

**Orville L. Freeman Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 7/22/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Orville L. Freeman  
**Interviewer:** Charles T. Morrissey  
**Date of Interview:** July 22, 1964  
**Place of Interview:** Washington, D.C.  
**Length:** 16 pages

**Biographical Note**

Orville L. Freeman, Governor of Minnesota (1954-1961), U.S. Secretary of Agriculture (1961-1969), and builder of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, discusses Hubert H. Humphrey's campaign against John F. Kennedy for the presidential nomination, concerns the public had with Kennedy's voting on farm issues as a senator, and also his Catholicism and later joining the Kennedy administration, among other issues.

**Access**

Open.

**Usage Restrictions**

According to the deed of gift signed September 18, 1972, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Transcript of Oral History Interview**

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

**Suggested Citation**

Orville L. Freeman, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, July 22, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

of Orville L. Freeman

to the

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

I, Orville L. Freeman, of New York, New York, do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at Washington, D.C. on July 22, 1964 and December 15, 1964 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The interview is to be opened immediately to general research.
2. Researchers who have access to the transcript of the interview may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only. Researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote from the tape.
3. I hereby assign literary property rights in this interview to the United States Government.
4. Copies of the interview transcript may be provided upon request to any researcher.
5. Copies of the interview may, upon request, be deposited in other institutions.
6. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Orville L. Freeman

Sept. 9, 1972  
Date

James B. Rood  
Archivist of the United States

9-18-72  
Date

ORVILLE E. FREEMAN – JFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Democratic National Convention 1956
2	Hubert H. Humphrey's candidacy
4	Issues in the Humphrey campaign
6, 12	The religious issue in Kennedy's campaign
8	Freeman's support for Kennedy's nomination
9, 11	Personal interest in vice presidential nomination
15	Joining the Kennedy administration as Secretary of Agriculture

Oral History Interview

with

ORVILLE L. FREEMAN

July 22, 1964  
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Could you tell us when you first met John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

FREEMAN: I'm not really sure when I first met John Kennedy. I had known of him slightly for some time. My best recollection was meeting him on the floor of the Senate on one occasion with Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey]. I had access to the floor because I was a governor. I met him casually and didn't give it much thought one way or another. He was another senator, a young fellow from the East of my own age when I had read a little about, and I wasn't particularly impressed one way or the other.

MORRISSEY: Was this in the early 1950's?

FREEMAN: I think it was probably sometime around 1955, or 1956, shortly after I was first elected governor of Minnesota.

MORRISSEY: Were you present at the Democratic National Convention in 1956 when he was propelled, quite suddenly, as a possible vice presidential candidate?

FREEMAN: Yes. I was present, and it was the first time when I had seen him in action. I thought he made a very creditable nomination speech for Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]. I ended up at that convention vigorously opposing his bid for the vice presidential nomination for some very practical political reasons. His farm voting record at that time, his public statement in connection with agriculture, were such that I felt that his addition to the ticket would have meant, without any doubt, the loss of the Midwest farm states.

[-1-]

I had been involved in a very bitter, very difficult primary contest in Minnesota between Kefauver [Carey Estes Kefauver] and Stevenson and did not, at the time, have very friendly feelings toward Kefauver. As a matter of fact, I was not even a delegate to this convention because Senator Kefauver had gotten together a list of delegates from Minnesota, most of whom had not even been active in the Democratic party or politics, some of whom were not the caliber of people we like to see representing the state of Minnesota, and the then governor was not a delegate because I had vigorously supported Stevenson. So I had not anticipated that I would be in a position where I would be supporting Kefauver for the vice presidential nominee, although I had a high regard for Kefauver in my respects. As it turned out that convention, I ended up going on the floor and working quite vigorously in that very key and critical vote when Kefauver barely nosed out Kennedy for the vice presidential nomination.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me about the development of Hubert Humphrey's candidacy and your involvement in it?

FREEMAN: This was a matter that developed rather slowly. This question is one that we began to discuss; I don't have it clearly in mind, but it came up from time to time in discussions with Senator Humphrey after the '56 election. The clearest recollection that I have is an occasion when he and his wife and my wife and I were sitting around the fireplace at our home in Minneapolis. We were discussing the possibilities of this and who the possible candidates were, one of whom, at that point, clearly was Senator Kennedy. Senator Humphrey mentioned the fact that Senator Kennedy had very extensive resources and was already building quite an organization for this effort, one that would be very difficult to beat. He also indicated that there had been some tentative discussions or at least approaches from Senator Kennedy, who thought that he, Humphrey, might be a good running mate as vice presidential candidate.

At that time I asked him, after some discussion on this, how he felt in terms of the relationship: whether he felt that Senator Kennedy was a man that he would follow, one that he felt was, in a sense, superior—that's not quite the right word—one that would look up to and feel was more qualified, or less. His response was the he felt he was certainly not more qualified. On the basis of respective abilities and evaluations, he thought he could make a better president than Kennedy.

I said that if he felt that way there was no reason why he ought not to take a run at that, and that we would, of course, protect his position in Minnesota in connection with

whatever development might be, in an effort to run which might not succeed. Of course, the Minnesota political organization would do everything we could, as I would personally as governor of the state, to help him if he decided that was what he wanted to do.

[-2-]

This then drifted along. This was, I think, quite some time before the active political season. I don't recall really, sharply, when he finally made his decision. As a matter of fact, there is in this office where we're now recording a picture which shows myself on the telephone, together with the present governor of Minnesota, the then lieutenant governor, with a picture of Senator Humphrey in a telephone conversation in which he was announcing, in Washington, that he would be a candidate and that I would be the chairman of the volunteer committee in that effort. I was receiving that call. This was a part of the general publicity of launching. The rest of the process of that decision-making I don't remember very clearly because I was pretty deeply involved in the problem of administrating the state of Minnesota, and the details of this at that time I wasn't completely involved in.

MORRISSEY:           Teddy White [Theodore H. White], in his book, refers to a meeting in Duluth in July, 1959, at the time of the dedication of the Saint Lawrence Seaway in which yourself and Mr. McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy], Senator Humphrey and some others, as I understand it, decided that they would begin the real active campaign for the nomination.

FREEMAN:           Well, this could be. This could be. I have no clear recollection of that. I was there at that dedication and was involved in it as governor of the state. There could have been discussion about it, and White probably looked into it. This was something that just kind of evolved like Topsy, but I have no sharp or clear recollection of there being a formal meeting at which the people he named got together and decided this is it, let's go. And I doubt if any such meeting was held.

MORRISSEY:           What was the outlook in, let's say, 1958, 1959, and early 1960 for the success of the Humphrey candidacy?

FREEMAN:           This kind of a thing is pretty difficult to sink your teeth into and have anything very definitive. Again, the outlook was one which was pretty well shaped by Humphrey's own decisions. We were perfectly prepared to follow his lead in it. I felt that he might have a fair prospect. He was well known. He had had a good deal of exposure to the Democratic party organizations around the country, having spoken very, very frequently. He had acquired, generally, a good relationship in the Senate. On the other hand, for some reason he had not projected—I don't particularly like the word "image"—but generally, the kind of image that I felt that his own merit, ability and record would call for.

I recall at the Governors' Conference in Florida meeting with a group of the press who said to me that they had ridiculed Humphrey when he first came to the Senate but had come to feel that he was perhaps the

best informed, certainly the most articulate, in many ways the most effective member of the Senate. But people outside and the things that were written kind of considered him as being kind of a blabbermouth and speaking too much and too long and all things to all people and generally a kind of a self-deprecating sort of picture. They asked me why and I asked them why. And really we could never decide why. Because of this fact, I had, in my own mind, some reservations. Those reservations came to the front subsequently because it was a very poor campaign; poorly handled, poorly organized, and poorly administered. It wasn't a good campaign at all. Humphrey simply didn't do a good job of it.

MORRISSEY:            Could you elaborate on that last comment?

FREEMAN:            Well, it just wasn't well organized. Basically, the kind of staffing and the kind of thorough, meticulous organization which was evidenced in every step of the way where Senator Kennedy was concerned was simply lacking. This was Humphrey's personality operation. This has been the history, generally speaking, of the Humphrey political efforts in Minnesota. But in a national campaign the kind of organization which this state had was just simply lacking. Whether it was Wisconsin or whether it was West Virginia, or whether it was the rest of it, this was just a very frustrating kind of thing which primarily revolved about the basic lack of organization that stemmed from the candidate himself.

MORRISSEY:            White, and others of course, emphasized the obvious lack of money.

FREEMAN:            This was not, I think, as important a factor as White makes it out, at least in Wisconsin. To a lesser extent in West Virginia where it began to hurt, but in Wisconsin I think that Humphrey probably spent as much money as Kennedy. He just didn't spend it as well. It just wasn't well organized. We tried to organize it, and we should have been able to do a much better job from Minnesota, which was adjacent, from knowing many people. But we didn't do a good job. We didn't run a good campaign, in part, because Humphrey himself was involved in legislation in the Senate and not quite able to break and to give this the kind of attention it needed—plus the fact that he just wasn't that well organized personally in the campaign. It wasn't a good campaign. It was like all three campaigns have been in Minnesota that are Humphrey and he is all over the place like a buzz saw. But in terms of a carefully planned, systematic kind of campaign, skillfully using people, this was not absent, but he did not have the kind of personnel who were brought together and developed into a cohesive unit—a cohesive unit that Kennedy had from the first.

I remember very well when the present mayor of Minneapolis, who was then my commissioner of administration as governor, served on a couple



of national boards with Sargent Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.] and it came to Senator Kennedy's attention that this was an exceptionally able person. He was then invited, expenses paid, to go down to Chicago to hear Senator Kennedy address the Chamber of Commerce. He came to me about this, and he went down, paying his own expenses at my insistence. Then he was entertained as a part of a general campaign group and was subsequently offered employment to join this movement. I think this was done systematically and that some outstandingly able people were brought in a variety of ways. So this was a carefully and methodically built campaign organization. There was nothing approximating that in the Humphrey organization. It was all more or less helter-skelter, here today and gone tomorrow.

MORRISSEY: Were you surprised by the outcome of the Wisconsin primary?

FREEMAN: No, it came about as I thought it would. Initially I thought that we would do much better in Wisconsin because Humphrey was well-known in Wisconsin and I'd been in Wisconsin a good deal. When the Kennedy campaign went forward they were doing a highly creditable job and it was clear that we were not going to have the kind of overwhelming success we had thought initially. So, I was not surprised. I had hoped we might do some better, but that was pretty much of a standoff.

I was surprised at the magnitude of the Kennedy victory in West Virginia. I thought I could see this coming. I did some campaigning in West Virginia. West Virginia was the kind of territory that should have been really made for Humphrey. Some of us had urged that he not go in, that he really didn't have the resources. In West Virginia this is true, that resources were highly limited. But, in that depressed area, the miners were the kind of people that Humphrey could appeal to very strongly. And I think that the campaign that the Kennedys put on in West Virginia was a classic. Humphrey started in West Virginia far ahead, and they not only took it away from him, they overwhelmed him. I think it was one of the most effective political jobs I've ever seen.

MORRISSEY: Was this because of superior organization?

FREEMAN: I think it was because of superior organization; I think he turned the religious issue around in West Virginia, very cleverly, very effectively, and very dramatically. And then it was the same general pattern of a great deal of personal attraction that didn't completely lend itself to definition but that they succeeded in projecting out. Where the Humphrey organization was concerned, it was the same complete confusion and disorganization.

[-5-]

MORRISSEY: Going back to the decision by Humphrey to enter the West Virginia primary, just how much of an issue was that in the Humphrey camp at that time?

FREEMAN: It was not any real issue. We stayed over, as I recall. The next morning, or even later that night when the returns were in, we discussed this whole question. I don't recall very vividly any sharp recommendation. I tried to bring the group together and get some kind of rational presentation of what the alternatives were and what the resources were. My best recollection is that there was a general feeling of some discouragement, the recognition that it would be extremely difficult to raise money, and that Humphrey himself was tired, and that this would be very difficult and, in all probability, it would be better not to go on. I think Humphrey himself made that decision, made it rather sharply and made it rather quickly, and said well, some hell or high water, he was going to go into West Virginia.

MORRISSEY: Was he bothered because the vote in Wisconsin followed religious lines somewhat?

FREEMAN: I don't recall any particular discussion about that. This was a political factor. It did vary strongly, and in areas which in terms of liberal voting records—in Milwaukee, for example—which should have voted more strongly for Humphrey than it voted for Kennedy; this was a concern. I think that the prime consideration in his mind was that West Virginians were the kind of people to whom he would have normal appeal, that his record would have a normal appeal. Also, as far as the religious thing was concerned, that there certainly was not the Catholic background to mobilize—that the contrary was the case. So he just wasn't ready to quit yet.

MORRISSEY: Between the end of the West Virginia primary and the beginning of the convention in Los Angeles, how did you view the situation generally?

FREEMAN: Well, this was an interesting period for me because I called Humphrey the night of the West Virginia returns and he said very clearly that that was that. It was then clear that a decision would have to be made as to whom Minnesota ought to support. I felt, as I've always felt, that if you hold a responsible position you've got some responsibility to provide some leadership and tell people what to do, or at least make up your mind what you ought to do; to lead, rather than to follow. So with the respective candidate around, the question was which one out it to be.

This was a bit sensitive and difficult because, in the first place, the Minnesota delegation had hardly been selected with the idea in mind of supporting John Kennedy. Not that it was elected through the process of conventions which we follow. It was, but they were people who were strongly pledged and some emotionally involved with Humphrey. In some

[-6-]

instances—and this was not purposeful; it just happened that way—in some instances there were some of them that had some pretty strong feelings along religious lines. So we did not, at that point, have a delegation that was starting very sympathetic to Kennedy.

Also, some of the West Virginia tactics had cut pretty deeply, especially Franklin Roosevelt's [Franklin D. Roosevelt] attack on Humphrey as being a draft dodger. This was

absolutely unforgiveable. Humphrey was very hurt about it and I was very furious about it and in West Virginia made no bones about saying that I thought this guy was about the biggest jerk that had ever come across the pike. The Kennedy camp, at that point never did disassociate themselves from this thing. They played a little politics with this one. I don't know whether it had any effects, but I did think it was a very incredible performance. As a matter of fact, in all my observations of both campaigning and serving under President Kennedy I would say that this was about the low point, in any judgment, of his activities. I never did discuss it with him so this may not be completely fair. But in any event, this was the residue of the feeling in Minnesota so that it was anything but pro-Kennedy. Of course, Humphrey himself was not an out-and-out bitter person who carries grudges.

The question then was what we ought to do, and when we looked over the field of potential candidates, the one who seemed much more in accord with our general philosophy was clearly Senator Kennedy. I then began to do some concentrated checking as to what his basic philosophy was, and there were a number of things in his voting record that concerned me. Up to this point I had not been particularly impressed with him, one way or another. I thought that he had made a creditable performance at Chicago in the '56 convention but nothing to get particularly excited about. I'd shared the speaking platform with him three or four times and had thought he was a rather inferior speaker and did not make a particularly good presentation. I remember speaking at an International Assistance Cooperative meeting here where he spoke on India. We shared the platform and had some pleasant visits, but I didn't think he made a very good presentation. He'd been out to Minnesota, I think probably in 1959, and had spoken at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner and generally had done rather poorly. He hadn't gotten much of a response. He hadn't made a very good speech. I'd been concerned about what was reported and what had been criticized as a rather weak position on McCarthyism. I was quite concerned about his position on agriculture on which he voted strictly the eastern viewpoint, although this had begun to shape and change after 1956.

On the other hand, as the campaign went forward, I'd come to feel some admiration for him, but I had by no means any great enthusiasm at this point. The one who influenced me on this was—but was probably a little inconclusive on it—Governor Williams [Gerard Mennen Williams] with whom I discussed this at great length. He spoke very, very warmly,

[ -7 - ]

and some of the doubts in terms of his principles and the kind of program that he would enunciate and carry forward, both nationally and internationally, that I'd been concerned about were pretty well reassured in talking with Governor Williams, for whom I had a great regard. This was true also on the civil rights issue.

After talking, especially with him and generally, I came to the conclusion that there was only one person and that Kennedy ought to be the nominee, and that I was going to support him. This was a decision that I made individually, and then went on from there to seek to implement that decision, actively, in the way of trying to shape up the Minnesota delegation.

MORRISSEY: Did you think at that time about supporting Adlai Stevenson?

FREEMAN: No, I didn't think at that time about supporting Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson had said dogmatically that he was not a candidate. I didn't think he could get elected. I didn't think he was in this show at all.

I'd gone down, incidentally, and tried to get Stevenson to support Humphrey. My wife and I had gone down to Libertyville and spent a weekend with him. But he was unwilling to take any position on this and I'd felt that in terms of a candidate for president, Stevenson wasn't a realistic choice.

MORRISSEY: What prompted you to give the nominating speech for Senator Kennedy?

FREEMAN: Because he asked me to. By this time, of course, I was strongly in support and the more exposure I had had with him and to him, the more I'd been impressed. He'd asked me to come over and talk to him. I'd been mentioned as one of those who might be a vice presidential nominee. We discussed the question of the Minnesota delegation and he said to me then that he couldn't understand why the Minnesota delegation was not for him because, he said, we were his kind of people and believed in the same kind of things in terms of economic and social and political programs. He said that the big city machines were not really for him. They were for him because they had to be, because he had jumped over them and gotten those votes they had to line up, although they didn't want him. But on the basis of philosophy and program we ought to be for him. I explained to him that I thought the Minnesota delegation would be all right. At the right time they would take a position. It was then, just out of a clear blue sky, that he just asked me if I'd nominate him, that he would be the logical one, to which I heartily agreed. Then, if that should happen, he said that he would like to have me give one of his seconding speeches.

[-8-]

I didn't tell him then I would or wouldn't. He made one further reservation that came out later and that would be provided Humphrey didn't nominate Stevenson. This was a pretty complicated situation by now.

Also, the question of the vice presidential thing came up. I said to him that my position in the Minnesota delegation was somewhat weakened by this discussion because there were those who said, quite strongly and emotionally, that the only reason that I was for Kennedy was that I wanted to be a candidate for vice president and that this was a pretty cold, calculating operation, this Kennedy machine, and that I was being led up the mountain because of my own ambition. This put me in a very difficult position because Senator McCarthy was outspokenly anti-Kennedy, and Humphrey had agreed with me that Kennedy ought to be the presidential candidate. As a matter of fact, he had come to me and said that Kennedy ought to be the candidate for president and I ought to be the vice presidential candidate. And he had also said to me that I had done my best at considerable sacrifice on the presidential thing and now he was going to be my campaign manager and this was the logical thing; that Kennedy should have someone from the Midwest—he had a good Midwest vote—and that he, Humphrey, was going to see to it that things were done along this line.

Well, this didn't work out because he subsequently came back and reversed that position and became, as a practical matter, a very real prospect for a vice presidential nomination himself. But he never cleared the air with me on that one. It was one of those things that happen in politics. But in any event, I was in a very difficult and embarrassing position and one that weakened because Humphrey was lukewarm, although he had stated quite clearly that he was in support of Kennedy. I had gone forward on that basis. McCarthy had said nothing, but it was well-known that he was anti-Kennedy. I was chairman of the delegation, or maybe Humphrey and I were co-chairman, I've forgotten. I was clearly for Kennedy, but those who were against Kennedy, and some who felt rather bitter, were contending that I had been misled. Some went as far as saying that if I had a clear-cut commitment that I'd be the vice presidential candidate that would be one thing, but that I was really being led up on the mountain. In the course of this conversation, I mentioned this to the then Senator Kennedy and said that I certainly asked for no kind of commitment in connection with this. If he made this decision in due course based on the factors that came on, I was interested, but that if he could see his way clear to make it known publicly that this was seriously considered it would be helpful to me in dealing with the Minnesota delegation.

When I left his suite then, after this discussion, there were a bunch of newspaper reporters, as usual, in the corridors. They stopped me, and I made a little statement. At this point, he came out and put his arm around my shoulders and said something about the record of the

[ -9 - ]

governor of Minnesota, that this is the kind of person that would make a good vice president, or something to that effect. It went so far as I could possibly expect that he should and had more than done what I had asked which subsequently hardened me in my resolve that I was going to do everything I could with the very difficult Minnesota situation.

MORRISSEY: Is there anything additional on the vice presidential business that you want to comment on here?

FREEMAN: Well, the vice presidential business kicked around and no one knew what the president was going to do. On the day following the nomination he called me over to his suite. My wife went with me. It was at that time that he told me that Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] would be the vice presidential nominee. The possibility of this had never entered my mind at all. My wife said she had never seen me quite as astounded or quite as shocked. I said to him that I just couldn't quite believe this. It was absolutely incredible. Further, in connection with this conversation and the reasons that he gave for that, I have in my own personal notes that I think I will keep closed for some time, my conclusion as to the basis for that decision. The things that were said then were not exactly those that are generally held today.

MORRISSEY: In the complicated Minnesota delegation, do you think anything could have been done to put some unity into it so it wouldn't have gone in as many different directions as it did?

FREEMAN: Well, this was an interesting thing. I think the Minnesota delegation, as long as Humphrey was in line, would have been for Kennedy and would have voted for Kennedy, probably, on the first ballot. This was split apart basically through some very skillful emotional work by Herbert Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman] from New York. Humphrey was tacitly for Kennedy and would have said so at the right time. It was kind of generally understood. Lehman came into a caucus in which he got very emotional about Humphrey and what Humphrey had done and about the primary campaign and all the rest. Before he got through he had that Minnesota delegation completely upset and had projected, in effect, that a vote for Kennedy rather than for Stevenson was disloyal to Humphrey. He had done it in a fashion that made Humphrey feel good, made everyone feel sorry for him, and made it very difficult for him to be for Kennedy. It was very skillful piece of operation. At that point, then, Humphrey slipped away. He ended up in the Stevenson camp. There was an organized campaign then of wires and letters, and a lot of people who had contributed quite a bit of money to help Humphrey, were now very strong for Stevenson. They, in turn, put strong pressure on Humphrey and he was in a very difficult position at this time, which he wouldn't have been in if he'd taken a clearcut public position earlier. This would have been much wiser for him to have done. As a matter of fact, the emotion in this ran so strongly around Stevenson that on the floor, and when the

[-10-]

nominating was going forward, Arthur Naftalin, who was my commissioner of administration and had been active in politics for a long time, came to me with just literally tears in his eyes, just really emotionally shaken. I had hundreds of wires and Humphrey had hundreds of wires and letters for Stevenson, threatening wires; this was obviously an organized campaign, the Stevenson thing. And Naftalin said to me that I had to change, that my whole political future, and the Stevenson thing—Stevenson was at the convention....And he was just shaken up! I just told him to go have a cup of coffee, sit in the corner and commune with himself; that as far as I was concerned this was just a good show.

I felt very badly that Stevenson was being so misused. The votes were there. There was no doubt about what was going to happen to the nomination. A good many of the lunatic left-wing fringe, including some of the communists of the stripe we had driven out of the party in Minnesota, had latched on to this. The tactics were familiar. I just leaned against a post and watched it. It was just a shame that Stevenson allowed himself to be used in this fashion. He should have had more sense. But he was in a difficult position too, because a lot of people who had been strong supporters and some who did not feel very high on Senator Kennedy pushed him, like they pushed others, and he just wasn't able to make a decision in connection with this. He made a mistake. But it didn't make any differences because the votes were clearly there and we knew where they were. If it had been necessary, I could have delivered the Minnesota delegation (or most of it, or a majority of it), although we had a caucus at midnight, well, until three o'clock in the morning, on this where Humphrey finally said he was for Stevenson and where Gene McCarthy said some very cutting, anti-Kennedy things, and where I took the floor then in the Minnesota delegation. If this had come to a vote I think I would have prevailed. But there was no need to do this unless we really needed the votes and if it had been close enough there to have needed whatever number of votes in the

Minnesota delegation. They knew and I knew I was prepared to deliver them. In the meantime, it wouldn't have served any useful purpose to split this wide one publicly. Following this caucus, when Humphrey and McCarthy came out in the caucus—although they never did, I think, either of them publicly, until McCarthy nominated Stevenson; but I did call the press and announce that I was in support of Kennedy. I said so then clearly. This had been generally known but I then gave them my reasons and also said that I felt that the majority of the Minnesota delegation was and that they would, in due course, so express themselves, and neither Humphrey or McCarthy contested me on this.

MORRISSEY: As a candidate, particularly in the farm states, Kennedy had two obvious liabilities: his voting on farm issues as a senator and also his Catholicism. Could you comment on this?

[-11-]

FREEMAN: I'd think the air had been fairly well cleared on the farm thing and I think that he got a pretty good vote if you check back in the farm districts. The farmers themselves voted Democratic pretty well, at least in Minnesota and I think in Iowa, and I think you'd find in other places. The small town people are always the tough ones.

MORRISSEY: As distinct from the actual farmers?

FREEMAN: As distinct from the actual farmers. This is where the going was tough. The Catholicism thing was a rough one. I think this was the issue that defeated me then as governor in that election, although we had a lot of other problems that had accumulated in three terms.

I was then the Master of my Masonic Lodge and also a pretty well known Lutheran layman. I then had a television program which I think was probably the best single presentation that I possibly ever made; a half hour on religion and politics. I felt very strongly about this because I felt that if Kennedy did not win the election there was a real danger that we would end up with a Catholic party in this country or at least a very significant clique or faction within the Democratic party, or both parties, which would be identified as Catholic. There were any number of demagogues prepared to play this. I thought it was time we cleared this matter up, and I went on a half hour television program and said so, publicly, in no uncertain terms, and gave my reasons for it. When I did this I had a very bad reaction.

MORRISSEY: Do you think that contributed to your own defeat?

FREEMAN: I think that was probable. I think if I hadn't made that television broadcast, I probably would have won that elections because out of a million, three hundred and fifty thousand votes, I lost by less than twenty thousand. So it was that close. I knew I was in political trouble in any event so this might not be true. We had problems of a liberal governor trying to provide needed public

services, schools, and parks and colleges, and highways, and we had had to increase taxes to do it. The recession of 1958 had had a very adverse effect upon revenues, and placed me in a very precarious political position in the 1959 session and we had a bitter struggle. And so, if I had been stronger, if it weren't for these facts, it might not have had as adverse effect as it did; but it did. Because of my rather prominent position in both the Lutheran church and the Masonic, order, this was used quietly, and in a way which was, I think, somewhat damaging.

MORRISSEY: Could you explain to me why the Catholic issue cut deeper in small towns and not on the farms around the small towns?

[-12-]

FREEMAN: No. I couldn't really. And I don't know that it did. The point I would make is that the farmer is much more apt to vote Democratic. More, I think than he realizes, basically because the Democratic party has had farm programs. But the small town, this is a rock-ribbed Republicanism. Also, I think the small town is just more bigoted than the countryside. Also, this is a strongly Lutheran state. Happily I think this has improved greatly, and had been improving in the previous few years. I managed—I shouldn't say I managed, but I think I played an important part in cutting the edge of this issue in getting Gene McCarthy elected to the Senate. We managed to keep this from being much of an issue. I was reelected governor by a hundred and eighty thousand votes; McCarthy was elected to the Senate by sixty-five thousand and he got a significant progress in votes. So this was improving, but the lines got pretty well hardened in the presidential election.

MORRISSEY: How about Kennedy's voting on the farm issue?

FREEMAN: I think by this time his vote on the Farm Act of 1958 and his general public statements, and the platform of the Democratic party were such that the position of being anti-farm, which was clearly labeled in '56, was not true in '60. And I'd have to go back, but I'm sure that in Minnesota, that he carried the farm areas, he had the majority of the farm vote, and I think that was probably true in Iowa and in Wisconsin, too. Small towns were the tough areas.

MORRISSEY: When Kennedy was first a senator he voted for the Saint Lawrence Seaway, which was not popular in New England. Didn't that vote help him out in your part of the country?

FREEMAN: I don't recall that ever even coming up.

MORRISSEY: That's curious.

FREEMAN: Maybe it did come up, up in the lake area, on some of the things around Duluth and around the north country, but it was not, I think, a very significant factor.



MORRISSEY: Did you expect Kennedy to carry your state?

FREEMAN: Yes. We thought it would be close. It was a strange election. Because of the religious issue, no one knew quite what would happen. Polls had shown—and this was a fairly accurate poll—fairly good strength, and then it dipped way down at one time on myself and on Humphrey and on Kennedy, all three. Then it bounced up again on Kennedy and Humphrey and not on myself, so that it was a little uncertain just exactly where it was. It was a confusing

[-13-]

picture, but I thought that he would carry. I wasn't so sure about myself.

MORRISSEY: How were you involved with planning for the new administration during the transitional period?

FREEMAN: I wasn't really involved at all. After the election I went with a group of governors to South America for a two-week tour. On return I spent about a week with my family in Florida. At that time I had a number of calls from people who were involved in the planning, but I was not involved in the planning at all.

The day after the election, the president-elect called me and expressed his regrets at the fact that I had not won, his appreciation for my support, and indicated that he hoped I might join him in the administration, and he advised us that I'd be hearing from him in due course. There were phone calls back and forth from different people as to would I be willing to do this or to do that. There were real doubts in my own mind. I was pretty bruised at this point at having lost an election myself and wondering what I ought to do, whether I should return to the private practice of law and start trying to make a living, or come with the administration, and if so, do what? But direct offers were made, and I was not a part of the transition planning at all.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me about the circumstances surrounding your appointment?

FREEMAN: Well, there had been a number of inquiries, one step removed. I thought that Kennedy handled this rather cleverly. He used, of course, the people who had been involved in the campaign, plus some others, in a rather systematic kind of talent search. He had established, I'm sure you know, rather extensive files, as to people who might serve ably in various positions. I had calls from a number of people like Shriver, like Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg], Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther], and a number of others who were involved on the fringes of this. There was some discussion of various things that might be done, none of which I was very interested in. I had some thought about Latin America, which I was interested in, which never gelled down to anything tangible. I had some thought that the president-elect might call me in to discuss some possibilities, which he did not do.

The matter kind of dragged along and I went back to close out the governor's office. Then a group of people from Nationwide Insurance Company, that were active in the cooperative movement revolving around Murray Lincoln [Murray D. Lincoln] and Wally Campbell [Walter Campbell], who was with one of the cooperative establishments here in Washington, came to see me. They apparently had talked with the president, or with someone and felt

[-14-]

that I should take on the job of secretary of agriculture. Senator Symington [William Stuart Symington, II] tells the story that down in Florida, when he was going to go play golf with the president-elect one day, he asked me if I had any message that I wanted to give him. I said "Yes, just tell him there's one job in Washington I don't want and that's secretary of agriculture." I'd been, for fifteen years, from the time we were organizing and drove the communist out of the D.F.L. [Democratic-Farmer-Labor] party in Minnesota, through the chairmanship of that party and the election and then the tough job of governor, on a two-year term with legislative sessions every two years, in the front line of political battles, and I'd been pretty well bloodied up. I felt that I'd had enough of the kind of gut fight that a secretary of agriculture faced.

The Co-op people talked to me about that like it was something that needed to be done, particularly from the standpoint of food and food use and making effective use of American agricultural abundance both at home and around the world; food abundance was a great national asset and one that we had not properly, or imaginatively or effectively used. This was a very persuasive argument. The more I got to thinking about it and thinking about what I should do, the more I realized that this was something in which I had some knowledge and I had some interest; and this was a department which faced great problems where real service could be rendered. So, after thinking about it at considerable length, I concluded that this was something that I would be willing to do.

At that point, I let it be known to Shriver that if the president wanted me to do this I was prepared to do it—not that I was prepared to do it; I was anxious to do it. I felt it ought to be done. So I'd come a complete circle from wanting nothing to do with it to feeling that I was something that represented a real challenge. It dragged along, then, after I had indicated this for a week or ten days. There was much speculation about it. A number of people with whom the president had discussed it called me. In the meantime, Senator Humphrey had recommended someone else. Other people had as well. The president had also interviewed some people. So, it was an open question.

One morning, early in the morning, the telephone rang, and the operator said that Senator Kennedy wanted to speak to Governor Freeman. It was really early and the call had awakened me. The voice at the other end of the line just said, "Well, Orville, what about this secretary of agriculture business?" And I said, "Well, what about it, Mr. President?"

He said, "Well," he said, "When should we announce it?" And I said, "Well, you've announced the others in Washington and I don't think you ought to downgrade agriculture. I think you ought to announce it in Washington also." He said, "How soon can you get here?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll try and make it by four o'clock. I'll see

if I can get a jet plane from the Air National Guard and be in by that time.” “Well,” he said, “get here as soon as you can.” So I went to the office immediately and went to work trying to get a statement that I knew I’d be called on to make, that would be timely and appropriate to start this on the right foot. I got hold of the National Guard and the best way to make communications was to fly by DC-3 up to Duluth, and get an F-97 Jetstar airplane, which I did. We took off from Duluth, Minnesota for Washington, right in the bad weather and snow storm and had a heck of a time getting down to the ground. I didn’t get here until six o’clock at night. It was a heavy snow storm.

I hustled to the Georgetown house and was ushered up the back way. There were a number of people around. The president had been waiting. There had been a problem because, at that time, one of the people who was actively seeking the secretary of agriculturesship was George McGovern [George S. McGovern], who had also been a strong supporter and had been defeated in his campaign for the senatorship against Senator Mundt [Karl E. Mundt]; he was there. The president talked to him about taking a job which was then actually created for that purpose, the so-called Food for Peace director which subsequently presented us with some administrative problems. Actually, I think, it was created to find a place for George McGovern, and I’m sure this was very difficult for the president to handle. In any event, this went very quickly.

There were people around and not very many places to go so I followed him into the bathroom. He just closed the door. I don’t remember which one sat on the stool and which one sat on the edge of the tub. The only inquiry, the only comment was that he had a good deal of pressure about having a secretary of agriculture from the South and he felt that the under secretary was someone that he thought would need to come from that section, which was obvious. That was the only, if you want to call it, condition. That took about thirty seconds. And he said, “All right, let’s go out.”

We went out in front of the Georgetown house and he made the announcement and a few remarks and I made the same. That was the extent of it. I went on about my business.

MORRISSEY: Did he mention Mr. Murphy [Charles S. Murphy] in terms of the under-secretaryship?

FREEMAN: No, Mr. Murphy was not then in the picture at all. As a matter of fact, how Mr. Murphy did get into the picture is another interesting story.

MORRISSEY: Okay. We’ll save that one for our next interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

Orville L. Freeman Oral History Transcript – JFK #1  
Name List

**C**

Campbell, Walter, 14

**G**

Goldberg, Arthur J., 14

**H**

Humphrey, Hubert H., 1-11, 13, 15

**J**

Johnson, Lyndon B., 10

**K**

Kefauver, Carey Estes, 2  
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 4-14

**L**

Lehman, Herbert H., 10  
Lincoln, Murray D., 14

**M**

McCarthy, Eugene J., 3, 9, 11, 13  
McGovern, George S., 16  
Mundt, Karl E., 16  
Murphy, Charles S., 16

**N**

Naftalin, Arthur, 11

**R**

Reuther, Walter P., 14  
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 7

**S**

Shriver, Robert Sargent, Jr., 5, 14, 15  
Stevenson, Adlai E., 1, 2, 8-11  
Symington, William Stuart II, 15

**W**

White, Theodore H., 3, 4  
Williams, Gerard Mennen, 7, 8