

**Robert R. Nathan Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 6/09/1967**  
**Administrative Information**

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**Biographical Note**

Robert R. Nathan (1908-2001) was the chairman of the National Executive Committee of the Americans for Democratic Action [ADA] from 1957 to 1959. This interview covers the ADA's involvement in the 1960 Democratic primary, the 1960 Democratic National Convention, and the Kennedy administrations legacy among liberals, among other topics.

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Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Robert R. Nathan  
Robert R. Nathan

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

4/5/71

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Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT R. NATHAN

Washington, D.C.  
June 9, 1967

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don't we start out by my asking you when you first met John Kennedy, or what, if you recall, were your first impressions of him.

NATHAN: Well, I don't know the exact time when I first met him. It was some time in the middle fifties. The first recollection, as I recall, was a sense of extreme youth. He looked young even when he was President, but in those early days when he was in the Congress he looked so very youthful. This was the first impression. Second, is generally one of rather crispness in conversation. I don't even remember the specific occasions, but I used to see him from time to time on Capitol Hill or in political activities. My general impressions were one of youth and vigor and intelligence--especially youth.

STEWART: Were you at the 1956 Convention?

NATHAN: I was a delegate at the 1960 Convention, but I was only in attendance and not a delegate at the 1956 Convention. I was there with ADA [Americans for Democratic Action] because at that time I was Chairman of the National Executive Committee of ADA.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in the race for the vice presidential nomination?

NATHAN: Yes, ADA was very much interested in who might be Vice President. There was considerable interest on the part of the ADA people in Hubert Humphrey. And as a matter of fact, prior to the Convention, to my recollection, there was no talk or serious consideration among the liberals--as reflected by the ADA participation--that Kennedy was even thought of as a candidate, no consideration at all. ADA hoped mainly that Humphrey might be considered, although, frankly, there were grave doubts whether there would be two liberals designated on the ticket. And then when the decision was made for [Estes] Kefauver, ADA was not really unhappy. I do not think, as I recall, that ADA as a group was particularly focused on anybody except [Adlai E.] Stevenson as President. There were general hopes for Humphrey, but not very realistic hopes nor a concerted effort on his behalf.

STEWART: Yes. So there was no real organized ADA effort?

NATHAN: No, not a real organized ADA effort. I think ADA has always recognized that the President designates whom he wants. I must say, when we come to '60, the [Lyndon B.] Johnson choice was a shocker, but nonetheless ADA has always recognized the fact that the President could pick whom he wanted. This is why in '56 there was no advanced organized effort in a meaningful way vis a vis the Vice Presidency.

STEWART: Do you recall what your reactions were to Kennedy's early starts in lining up delegates for the 1960 Convention?

NATHAN: Yes, as a matter of fact, I was aware throughout the late fifties of his activities, having been ADA National Chairman from 1957 to 1959. We in ADA were quite strong for Hubert Humphrey in 1960, and I was aware of Kennedy's activities, let's say, from a defensive point of view. We were very much impressed with the extreme efficiency and vigor and aggressiveness of his organization and the fact that Jack Kennedy was getting around a great deal among liberals, making speeches and going to meetings. I don't recall when we had the first real indication of his willingness to, for instance, speak before ADA, but I know we were always seeking outstanding candidates for our Roosevelt Day Dinners, including men like Hubert Humphrey and Adlai Stevenson. I do recall when I was Chairman from '57 to '59, I believe, that we had Jack Kennedy as a speaker at some of the Roosevelt Day Dinners. He was perfectly welcome, although I think ADA had mixed emotions; one, a desire to have outstanding people like Kennedy; but on the other hand, somewhat concerned about what it meant to Humphrey's candidacy.

STEWART: What was your personal assessment of Kennedy's qualifications to be President, say in '58 and '59?

NATHAN: Well, frankly, I had some doubt about the degree and the breadth of his experience. I had encountered him on the Senate Labor Committee. I was concerned with many matters, especially Puerto Rican minimum wages, and I had been working with some of the members of the Committee staff and had contacted the Senator. My impression at that time was that there still had not yet been a convincing demonstration of qualifications for the Presidency.

STEWART: Because of . . .

NATHAN: Lack of experience and lack of breadth of exposure to issues. The President had not really been deeply involved in many big issues. His roles in the Senate Labor Committee and in education generally were quite impressive, but there'd not been that manifestation of continuing deep contact with a lot of subjects as of '58 and '59.

STEWART: Did his position and his actions, or lack of actions, on the whole [Joseph R.] McCarthy question bother you?

NATHAN: Yes, and I think ADA always had grave doubts about this as to just how much of a clear decision he had made. Of course, as you know, during the middle and late fifties many people in ADA, and I suspect myself, had feelings that President Kennedy had dodged the issue and had not faced up sharply and clearly to the McCarthy issue. Later there were, as I recall, observations that may have moderated the reasoning for his actions, but generally there was real concern. I know Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt was concerned about it and she was active in ADA. Many other ADAers were concerned. This is understandable because, of all organizations in the United States, there were very few that took a more determined position against McCarthy and exposed themselves as much as ADA. So ADA felt deeply about this.

STEWART: To what extent was Ambassador [Joseph P., Sr.] Kennedy's reputation and some of his actions a factor in the non-support that the ADA people were giving to Senator Kennedy?

NATHAN: Oh, I think this had an element of truth in it. The liberal community generally in the United States, certainly as reflected by leadership in ADA, had rather grave doubts about Ambassador Kennedy's general policy position, especially his international position. There was a feeling that there might be a strong isolationist tendency on his part and that he was rather conservative on domestic issues as well. But I think the concern of ADA was more on the Ambassador's international position, a feeling of isolationism.

STEWART: And you feel that this was translated to Senator Kennedy to a certain extent?

NATHAN: Yes, I definitely do. I think that the Ambassador just did not have any sympathetic support from liberals, and, of course, though his views may have been



misread, this did tend to reflect adversely on Jack. I know a lot of the liberals in conversation would speak disparagingly about the Ambassador within the context of talking about Senator Kennedy.

STEWART: To what extent was Senator Kennedy's religion a factor in the lack of ADA support or liberal support?

NATHAN: I don't think it was any factor at all. As a matter of fact, I'm overwhelmingly certain that in ADA the idea of a Catholic president, in terms of religion, was something that was never considered as detrimental. Of course, there would have been a desire to appraise that individual's views. But I don't believe that Kennedy's Catholicism was a factor at all in ADA's resistance to Kennedy's moving ahead.

STEWART: There were some people, I think, who were concerned because of the traditional, conservative nature of most Catholic bishops in the United States. Possibly this . . .

NATHAN: I think there may have been some, but I really think that if it appeared and emerged it was only in isolated, minimum circumstances. I just am almost certain that, if a factor at all, it was an exceedingly minor or remote factor.

STEWART: How, generally, would you evaluate Kennedy's performance on the Senate Labor Committee, especially in the dealings you had with him?

NATHAN: Very favorable. I think one cannot question the quality of his contribution. I think that he was liberal; I think that on the whole he was objective; he was well versed on the issues. I think any question posed would have concerned the degree of his participation and the scope of his activities rather than the quality of his performance or his knowledge. I was especially concerned with Puerto Rico because we were doing minimum wage studies and analyses down

there. There were very complicated issues involved, and this entailed some conflicts with people like David Dubinsky and some other top leaders. And I thought that President Kennedy was quite forthright and, using the word courageous properly, I think he was courageous on the Puerto Rican labor issue and on the whole minimum wage issue as it pertained to Puerto Rico. And on many labor matters in that period my general impression of him--and I was working with labor quite extensively then--was on the whole very favorable.

STEWART: What were the major considerations that the ADA was confronted with in the race for the Democratic nomination? Was there a lot of talk about whether to openly endorse one or the other candidate?

NATHAN: Oh yes. There was a lot of talk at the meetings of the Board and the Executive Committee and the Convention. I think that, had it not been for the active candidacy on the part of Humphrey, I suppose ADA would have been split quite substantially.

I believe that the major objection to Kennedy was the Humphrey issue. In other words, it was more of a pro-Humphrey than an anti-Kennedy attitude, although I suspect that there continued to be a real lukewarmness toward Kennedy. In other words, what I'm saying is that, if Humphrey had not been a candidate in '60, I think ADA may not have taken a strong anti-Kennedy position, but I don't think that it would have been a very strong positive one either.

STEWART: The ADA didn't openly endorse Humphrey, did they, any more than. . . .

NATHAN: No, but it was, no. . . .

STEWART: But there was no question. . . .

NATHAN: Well, ADA generally has not tended to endorse anyone for the presidency before the Democratic Party Convention, but there was no question, the whole tenor of the ADA Convention was to go all out for Humphrey, all out.



STEWART: Were you and others fearful that Kennedy and Humphrey might come to a stalemate and [Lyndon B.] Johnson would be nominated?

NATHAN: Oh, yes. Quite seriously. There was real worry about that because ADA, without question, was very strongly against Lyndon Johnson for the Presidency. Many people were worried about it, but most of them just didn't believe it could happen.

You see, ADA had always been in quite serious conflict with the Senate Majority Leader because they felt that Lyndon Johnson was not "all out" and he was attempting to compromise and take what he could get, so to speak. ADA was clearly very antagonistic to Lyndon Johnson's candidacy in '60, nothing like that vis a vis Kennedy, although they were worried about his scope of experience and his youth. But it was nothing like the anti-Johnson position.

STEWART: Were there some who were reluctant to go all out for Humphrey for fear that he really couldn't make it and that supporting him might lead to killing off both of them?

NATHAN: I doubt it. There may have been some, but the ADA people, by and large, are ardent when they get ardent, you know, and they went all out for Humphrey. I think that they had grave doubts and worried about Johnson, but I just don't think they believed he'd make it. It was a worry but not a major factor--perhaps more to be alert about than to worry about.

STEWART: Do you recall any effort by Senator Johnson or his supporters to speak to you or anyone to soften the liberal opposition to his candidacy?

NATHAN: Not to Johnson's candidacy. I knew people who were working for him and who would argue that he was much better and more able and more liberal and less conservative and more principled than many people in ADA thought, but I think that by and large very little real effort was made on

Johnson's behalf among ADA. I think they wrote ADA support off rather completely and correctly.

STEWART: Did you have any direct contact with Senator Kennedy or his supporters, say in this late '59, early '60 period?

NATHAN: Yes, I did. I knew many of the people on his staff, and I'd see him from time to time, mainly not on political issues. I did see him during the primary race. There was a reception here in the District of Columbia where he spoke to the delegates, and he said he recognized the long loyalty and support to Humphrey. He spoke very strongly, positively on his own behalf, and not against Humphrey. This was at Polly Shackleton's house here, I think. She was then on the Democratic Central Committee and I was then a member of the Central Committee. Kennedy came and spoke to us. There were a number of people who talked to me about supporting Kennedy, but I made it quite clear that my first choice was Hubert.

STEWART: It's been said in Ralph de Toledano. . . . The terrible book [R.F.K. The Man Who Would Be President] he wrote about Robert Kennedy said that you were threatened with a loss of clients if you didn't support Kennedy in the primary period.

NATHAN: No, I don't believe that. I don't remember any such threats. Pleading yes; threats no.

STEWART: I'm just quoting him.

NATHAN: No. But there were people who came to see me. I remember Ralph Dungan talked to me many, many times about supporting Kennedy--and others. But I made it quite clear that I had known and worked with and respected Hubert and had affection for him, and that was it. I worked to raise money for Humphrey. As a matter of fact, I think one of the very first fund-raising parties for Hubert Humphrey was held in my office in 1959 when we had a big gathering. I recall the out-pouring of money; I think we raised fifteen thousand dollars late in '59 for Hubert's candidacy. And this was one of the very early starts, if not the start, for funds for him for the primaries.

STEWART: Exactly what role did you play in the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries?

NATHAN: I just contacted people I knew there and mainly tried to raise funds, but I did not go out to campaign in either state.

STEWART: Did the Humphrey campaign receive any direct financial aid from ADA?

NATHAN: Only insofar as it might have passed through in the form of identified contributions. You know, ADA, by and large, is not a fund raiser for candidates. In ADA it's sometimes very hard to distinguish the officers and the leaders from the organization. And I don't think the organization, as such, was a channel, although it might have been, but mostly it was the people in ADA who worked hard to raise the money for Humphrey and it went directly to his organization.

STEWART: Were you concerned about the extent of financial and other support that Humphrey was receiving from Johnson people?

NATHAN: No, I don't think there was much in ADA of any such help. As a matter of fact, I used to talk to Marvin Rosenberg, who, as you know, was Treasurer of ADA and a member of the top Humphrey organization team. We discussed money and I never had any indication that the Johnson backers were giving any significant help to Humphrey.

STEWART: When did Humphrey's financial problems really begin? Were they always as desperate as I guess they became in West Virginia?

NATHAN: Well, no. I don't think they were ever before quite as desperate as in West Virginia, but he was always in need, and this was one of the problems. Many of us were trying to raise money for Humphrey and trying to work with him and use him in the fund-raising process. He was trying to campaign, and I know he was often pulled away from active campaigning for fund-raising events. But he never had an abundance

of funds, and it was always, "We haven't got enough money; we haven't got enough money." Of course, some people raise funds as a continuing effort, always complained of shortages, but we knew that Humphrey's national efforts were costly. We always knew that there was just not enough. And Humphrey would not let commitments be made way beyond what he could expect to meet--as some people often do. They go into tremendous debt, but Humphrey was very worried about indebtedness.

STEWART: Did he wind up with much of a debt?

NATHAN: No. No. There wasn't a big indebtedness. I don't know how much it was, but the money was coming in and they were spending it as best they could, as much as they could. But they never went overboard in terms of spending a lot more. I don't think they ended with a big deficit.

STEWART: Were you in agreement with Humphrey's decision to get out of the race after West Virginia?

NATHAN: Oh, yes. No question about it. It was obviously foolish to stay in. If he had stayed in--I mean really aggressively--it would have been out of pique. It was hopeless, and I think that politically it doesn't make any sense to run after an impossibility. He was clearly through after West Virginia.

STEWART: What was your position then?

NATHAN: I moved over to Stevenson. I got into some strong fights with some of my associates in ADA who moved over to the Kennedy side. But I felt a great affection for Adlai Stevenson, and I had some doubts about Kennedy's winning at that stage. I had a feeling that Stevenson had the best chance in the election to win. He had his faults, and they came out later. I was uncertain as to who would be the very best candidate. I thought Adlai Stevenson would do very well and I liked him, and I stayed with him right to the end.

STEWART: You thought he could beat [Richard M.] Nixon, for example?



NATHAN: Yes. I thought he could beat Nixon. I still think that Stevenson just happened to come along at the wrong time. If it had been anybody other than [Dwight D.] Eisenhower I think Stevenson would have been President.

STEWART: Again, in this immediate pre-convention period, did you have any contacts with Senator Kennedy or his staff.

NATHAN: Oh, yes. I talked quite a bit to Ralph Dungan, especially in that period in the spring after West Virginia. Ralph and others used to argue with me that it was foolish to talk about Adlai; that Adlai wasn't going to make it; he wasn't going to make the race; he wouldn't win; and why stay with him; go with Kennedy. I wobbled a little at the time, but, maybe in retrospect foolishly, I stayed with Adlai.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in any of the attempts to communicate with Stevenson to try to make any kind of an arrangement with him?

NATHAN: Well, I didn't personally, but I talked with people who were working with him. I remember talking with [A.S. Mike] Mike Monroney and Mike's son [Michael Monroney] and others. It was a futile effort. We had hoped, of course, every day that Stevenson would come out openly and say, "Well, all right, make the run. I'm with you." But even in the last nights out there in Los Angeles, he'd come up to three or four hundred desperately sincere, loving people and he'd just make some comments, "How nice. Wonderful to be with you. Thank you. Good-bye." It was a most disappointing performance.

STEWART: Did you have much personal contact with Governor Stevenson at the time?

NATHAN: No. Not in the spring and early summer of 1960.

STEWART: To what extent did you feel that the ADA was responsible for the liberal platform of the 1960 Democratic National Convention?

NATHAN: Well, here again, I must say that it's sometimes awfully hard to distinguish between ADA and ADA people, but I think that the ADA group and many of its leaders had a very important role in that '60 Convention-- on the liberal platform, very important.

STEWART: To your knowledge did Stevenson ever seriously consider coming out for Kennedy?

NATHAN: Well, I heard that he might, and there was some talk that they might get together, but I don't know of any actual evidence that he really seriously was prepared to do it. I knew many people around him and people close to him, but there was no evidence that he was ready to make an arrangement and endorse Kennedy; he just seemed to be wobbling between himself and being quiet. I suspect if he had withdrawn he probably would have come out for Kennedy as of that date because Kennedy looked so likely to get the nomination.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in any attempts to get Humphrey to endorse Kennedy?

NATHAN: No. I did talk with Humphrey then, but I didn't try to play any part in his decision myself.

STEWART: What was his reaction?

NATHAN: I remember when he came and talked to our Delegation, he said, "You're released now. I'm not in it. You do anything you want. I'm not telling you one way or the other." And I think the Washington Delegation would have done anything he said. If he had said to the Washington Delegation, "You go for Kennedy," I think they would have without any question. But he was very firm in the fact that he was not asking them to take any position, "You're released; do what you



want." Period. I think there was some bitterness around him. I can't say it out of firsthand knowledge, but Muriel [Mrs. Hubert Humphrey] was quite unhappy about what had happened to him. Of course, I know ADA people got bitter about the West Virginia primary, especially about [Franklin D., Jr.] Frank Roosevelt's charge on the military picture and some of the other things that happened. But I think if Hubert had withdrawn for Kennedy the District Delegation would have gone along. And that was an ADA "general" delegation, it was not a complete ADA delegation.

STEWART: Were you at all optimistic at the Convention that Stevenson could hold off?

NATHAN: Well, I had some feeling that he could hold off Kennedy at the beginning, you see, because actually there was a real stalemate there. Johnson stayed in and I think that many of us who were for Stevenson thought that maybe this would result in a stalemate. Johnson had some votes, Stevenson quite a number, Kennedy a lot. But I must say that as we had meetings it was dwindling hope. I remember going to rallies each night and Stevenson was witty and charming and gracious, but you left with nothing but a letdown. Well, we'd start working that night and the next day, and then the next night suffer another letdown. And I must say hope diminished considerably as the days went on.

STEWART: You, I assume, had considerable personal contact with Stevenson at the Convention.

NATHAN: No. I saw him, I think, three or four times briefly and not usually alone but rather in groups. He was very pleasant and enjoyable, but that's it. I talked a lot to Monroney and others. There was always a hope that he'd give that signal to go, but he never did.

STEWART: In retrospect it's interesting, of course, that the Kennedy people had it wrapped up some time before the Convention and knew exactly where the votes were.

NATHAN: Yes, but I still think that if Adlai had made a move, I'm not sure that everyone that seemed committed to Kennedy would have stayed. You know people bounce. It's funny how in the last days they do bounce around. Look, I'm not saying that I think Stevenson would have been the candidate if he had come out and made a real fight for it, but I think it would have been a real battle. I'm not sure it would have just gone over that fast. I think Kennedy may have lost some of those who were committed to him. I know in the District delegation they wobbled.

STEWART: Did Kennedy's qualifications or impressions of his qualifications as a candidate improve by the time of the Convention . . .

NATHAN: Very much. I think that Kennedy--if you can forget the bitterness of West Virginia--I think that Kennedy's qualifications and image among liberals built up a great deal. Take for instance his strong reaction to conditions in West Virginia, the poverty, the privations there. This came through, and the liberals were really very much impressed.

STEWART: It's often been said that the greatest thing that could have happened were these two primaries because they really . . .

NATHAN: They exposed it.

STEWART: . . . set the stage for the position that he did take in the campaign.

NATHAN: They made him into a national figure from, what many people said, a "part-time senator"--a limited senator. Kennedy's image until then was that of the tremendously astute politician working for the nomination, not a great national leader. But I think that out of these primaries came a real national image and stature.

STEWART: Were you ever given any direct indication that Johnson would be chosen as vice presidential nominee?

NATHAN: Never, no. I must admit that I thought that was about as remote as the proverbial snow ball. I just thought it had absolutely no chance. The bitterness that was there, the lack of support among the liberals, the general lack of candidates' support, I don't think there was anybody in ADA or elsewhere who really believed this. As a matter of fact, at the Convention [Joseph L., Jr.] Joe Rauh and I were both delegates from the District of Columbia, and I remember some of the District delegates saying to me, "Do you think that if Kennedy is nominated--and this was in the last stage of that Kennedy-Stevenson battle--"there's a possibility that Kennedy might put Johnson on as Vice President?" I was for Stevenson, but I said to them, "Look, if that's the ground upon which you're going to vote for Stevenson against Kennedy, I think its foolish; I don't think there's a chance." It wasn't a real issue. Nobody believed it. Some of them talked of rumors, but nobody believed it.

STEWART: There was, and I think you were quoted and certainly Mr. Rauh was quoted as saying when the announcement was made, that this was a violation of an understanding that had been made.

NATHAN: Well, that's what Joe--a Kennedy supporter since West Virginia--said. I didn't say it because I didn't know there had been any understanding, at least not to my knowledge. Joe said that he thought he had it on very good authority that it wouldn't happen. And, of course, the good authority he had was [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy. But I never had any such understanding. I was just shocked; I just didn't believe it.

STEWART: How did you reconcile your opposition to Johnson with the contention by the Kennedy people that he was needed on the ticket to defeat Nixon?

NATHAN: Well, ADA is a responsible political organization, but I don't think ADA, given the way they felt about Lyndon Johnson in '60, would have gone along just for political expediency. I think that at that time ADA felt that the best you could do was to try to have Johnson bring the reactionary elements in the South along. On the whole, I think Johnson has done a tremendous job as President and I think that his contributions on the domestic scene particularly have been great. But as of 1960 I didn't think he was needed to win the South. To this day I don't believe that it was Johnson's place on the ticket that won the election. I think that nobody in ADA, even if they thought that maybe this would provide the marginal straw for the Democrats to win, would have gone along with it. They opposed Johnson vigorously and felt he would hurt, not help, the ticket.

STEWART: Did you have any direct contacts with Senator Kennedy or people on his staff at the Convention?

NATHAN: Oh, yes. I saw a lot of Ralph Dungan, especially, and many others--I don't remember--who were working around there. They kept talking to me, saying I ought to get on the bandwagon and not be foolish. I said, no, I was going to stay with Stevenson. Oh, yes, I talked to many of them--before and after Kennedy was nominated.

STEWART: Did you see Senator Kennedy directly?

NATHAN: No, I didn't see the Senator directly at the Convention.

STEWART: Were they fairly understanding about your position?

NATHAN: [Laughter] Perhaps understanding, but not very patient. After all, this was a big prize and they worked awfully hard for it. There was not deep bitterness, but I think I probably influenced some of the other District delegates to stay with Stevenson. I felt that way, and I stayed with it.



STEWART: What was your personal position on the question of the ADA endorsement of the Kennedy-Johnson ticket?

NATHAN: Oh, I was in favor of the endorsement, certainly as a Democrat I was in favor of it. With all the antagonism I had had against Johnson as the Majority Leader I would have endorsed Johnson against Nixon, or almost anybody. There was no question at all about endorsement. The bitterness about the ticket abated after a little while, not fully, but ADA then really went out and worked for the ticket, no question about it. And I was in favor of the endorsement.

STEWART: There was never any real danger that they wouldn't endorse? That August meeting was supposedly a very tumultuous . . .

NATHAN: Oh yes, it was tumultuous. I don't remember the votes. One of the problems in ADA is that often--and we've got the same thing on Viet Nam now--often our most articulate people or the most ardent are the ones who make the tumultuous manifestation but often don't carry many of the people with them in their degree of dissent. But I don't really believe there was any serious question in 1960 of ADA's endorsement. I think this was clear very soon after the Convention. And Joe and I were as unhappy about Johnson as anybody--although a lot of the delegates were terribly unhappy--but we worked for endorsement.

STEWART: How concerned were the Kennedy people with this endorsement by the ADA?

NATHAN: Oh, I think they wanted it quite a bit and were anxious to get it. But I think they were cocky about it coming through. I think they were confident they'd get it.

STEWART: Again, did you discuss this with them or with anyone before this August meeting?

NATHAN: I don't recall specific discussion. I'm sure we had discussions and relations with his staff, but I don't remember specifically with whom. I think they knew I was for the endorsement. Not during the first hours but after we got away from the Convention, perhaps a few days later, there was no question of my all-out support for the ticket.

STEWART: What did the few people who were not in favor of an endorsement, how did they reply to the charge that the only alternative, of course, would have been Nixon?

NATHAN: You mean how did this influence them?

STEWART: Of course, there were some people who, I assume, wanted the ADA just not to endorse anybody.

NATHAN: Anybody, yes. I think this was the only real opposition. Nobody was for Nixon endorsement.

STEWART: No, no, I know that. But, of course, the answer to that was, well, if you don't endorse Kennedy then this might at least help get Nixon elected.

NATHAN: Well, I think this was an argument. I really must say that if [Nelson A.] Rockefeller had been the Republican candidate in '60 it's entirely possible ADA would not have endorsed anyone.

STEWART: Really?

NATHAN: It's possible. I wouldn't say it would have happened, but I think it's possible. But with the Nixon situation, I don't think there was any question after the Convention. Certainly after Nixon's nomination it was pretty clear that we would stick together.



STEWART: James MacGregor Burns once made an interesting quote that he thought many liberals opposed Kennedy because he lacked the tragic quality that many liberals liked, he was just too successful. His liberalism was without tear, I think Burns said. Could you comment on that?

NATHAN: Well, I guess there is something to that. Inherently the liberals are for an underdog. The liberals are emotional, and the liberals are excitable. One of the image pictures I'm sure that hurt Kennedy in '58, '59 and '60, was his coldness. He smiled, he was charming, but there was no outgoing affection, or warmth, or even indignation. He was master of what he was saying and he could say it vigorously, but there wasn't the passion that Hubert put into it. When Hubert said something--even to this day--you sort of feel it comes right from the heart, not from the head. Kennedy spoke with strength and vigor, but I think this lack of sentiment during his candidacy was an element in the lack of ardent liberal support.

STEWART: What contact, if any, did you have with Senator Kennedy or Robert Kennedy during the campaign?

NATHAN: I didn't have any, actually, during the campaign. I met with the people around them. I made some speeches and I wrote some materials, but had no direct contact with either Robert or Jack. I've never had much contact with Robert Kennedy, I know him just in passing. But with fellows like Dungan and Arthur Schlesinger and with others active in the campaign, I did have contacts. And ADA worked hard, and I was working more in ADA than anywhere else.

STEWART: Do you think ADA made a significant contribution to the Kennedy election campaign?

NATHAN: I think it did. Of course, ADA doesn't have large numbers of members, but I do believe that there are hundreds of thousands of Americans of liberal persuasion who are influenced by ADA's endorsement, or ADA's positions, or ADA's attitudes on candidates and issues. From that point of view, I think ADA was quite helpful in the Kennedy-Johnson campaign.

- STEWART: There was, of course, a big problem in trying to rouse some Stevenson people who sulked in Southern California and elsewhere.
- NATHAN: Yes, that's true, they sulked. A lot of the Stevenson people sulked for quite a while. But for those who were wobbly, I think the fact that ADA moved ardently into the campaign proved to be a positive element.
- STEWART: Did you see this continual warming of liberals toward Kennedy as the campaign processed?
- NATHAN: Yes, no question about it, as the campaign progressed. ADA, with all her emotion and sentiment, also has a very deep feeling for intellect. The way Kennedy handled Nixon, the way Kennedy took on issues, the quality of his statements, and the beauty of his expressions, I think made them forget Stevenson a great deal. There's no doubt he conducted an excellent campaign on issues. His spirit, his determination, his vigor, and his endless energy--all these, I think, warmed up ADA people and all the liberals during the campaign.
- STEWART: Moving on to the transition, you were involved in one of the task forces, weren't you, on foreign economic problems?
- NATHAN: That's correct.
- STEWART: Generally, do you recall any major disputes among the people on that task force over the reports that they did prepare?
- NATHAN: No. There were questions about how large our national effort might be, and there was concern about Kennedy's rather conservative fiscal policy and how much money he might want to request from Congress, but I don't think there was any major dispute on the fundamental objectives of America's leadership in economic assistance, in economic development.

STEWART: Did you consider this whole task force effort a worthwhile thing?

NATHAN: Yes, I think it was an exceedingly imaginative undertaking of trying to get people with experience and ability to focus on important issues. I think it was useful from two points of view: First, I think it helped bring to Kennedy's side many of the intellectuals who had been somewhat on the fringe; and secondly, I think it was exceedingly useful in bringing clarification and meaningfulness to issues. I think it was a very useful activity from the President's point of view.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in any of the appointments for the Kennedy Administration?

NATHAN: Not directly. ADA pushed some candidates for jobs and talked to senators and so forth, but I don't think that I had any part in pushing a series of names. I recall being asked about individuals from time to time. They had a recruiting task force, of sorts, and I used to send in names of businessmen and academic people and intellectuals. But I was never on anybody's particular bandwagon trying to make someone a Cabinet officer or for any activity of that nature. But I used to receive inquiries from the White House concerning various individuals' talents and capabilities. For instance, I've always had tremendous respect for Orville Freeman and I may have talked to people about him, or about Arthur Goldberg, with whom I had worked and was very close. But I wouldn't have had any positive role in the placement of anyone nor, frankly, do I think ADA as an organization had. I do not think ADA as an organization had any positive part in many appointments.

STEWART: Certainly not as far as Stevenson's Secretary of State job was concerned?

NATHAN: I talked to people about Stevenson as Secretary of State, and I would have been highly in favor of it. I think he would have been a great Secretary; I think he was a great Ambassador to the U.N. But I don't think we ever made a major effort on behalf of anyone. I really don't

recall the ADA organization taking a position.

STEWART: In February of 1961 you attended a meeting at the White House with a number of other ADA people, do you recall that?

NATHAN: Yes, there were four of us.

NATHAN: Joe Rauh, Marvin Rosenberg, Sam Beer and myself.

STEWART: What do you recall about that meeting?

NATHAN: Well, we went in to see the President about ADA's platform and policies. There are two things that stand out in my mind. One is the fact that the President didn't want ADA to push him very hard on civil rights. He felt that this was an issue that needed some calm, unemotional and unpressured attention. He was clear in saying he would appreciate ADA not pushing him too hard on it; he was already having his civil rights problems on the Hill.

On economic issues, he asked me how I felt about the economy. I told him I thought the Employment Act of '46 was a very important one to pursue and that we could have full employment and prosperity in the United States. But I remember saying to him that I thought that if he wanted full employment during his eight years in the White House, he had better resign himself to the fact that the national debt would probably go up by fifty billion dollars or more in those eight years. I think this was a little bit of a shock to him. I can't say that he paled, but he drew back a little. I talked to him about some of the economic problems of relating savings and investments to assure full employment; about how our income is distributed; that if we were going to have sustained prosperity it meant attracting more investment, resulting in big profits; and unless you wanted to hit profits hard, you are going to have more savings than will be readily invested; if that comes about, then you'd have to have government deficits to enjoy full employment. I told him I didn't think this was a serious problem. I said the national debt had gone down in relation to our gross national product, and the level of our debt really was not a problem. Debt service charges were dropping in relation to our national income, and it'd be a lot



better to have deficits than unemployment. I think he agreed with all this in principle, but I think he was disturbed by the concept of continuing deficits. Basically, Kennedy was fairly traditional in his orientation on fiscal policy. I think that Walter Heller did a phenomenal job with Kennedy.

STEWART: I was going to say he certainly changed.

NATHAN: Oh, tremendously. Heller deserves more credit, I think, than almost anybody has given him for what he did in economic articulation (I don't like to use the word education), in the clarification of economic issues with the President, The Cabinet and the country.

STEWART: Is there anything else about this meeting that you recall?

NATHAN: Well, it was very friendly. I do recall that the President said he was being subjected mostly to conservative pressures and that he welcomed liberal pressures. In effect he said, "Come on, fight and give me support, because I will have much more pressure on me, Congressional, business, and so forth, from the conservative side. I need labor and the liberals to push and complain, press and propose, because otherwise the pressures will all be from the conservatives and they're very strong and articulate. So I welcome pressure from ADA and other liberals." But he did not want pressure on civil rights. He said very firmly that he welcomed the pressure of the liberals and wanted it on economic matters, that it would be useful, but on civil rights he thought greater pressure would aggravate the nation's problems.

STEWART: Did you have any other meetings with the President during the three years of his Administration?

NATHAN: Yes, occasionally, with groups. I am a Trustee of the Committee for Economic Development, and he met with us. I was a member of the National Commission on Money and Credit. When our report on money and credit was released, we had a meeting with the President. He was very excited about the report and asked me some questions during the meeting. But I was never called in frequently as an advisor. I

used to see Walter Heller frequently and many of the Cabinet officers--Arthur Goldberg and Orville Freeman and others--but I was not in the White House frequently with the President.

**STEWART:** Were you generally disappointed with the apparent caution of the Kennedy Administration's powers in its relations with Congress at the time?

**NATHAN:** Yes. I said quite strongly and often that I thought the President would be better off to fight Congress more and take the leadership, and even a beating, than to be cautious with them. I felt that politically he would be better off, and the country would be better, if he exerted all-out tough pressures on the Congress, tougher than he did. I think probably, of all the weaknesses in the Kennedy Administration, that was probably the one point that was greatest, that Kennedy hesitated to take on the Congress. This, of course, goes back to the fact that when he was a Senator he wasn't really one of the "top club" men. Even Humphrey, with all his liberalism, was accepted and liked more than was Jack Kennedy. Humphrey mingled with them; he was part of the family. But Kennedy as a Senator never really was in the closed circle. I think the President was not certain how to deal with them, because he was afraid if he hit them hard they would react angrily and would not cooperate. So he pushed to the extent he felt he could without encountering serious trouble. I'd call it a weakness.

**STEWART:** Were there any other aspects of the Administration's economic program that you seriously disagreed with?

**NATHAN:** I thought they delayed too long deciding on and requesting the tax cut. I thought they should have gone in for a tax cut in '62. Kennedy had doubts about it, he was worried about it, but I think he finally was sold in early '63, and it was enacted in '64. I think that was my major disagreement. But on many other economic issues he was very good. I felt that perhaps he didn't go far enough on foreign aid, which I consider one of the gravest problems this country and the world faces. But on the whole I think his economic policies were excellent and his advisers were tops.



STEWART: Were you in general agreement with the reorganization of the foreign assistance program and establishment of AID [Agency for International Development]?

NATHAN: Yes. I thought the reorganization made sense. I was a little worried about the limited degree of independence the organization might have in the State Department but, on the whole, I thought that it was a useful change. I think that bringing David Bell out of the Budget Bureau was a great sacrifice, for the President and for Bell, but a very good move.

STEWART: There were two people before Bell, Fowler Hamilton and [Henry Richardson] Labouisse.

NATHAN: Yes. There was a very difficult period involved. Labouisse, I think, wanted to reorganize the agency before taking any action, and this killed him. I think Labouisse made the mistake of waiting too long. If he had taken hold and made some decisions and then reorganized, he would have done well. But he didn't do anything for months while the reorganization was pending.

I sat on a task force, by the way, for Fowler Hamilton's weeding out of personnel. And we did weed some out. I think Fowler Hamilton made a real effort, but got little support. I think President Kennedy was so involved in domestic issues that he did not give foreign aid the attention it should have had. But I think his appointment of Dave Bell was very good.

STEWART: Do you recall, in fact, seeing any emphasis in the move away from cold war thinking and into more developmental thinking as far as the foreign assistance program was concerned?

NATHAN: Yes, I think Kennedy moved away from emphasis on military aid, toward economic aid. I think that occurred during the Kennedy period. I think Kennedy's feeling that there was room for diversity in the world picture was very important. I think one of Kennedy's great contributions was his idea of foreign aid without ties. During the Kennedy period we got away from the feeling on aid that if

you're not a friend, then you're an enemy and, therefore, we will not help. This was very useful. It was helpful in thawing the cold war.

STEWART: Were you involved in the problem he had in the steel price conflict?

NATHAN: Not really. I followed it very closely and talked with a lot of people, but I didn't get directly involved in it. We had done a lot of work for the steelworkers' union over the years, and I had been fighting the steel industry on prices and inflation, but I wasn't directly involved in that battle.

STEWART: What impact do you think the Kennedy Administration had on the ADA and liberal cause, in general, in this country, if any?

NATHAN: Well, I think it had a very positive impact in the sense that the Kennedy Administration made it respectable to be intelligent, to be an intellectual. With all the affection I have for [Harry S] Truman, there's no doubt that at the end of the Roosevelt period and during the Truman regime, Washington provided a rather dry, arid climate for intellectuals. The Eisenhower Administration just about destroyed the intellectuals in the government. If you had a high IQ, the Eisenhower team thought something was wrong with you, and ADA was full of such persons. A respect for intellectuals came out of the Kennedy Administration, and it helped the liberal cause. The fact that a lot of ADA and former ADA people were in the Administration was gratifying to ADA, and on the whole it helped ADA.

On the other hand, it is often difficult for a militant liberal organization like ADA to work in full harmony with a liberal regime, because some issues are taken from such an organization. When ADA is way out in front, say, ten years ahead on issues, it can like what the Administration is doing for the next year, but it wants to push the Administration toward that ten-years-in-the-future goal. But you can't push them so hard as to appear to be against them, and this posed a problem. But the end effect was positive for ADA.

STEWART: Did--I'm not sure of my facts here--but did in fact the ADA continue to decline in membership? It has in the last . . .

NATHAN: Well, not really. It never had a large membership. I suspect it declined in the 1960's only fractionally. It is picking up a little again, by the way.

STEWART: Oh, is it?

NATHAN: In the last year or so with their anti-Viet Nam position, and with [John Kenneth] Ken Galbraith as chairman, I think ADA's membership is picking up. New chapters are being formed. The big problem is they are not able to get many young people, or black people, and this, of course, reflects in part the complacency that seemed to be permeating the country for a considerable period of years. The young people just weren't getting into anything. That has changed.

STEWART: What other involvements, if any, did you have in the Kennedy Administration?

NATHAN: There are two or three incidents I might go back to. One I thought was rather amusing about Kennedy. When he was entertaining the King of Afghanistan, just before the assassination, about two months before, I was invited to the White House dinner because we were economic advisors to Afghanistan. When my wife and I, passed the President in the receiving line, he introduced me to the King, whom I'd met. Then he reached over and said to me, so the King could hear, "When are you going to start advising us?" In essence he was saying to the King, "You've got a good advisor," which I thought was very nice of him and helpful.

But there's one incident which I talked about with ADA people, and I never said anything public about it because I can't identify the person. At the Convention in 1960, when Lyndon Johnson was nominated, Joe Rauh got on the floor and waved his arms and said, "Jack, if you can hear my voice, please don't do it. You're going back on us." Then we had a caucus of the District of Columbia Delegates and we decided that we were going to nominate Orville Freeman for Vice President and that we were not going to vote for Johnson. Michigan, by the way, was going along with us. Well, Orville was on the platform when we made this decision. We came out of our caucus and I talked on television about our views, and I said that the District of Columbia Delegation was going to vote against Lyndon Johnson and we wanted to vote for Orville Freeman in protest. Orville heard about this, and he came down--I saw him--and he said, "My gosh, please lay off. You know I'm grateful, but it is out of the question." So we went back into caucus. But before we went back into caucus, I was called to a phone. It was a long distance call for me, I'd been on the air, and a woman in Dallas--really, this is strange--said, "Fight him, fight it. Don't let Johnson be nominated, because Kennedy will be killed and Johnson will be President." This was the strangest thing that happened, right on the floor. I was called on the phone in one of the rooms. I don't know how they reached me in the District Delegation meeting. And this woman said she was from Dallas, and she urged--it was a long distance call--us to keep up the fight against Johnson because Kennedy will be killed, or die, and Johnson will be the President. This was strange and odd, especially in retrospect, coming from Dallas.

But anyhow, we went back into caucus, and then we decided that we were going to announce--since we had no candidate, and after all it was an embarrassment to anybody we nominated, we decided we were going to go onto the floor and say that such and such a number of our delegates were for Johnson, and another number was against him, thus registering a protest. And [W.] John Kenney who was chairman of the District of Columbia Delegation, said he wouldn't make such an announcement, so I was elected to be the spokesman for the District of Columbia Delegation. But then they cut off the vote before it got to us. It's an interesting story.



I used to see Walter Heller a great deal. I worked very closely with Arthur Goldberg on many matters in labor. I've always worked with him since he was attorney for the AFL-CIO and the Steelworkers Union. But I'd never exerted any political efforts within the Kennedy Administration for specific appointments. I always had a good relationship with Ralph Dungan, [Myer] Mike Feldman and other fellows at the White House. I used to go over there for lunch with the staff. But I don't think I was ever fully forgiven for not switching behind Kennedy at the '60 Convention. But then I never felt any sense of personal bitterness or vindictiveness toward me. It was just that I don't think I was forgiven, and that was about it. But when I would see the President, he always said, "Hello, Bob. How nice to see you." So it was a warm, pleasant relationship. But I was never approached to take an appointment. I was never asked to do any specific assignments, except by many of the Cabinet people and others I'd worked for. But I do think that I was sort of frozen out, and it didn't bother me particularly. I think Kennedy ended up as a really great President.

STEWART:       Okay, that's about all the questions I have.

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Robert R. Nathan– JFK #1  
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