you.... You shouldn't bring these things up, because they remind others, uh, uh, other situations.... When I was on a later African trip, I went into--I was, I was the sponsor in the senate for the U.N. [United Nations] embargo on Rhodesian chrome, which we succeeded at--but I made a trip into Rhodesia to have a look at the consequences and what was going to happen. And I stepped off the plane there and instead of the press corps meeting you in the VIP [Very Important Person] lounge where you'd have a quiet meeting, they were all around the steps of the plane and as I stepped off--this would have been maybe 1961, or so, right along in there--the press fired a question, "We just learned that the United States has changed its race policies to go back to segregation." And I said, "You're putting me on," I said. "I've heard no such thing and I'm sure it hasn't happened." "Well we just had a senator here yesterday that said it, that these people ought to go back into the trees, where they came from, and we assume that's your policy." And so I asked.... I finally checked around. I said, "No, there's nothing to that." And, what had happened was Ellender had landed there the day before and had been asked by the press "Do you have any advice for us on our racial problem, here." And he said, "Yes, don't do what we did. Keep them in the trees." Or something like.... it was an absurd banality, you know. And they were furious about it. And I walked right into it. Nobody had briefed me. Nobody said, "Watch out for this," because nobody expected it, I guess. But fortunately Kenya, where we were going next, Kenya had barred him from landing there. He'd had to get out of Africa. But that was uh, I used that to illustrate my point among anybody that ever listens, that it's important that senators not make speeches overseas, because others, foreigners still can't understand that there's no necessary connection between the senator's speech and the policy of the government of the United States. They think, because of the parliamentary system and that sort of thing, that speeches generally reflect government policy.

STERN: Yeah, right, sure. That's a good point. I found a good deal of material in the file about your concerns about international textile negotiations and prices, particularly, wool, cotton...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...which is rather obvious from...

McBEE: Right.

STERN: ...terms of Wyoming. Did you feel you were relatively successful in the Kennedy administration?

McGEE: Well, uh....

STERN: For example, one of the meetings was with Church, Pastore [John O. Pastore], Cowledge [ ] and....

McGEE: Yeah, that's right.

STERN: That was on....

McGEE: Church and I were from wool states. Pastore was from, uh, the, the manufacturing end of it. O'Mahoney had been a Massachusetts boy and therefore there was a tie that way also and we were trying to integrate the policies to protect the textile industry. Uh, my heart wasn't in it, but I was persuaded that, because it was a basic industry wool raising in Wyoming--that that was one of the obligations of being a senator there. Whenever times could change, why, that might change too, but I was never totally in it, but I did get an award from the National Wool Growers Association called--that they called--the "Golden Fleece Award". Well, Proxmier [William W. Proxmier] picked that phrase up later on and used it for his insulting things, but this was an honor. [Laughter] It was to be and some people dredge it up to say, "McGee got the Golden Fleece Award in 1961 or '62, or something like that." But it, it was tying the two states together, both of which had an economic interest, had a similar economic interest, at the producing and manufacturing level. So that was the reason for it and that's why we had that little delegation meeting, with the president. We were trying to slow down the process of going into a larger segment of international trade. But it runs against everything I'd ever taught or preached, but again, here was where you had to decide where you were going to draw your lines for representational purposes.

STERN: Sure.

McGEE: And I drew the line on wool and oil. They were the two largest segments in the state economy. And, uh, always with apologies, but, uh, I mean, uh, but it was either that or get out of the business.

STERN: Right, right. I also noticed that you were concerned about the government selling free silver for commercial use, uh, is that...?

McGEE: Well, that not for Wyoming as much as it was Wyoming identifying with states who would identify with us in regard to wool and the cattle prices and that sort of thing and Nevada was one of those. Montana was one of those, New Mexico a little bit. So, uh, we, it was a matter of kind of holding those basic raw interests together....

STERN: Right.

McGEE: Otherwise there would have been no....

STERN: Yeah. One of the things which, uh--in '62--I think you had a major role in was that you introduced the resolution that Kennedy sponsored that the administration was very much interested in, that was creating the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which of course did not make it....

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: What's your judgement on that? I know that I've talked to a number of people. Some of them feel that JFK made a fundamental error in naming Weaver [Robert Clifton Weaver] beforehand, saying, "I'm going to name Weaver."

McGEE: Yeah. I think that, I felt at the time that that had an impact on the delay. I think--no question, and for the wrong reasons, for the wrong reasons--I think Housing and Urban Development maybe needs to be regrouped in hindsight now, but I think it had to be broken through on and get going. I think it was long overdue.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: And I think that the phony issue was the, still, the race hanging over everybody. And, uh, I don't think it would have cost Kennedy any quarrel with his own ideals if he'd delayed the timing. I think, and I don't know what they think about it now, the Kennedys, but I think if that could have been withheld, we might have had it sooner.

STERN: Why do you think it failed then, if you do not think it was basically because he named Weaver?

McGEE: Well, I, well, I think that that was the coloration that cost both. There was a lot of opposition to it just because it was another government bureau. But I think, therefore, on that basis, you find those little things...

STERN: Yeah.

McGEE: ...that, uh, added onto the scale of things, uh, ultimately, wrecked it. And I would be inclined to give the antipathy toward government in those days as a larger factor than the racial one just was the clincher. In other words, it provided enough of the extra feeling to, to cost us the votes.

STERN: Right. You went with Senators Engle [Clair Engle] and Young [Stephen M. Young] in February of '62 on a trip to South America and gave the president a report and saw him about it, as a matter of fact, in February of '62. Do you have any recollections of that?



McGB: Yeah, I do. We took Young and Engle by reluctance.

STERN: Why was that?

McGEE: Uh, they didn't study. Moss [Frank E. Moss] and I were the other two on that and we, we worked hard at it. I don't remember a time when they left the hotel. And we just beat our butts over there. But the, the timing was deliberate because of the breakthrough that Kennedy was epitomizing in focusing on Latin America and that's why we went. It was my mission, I mean, it was Kodell McGee again through the appropriations, Foreign Aid Committee. And we, Young and Engle--I think Engle initiated it, but Young wanted, had never been there and neither had, uh, Steve; and so they wanted to get a free ride, as it turned out. I wouldn't have taken them another time, but this time they were both senior to me because, even though they'd all come in the class together, Wyoming in the alphabetical order was the bottom of the list and that was the way they had to break the seniority ties that otherwise existed in that large class. But they, I was, I was their senior only because of who was financing the trip, you see. And they didn't comport themselves very well. I mean, what, they didn't do anything that was criminal, they just were lazy. So we, I don't know whether we taught them anything on that trip. Moss is a dog at working, always is. Whenever I could get him at the same time it was always great to have him because he wasn't afraid to plow around the country and get out of the cities, but it was a momentous trip in many ways. We....

STERN: What was the reaction that you saw, for example, to the Alliance of Progress and...?

McGEE: Well, what we evaluated at the time was that it, it was on its way, but the one gap in it which we recommended in our report, was that they had included in it only fundamental things that could realistically change the economic face of Latin America, those areas, uh in the long run. But they had to win the short run in order to keep the votes, to sustain it. And that's what they neglected. And I think I used the illustration, after looking at some of the developments there, in real, that they'd only earmarked a conspicuous amount of it just for one-hand water pumps in, uh, the poverty areas to accompany the big dams that were being projected that you'd have had something that would have galvanized their interested. Or in the schools, if they could have opened a one-room school with the education for the first time for a little group in that particular area as its feature, instead the mass attack on illiteracy, which is, is big stuff, but it's not.... It doesn't reach here because it's in the abstract and it's someone else.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: And so that was our basic feeling about the Alliance for Progress with this big projection. The parallel I used in those primitive days was sort of like the shock of the war of the Pacific, that there was no way you could attack Japan and win the war like that. But fortunately they had Hitler as a digression. And in the meanwhile, in the Pacific to keep the troops, rather keep the people quiet they'd attack a little island here or a

little island over here and have a big victory and fed them this kind of meat. Now, it's out of the wrong context for economic development, except that it illustrates the psychology of how to handle selling long term commitment. And I think that's where it fell short. I'm sorry to say, it's a... But it was a great time to be there. The only one person that was there then that's still there is old Stroessner [Alfredo Stroessner] in Paraguay. He goes on forever, but the rest have all changed.

STERN: Right. That's very interesting. I noticed, also, that you supported, you were a strong supporter of the U.N. Uh, Scoop Jackson [Henry M. Jackson] had made a speech in the spring of '62, very hostile to the U.N., which upset Stevenson very much and that you were then the supporter, major supporter, of the hundred million dollar U.N. bond issue...

McGEE: That's right.

STERN: ...and obviously supporting Jackson's position on that.

McGEE: Yes, I've opposed Jackson several times. We were, we were together on a lot of things on foreign policy, but I've often accused Scoop of politicking with foreign policy. And, whenever I disagree with him he's politicking--whenever we agree, why he's a statesman, you see. That's the old yardstick--but I think he played a... He was running for president later on. This would have been beyond the Kennedy years, where he was aspiring to the presidency and really did, louse up our relations with the Soviets at times when we had a chance to get the Jews out of the Soviet Union, and he'd make another ringing speech on it and they'd close the door again, you know, this sort of thing. But he was a much bigger man, and those were the incidentals, little footnotes. They had nothing to do with his basic policy. He was a sharp cookie and I think a very fine one.

STERN: What about Medicare? Now there's one that I found fascinating. You were--you supported Medicare and I've talked to a number of people about this and it's never seemed clear to me why the administration failed. It was so close, I mean, by two votes.

McGEE: Yes.

STERN: Why they couldn't get people like Monroney [A.S. Mike Monroney], Smathers [George A. Smathers], Hill [Joseph L. Hill], Sparkman [John J. Sparkman], Jennings Randolph? Why couldn't they get a couple of those people?

McGEE: Well, I think because the, uh, the tradition that they really were probably the last, uh, some of those, the last liberal voices, where they'd gotten by with a fairly social, uh, socially conscious voting pattern. They were still under constant threat from the very conservative interests in their area and that they had to make their basic decision against their own judgment. I think that would have been less true of Smathers, who was very close to the president...

STERN: Personally.

McGEE: ...but wouldn't deliver on that basis. but it would have been a torture for Mike Monroney and yet he had to count his chickens where they were. That was one of those that, uh....

STERN: It was. Monroney was one of the big disappointments.

McGEE: Yes.

STERN: And Bob Kerr [Robert S. Kerr], you know, just....

McGEEr Yeah, Kerr never let him forget that. He was going to.... Mike was going the other way, you know, and Kerr really put the screws to him.

STERN: That as a very, obviously, one of the real big--according to some people--Kennedy got so angry with.

McGEE: Oh, yes, yes. Well, and rightfully so, 'cause there was a chance for a major breakthrough which was just delayed, unfortunately, but it was....

STERN: Yeah. In November of '62 you and, again, Moss and, this time, Frank Church went to southeast Asia and, of course, given what was going to happen in southeast Asia, what, what were your impressions on that trip?

McGEE: This would have been '62. I had been there in '59 first on assignment and in '62, was no, uh, well.... What we came away with in '62 was a focus that they ultimately lost sight of and that was that the terrifying threat in the minds of the southeast Asians was China, not the Soviets. And China was all along the frontier of southeast Asia and they were now dabbling in Indochina, at that time. And the threat of moving down from Thailand on the stretch of land into Malaysia was very real in their concepts. And that's what we came out with and later had a long argument with Lyndon Johnson's people, Lyndon and his people, that if they had just kept their focus on the Chinese, they would have much less problem among the southeast Asians for the reason that, historically, there is their great threat, that they speak one language on. And that they ought to keep focus on China because that was the real factor and then they sold Lyndon on playing this dueling game with the Soviets for these vacuums that they called them in the world. And in hindsight, I, and I finally followed the president along in that one, uh, Lyndon later, but with reluctance on balance, saying that he got a part of the president, but I think it's a mistake to leave, get off of that Chinese kick because that would have made a difference on who was on which side in the two Vietnams.

STERN: Uh-huh. That's interesting.

McGEE: You didn't need a lecture on that. That was.... But your point brought it to mind. But that's what we found in southeast Asia. We found that it was united, almost terror in their fears, of the impact of the Chinese that were utilizing the overseas Chinese in their midst--who were very numerous, ran into the millions, even in their area--that this was the common motivating factor of unrest, except for the historical traditions that separated Cambodia and the Vietnamese.

STERN: Right. On a very small matter, I just happened to find, uh, some material about, uh, the president meeting in February of '63 with some Wyoming editors, publishers at the White House. I was wondering if you were there and...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...and had any anecdotes about it.

McGEE: Don't remember any of.... Loraine reminded me of that meeting. I don't remember anything exceptional on it except that Tracey, uh, McCracken was instrumental in getting the editors together for that because he was a big wheel in Democratic politics, as well as the journalistic business. And we had no, there were no incidents, there were no funnies that I could remember in connection with it that, uh. It was one of those things the president does, bless his heart, that he shouldn't have to take time to do because he ought to stay on the high road and central areas of priorities.

STERN: Yeah. Okay, I have one other point about the big western trip in September of '63, September 25<sup>th</sup>, to be exact...

McGEE: Uh huh. Right.

STERN: ...when the president flew to Cheyenne...

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: ...and I could see on the Air Force One roster that you were on the plane with him and I wondered if you had any anecdotes about, or recollections.

McGEE: Oh, yeah. That was a rich trip. Uh....

STERN: Big crowds, I gathered.

McGEE: Yes, tremendous, everywhere, just electric, you know. If they could have voted that day, they'd have voted for Kennedy for whatever.

STERN: Think he would have carried Wyoming in '64?

McGEE: Oh, I think he would've at that time, yeah, in the fall. They.... Cheyenne, I think it

was another one of the jam-packed things. The only.... I can't give you an anecdote I think about it yet, as, we got up into Laramie, where it's the first time they ever filled--they had a new field house that had never been filled--jammed with 11,500 people, which is big stuff for our scarce population out there. The sequel to it was it was never filled again by a public speaker until I took Henry Kissinger out there in '76 in the 5th of February at five below zero and they filled it with 11,500 people with that ice, all over the stage. It was unique, but Kennedy started it and he really carried them off. It was a memorable one for the university as well, because it was.... They've had a pretty good reputation for responding to national leaders. But I think it was the first time that a civilian had filled the field house. There was some razzmatazz band that filled it, a rock band of some sort, not rock in those day.... I can't think of the name of it now, but it was famous then. My kids would kill me for forgetting it, but they filled it. But I think this was the only political leader-type that had succeeded in filling it, so it was regarded.... The state was proud of that. Up in the Jackson hole it led to another meeting with Kennedy when we got back a little later, but he was carried away. He hadn't been up in that area and it got him into Yellowstone [National Park] and into the Jackson country there and he went up to Montana. And he was so carried with it when we....

STERN: You mean impressed with, the uh, with the physical beauty?

McGEE: Well, the beauty of it, the physical potential and this vast reservoir of reserves, forests, water. I think that probably hit him harder than--he mentioned something to the effect--that this hit him harder, in more realistic terms and experiences than he had had. He'd been everywhere, I don't know why, but at any rate, this seemed to drive itself home to him in terms of the importance of preservation, conservation. I think that was what he brought out of that single trip more than any other single thing that area. But after we got back, he called down at the White House, it would've been in October....

STERN: Was that the last time you saw him?

McGEE: That's the last time I saw him. Anyway, my date that I remember is the 25th, but I don't have notes to look it up with, but I think I wrote it on the back of the picture that we had taken at that time, October 25th. And what he wanted to talk about was the sequel to that trip, that it was so great he wanted to get the family out there next summer. Uh, one thing he'd have to know about in terms of where they stayed, "Could you...? What would happen to Jackie if she were water skiing on, uh, Yellowstone Lake. Is this.... We didn't see any skiers up there when we were there." And I said, "Well, I don't know, you'll have to ask the Park Service, but in general, our rule of thumb in Yellowstone Lake, even for boaters, if you fall overboard and you're not out in a minute, you're finished, it's so cold, and very deep." In fact, to my knowledge, they've only recovered two bodies from Yellowstone Lake. They just sink to the bottom because of that, it's so sharp. So, I said, "That might be a factor but you'd have to clear that with the park service and the experts on the scene." "Well," he said, "We, I want them to go there next summer and we're going to set aside...." He was setting aside x-number of days or weeks for August of 1964. And then, of course, all these other events happened. I, a bit of, uh, only a little bit of interest, uh, on that

fateful day in November, I was out in the state. We were preparing for the new campaign coming up in '64 for the senate. We had been in Casper, Wyoming the night before and we had a film that my planners had already put together that we were playing at each town where we stopped, getting ready about the things I'd done for Wyoming and all that sort of thing....

STERN: Right.

McGEE: ....and in Casper, the film had just started and had broke in two and it got fouled up in the mechanism and we had to cancel the meeting. And the reason I mentioned it was that the next day when we were driving from Casper up to Sheridan--which is 175-200 miles--why, it was then we had the car radio on near Sheridan, we got the news of the shooting and first thing Loraine said was, "Well, that was funny that film broke last night"--well, it was, uh, no, no, really it was just the shock, I mean she said, well.... Because the film featured Kennedy in all the things that we'd done together, you know and this sort of thing. It's part of our salesmanship. It was a good film--and she thought that was too much coincidence. [Laughter] And I said, "Well, you've got to believe in spooks, then." But, in any case, we, that was a real shocker and we, we got into Sheridan where the next speech was and we cancelled everything and chartered a little aircraft smaller than we realized to get to Denver to get a flight back--they'd sent a plane out to Denver where a lot of us were convening on Denver, converging on Denver, to get back--uh, but this character that met me at that, with the airplane, I discovered it was a sort of a training flight for him. He'd never been to Denver. He couldn't find the airport and I had to show him from geographical signs that I could remember from the jillion times I could remember that we'd been to Denver by air how to get the airplane in. And I'm not a pilot, I wouldn't pretend to be, but it was, uh, that's how desperate we were. I didn't know it or I wouldn't have gotten into it then. I would've found some other way, but this fellow was guaranteed as a pilot, which he was. He'd just passed his pilot license, as it'd turned out and he needed a few more hours to get another credential. [Laughter]

STERN: Well, let me just ask you one or two more things. I'm taking a lot of your time....

McGEE: No, this brings back many memories, believe it or not.

STERN: Uh, do you feel--sort of a more philosophical kind of question, as you look back now, next week it'll be nineteen years since the Kennedy administration ended....

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: Do you think differently of JFK and his presidency now than you did, let's say, a year or two after it ended? I mean, has your perception of his presidency changed? Do you see it differently?

McGEE: Yeah. Well, uh, not in terms of its idealistic impact. Uh, and, in fact, it's deeper as I see it. I hadn't realized how much of an impact he had on the whole world. I don't mean on just places he'd visited, but on the whole world, places that we'd traveled after that where always this came up. That just.... Of course, the fact that he died as he did, and perhaps as soon as he did, maybe preserved some of that. You never know when you live through a lot of the things later on and you get into messy situations, sometimes there's a counter thing that moves in. But I think that whatever else we used to say to Abraham Lincoln, as historians, that probably the assassin saved him in the sense that he would have had the hell of reconstruction which destroyed more than one man and it might have destroyed Lincoln. You never know. And so they, uh, that same thought comes up in regard to Jack Kennedy because it was a rough time ahead, much rougher than they'd been through, even though they'd had the Cuban experience, for that short interval or time. But, uh, I think the only possible change there might have been, there might have been a little delay in some of the programs. His legislative rapport with the senate was not very good. I mean, it wasn't the senators, that he was busy gunning for the next thing and they didn't have a great deal of respect for him that way, but as soon as he was a winner, they all loved him. But I think that in the legislative sense, uh, Lyndon covered a lot of his tracks which is a part of that reason of having Lyndon there. That was one of the reasons he got the vice presidency, from the president's point of view. And that was paying off and that might have been able to bridge that gap that Jack had as a natural weakness, namely, of getting a bill passed or of getting legislation passed, because he really couldn't be two people. And he paid a price for that for running for president and then, when he.... But, those are things you adjust to and that isn't a fatal thing, it's just a fact of life. I would think that would be the only thing that would emerge there and that's not a, not meant as a negative, but as a factual thing about how complex the presidency is. You can't do it all. Somebody has to do some of it.

STERN: A sort of a footnote you reminded me of about Johnson. When he became vice president he asked the democratic caucus to allow him to preside over the Democratic caucus, even though he was the vice president, which passed by a large margin...

McGEE: Uh huh, sure.

STERN: ...but he then withdrew because seventeen senators voted against him.

McGEE: Sure.

STERN: Do you recall that?

McGEE: Yeah.

STERN: And then he kind of became very passive as vice president. And that....

McGEE: Well that.... First place, he was mixing up his two jobs. I mean, he was, he was never happier than when he was the majority leader. And he had no intention on

God's earth of ever being vice president to anybody. And, uh, it was a fortunate thing for Kennedy, I think, that it happened. Because I do think that Lyndon saved most of his legislative programs that did get through, because, again, he was still the majority leader, you know, for all practical purposes, Mike [Michael J. Mansfield] was never a strong majority leader, he was just a beloved one. And, Mike, uh, Mike Mansfield....

STERN: Do you think that Johnson had continued to have real influence in the Senate when he was vice president?

McGEE: Oh, sure. He called in all of his chips. But he would do it on the telephone, or he'd meet in Mike's office. I don't know how many times we might have been in Mike's office with the vice president. Some of us.... He had legislation pending or we were chairmen of a subcommittee where something was going through and it would, if Lyndon wasn't there in person, he was on the phone, calling in chips, reminding you of where you'd come from and all this, you know. No, I think he was a key factor, if not the key factor in the legislative....

STERN: That's very interesting because many people have felt that he was too passive and that he was....

McGEE: No, he was, he was humbled himself. I guess he was never humbled, he was upset himself that he wasn't returned as the great emperor into the senate, which he virtually was, even so, but not in his terms. [Laughter] And so that's what let him down, but no, he was the, he was a skilled craftsman and even with the legislative committee staff from the White House with Mike and with Larry O'Brien, uh, Mike Manatos, I mean, and Larry O'Brien, he, Lyndon gave them their real suggestions as he would call them, meaning this is the only way you're going to get Bob Kerr over on this one. Or you're going to get somebody else over on that one, Spessard Holland [Spessard L. Holland] say from Florida. But you can get him here if you remind him of this.

STERN: Huh. That tends to, uh, to be somewhat of a different position from that which other people have related to me in that....

McGEE: I can testify to those 'cause they involve committees on which I was, uh....

STERN: Maybe, maybe some other people have been reluctant...

McGEE: Maybe.

STERN: ...to acknowledge Johnson's, uh....

McGEE: Yeah, well I don't, I think that would be a mistake. I think that was his strength. Uh, Johnson ended it at the three mile in the north shore. I mean he, that was, that was the first thing that happened to him was in the presidency. I think to deal with



foreign policy [he] was very clumsy and uneasy with it. And he didn't have the eloquence to cover it up. This president [Ronald W. Reagan] is also very uneasy with it and can't master the, even the craftsmanship of the business, but at least all he has to do is smile and get out of the room. I mean, there is something to being able to sell something without exceptions.

STERN: Yeah. Okay, one last point, uh, just, I wondered if you had any general recollections of the, uh, of Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], particularly in terms of his relationship to JFK. Did you ever observe anything which was very striking to you about the way that they, uh....

McGEE: Well, just how very close they were and how very smart Bobby was. I mean smart in the best sense of the word. Uh, I knew him also well in the Senate. In fact, I have a generalization that I through out about all three of the Kennedys as senators that I think summarizes my assessment in terms of the Senate, that Jack Kennedy doesn't, you can't really give him an assessment in the senate because he didn't do it the justice that he was capable of, everyone would give him credit for being capable of because he was running for the, for the larger thing. Bobby Kennedy and Ted were there at the same time.

STERN: Right.

McGEE: And I guess the best way to encapsulate it, is there is no question Bobby was the brightest of all the Kennedy--I didn't know Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], young Joe---but the other three Kennedys. He was easily the, mentally the sharpest, but the debate among the "BS-ing" going on in the cloak room was always whether, between Bobby's backers and Bobby's foes could Bobby get, would Bobby get eight votes or could he get as many as ten or twelve votes on this bill that he was introducing? And his enemies would say he couldn't get any more than seven or eight and his friends would say, "No, he can get at least twelve." And with Ted Kennedy, they would always debate whether he had forty-nine votes or fifty-two votes or fifty-three votes. What I'm saying is, Bobby was, spent most of his time elsewhere than the Senate, working hard about good causes all over the world. He didn't work hard as a senator, but he had basic brilliance that enabled him to keep his act together, but he never developed any rapport in the senate and they would vote against his stuff, not because it was necessarily unwise, but because he introduced it. Ted Kennedy, contrary to some things you may hear, or some people assert, does his own work. By that I [mean] he's deeply respected by members of the Senate they'll back him if they can. They might philosophically oppose it so strongly that they couldn't go along.

STERN: Sure.

McGEE: But he became a member of the club, because he didn't ask somebody to cover up for him because he was gone all the time. He really earned his own spurs and I think one of the more relevant, simple illustrations is his closeness to Jim Eastland [James O. Eastland] on the judiciary committee. I mean, they were, Jim really, really

respected Ted and Ted could get anything he wanted from Jim Eastland except something in Mississippi. But uh, and that's the difference in terms of what you're trying to measure them on. Bobby had a, his electric mind capability as I described it, where he could slice through all the guck of mankind and contemporary things and get to the core of things in critical, particularly hopeful parts of the world. But that took his time and he didn't do that kind of work in the Senate. The Senate was just a jumping off place for him.

STERN: That's very interesting because it suggests if he had become president that he might have had some real problems.

McGEE: I think he would have had very serious problems. I don't think he could have sold himself anyway to be president. I really don't think it was that serious because he had, he had the other great quality which many presidents lack and that's brilliance.

STERN: Well, that's fascinating.

McGEE: Now that's just the way it seemed to me. I've always considered it a unique time to have been alive on my part. I blame that on my mother.

STERN: Thank you very much.

McGEE: In those days, when I was much younger, we, Kennedy and I were sometimes mistaken, Jack Kennedy, similar profile. And we'd often, he kidded about it. I said I'd be his stand-in sometime, you know, if he got in any tight place where he didn't want to show, that kind of stuff, just for a joke. But on one such occasion, I was going from the Denver airport when they were building one of the new arms on the airport out, and a bunch of the workers were there. And some guy said, "Hey, here's the Chief!" And then pretty soon they saw it was a mistake. I said "Well, I'm very honored." He said, uh, "Well, you ought to go around and be his double." It was not significant but then in the halls of the Senate, I came out one day and a little girl, all alone, she must have seven, or eight, nine, maybe nine years old, and she says, "Oh, you're President Kennedy. Would you sign my book?" And I hesitated a second and finally I signed her book. And I've often, I, my wife scolded me for it. She said "You shouldn't have done that," and I said "You should have seen her look and she will never know the difference." [Laughter] And it'll just make her, her day, and that. But she was just, she was just.... Well, if she'd had parents with her I would've.... It was obvious, but.... And I've wondered, in hindsight, whether that was wise to do, but it was a curious little incident, and...

STERN: Yeah, that's kind of interesting.

McGEE: ...a footnote.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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