

William C. Battle, Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 2/17/1965
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Biographical Note

Battle was Presidential campaign coordinator for Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky for John F. Kennedy (JFK) in 1960 and Ambassador to Australia from 1962-1964. In this interview, he discusses his friendship with JFK when they were both PT boat commanders in World War II, the 1960 presidential campaign in West Virginia and Virginia, and his appointment as Ambassador to Australia, among other issues.

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William C. Battle – JFK#1

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First of Four Oral History Interviews

with

William C. Battle

February 17, 1965

by Guy Friddell

For the John F. Kennedy Library

FRIDDELL: This is Guy Friddell, I am the editor of the Editorial Page of *The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, Virginia. This is February 17, 1965. Here with me is Ambassador William C. Battle, recently returned from Australia where he was our Ambassador to Australia. He is the son of former Governor Battle [John Stewart Battle] of Virginia. He was the campaign manager for John Fitzgerald Kennedy in the 1960 campaign in Virginia. Our purpose today is to get some of his recollections of his association with Mr. Kennedy before, during, and after the campaign. Bill, you have been returned now from Australia. What do you sense about the mood of United States regarding Mr. Kennedy and our loss?

BATTLE: Well, Mr. Friddell, I think that friends and political foe alike recognize that there is gone from the American scene the great charm, grace, and dignity, the likes of which we have not seen in the White House in many years past and certainly the likes of which will be a long time before we see again. I think that from world point of view, the man who gave hope to millions and millions of people who had previously been without hope and the man who surrounded himself with such a wonderful family, a family that projected to millions of people who still put great stock in a family, the family unit.... And one cannot help but think unless one has a political axe to grind—and, of course, the family was a target,

the Kennedy dynasty and things of that sort but aside from politics.... This great family, the unity of the family, the singleness of purpose, the desire to serve the world, this country and the world, the ability to bring the laughter of young children into the most serious circumstances, I think it did a great deal to enhance our spirit around the world and I think that these are some of the things that will be greatly missed.

FRIDDELL: What was the reaction in Australia to the assassination of the President? You were there at the time.

BATTLE: Yes, I was there and the initial reaction was one of complete disbelief. When the actual fact made its imprint there, the country absolutely stood still. I think perhaps as much as anywhere in the world, he was loved there and they were eagerly looking forward to a rumored visit by President and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. The country just couldn't believe it. There was an outpouring of grief, the likes of which would only be equal here, I think. It was not imaginable that I was in a foreign land at that time.

FRIDDELL: Where were you when you heard the news, and does anything stick out in your mind that was said or done later, not necessarily by a member of the diplomatic staff, but did anything come to you or come in to you closely in that time? From maybe just an ordinary person?

BATTLE: Well, of course, it was 4:30 the next morning in Australia and I happened to be up at the time. I was preparing to take my youngsters fishing when the UPI [United Press International] representative in Sydney called me and told me that the President had been shot. We didn't know how serious it was, but he called me immediately after receiving the news. I couldn't believe that it was serious. I knew he was in Dallas; I knew there was temper there. But I did turn on the shortwave, and of course, the Voice of America took us right to the hospital in Dallas. And from there we turned on the radio before it was announced that the President was dead, and from there on it was just a nightmare. You see, this was just 4:30 in the morning, and then when Australia began to wake up the disbelief was everywhere.

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FRIDDELL: Was there any dominant recollection in your mind at that time of him? Did any moment come home to you? I know that emotions must have been flooding in on you, but was there any one thing that sticks out in your mind?

BATTLE: No, I don't think so. I think the shock was the main thing. You just couldn't believe it and why the world had to be deprived of this man who was just on the threshold of real greatness and was leading the country so successfully and had gained the confidence of the entire free world and the

admiration of many of those who were not in the free world. Down in Australia, you see, we are right under Southeast Asia. It has been a long time since any American had the support and the enthusiasm of the Asians behind him the way President Kennedy did, and I think he is probably the one man who could have resolved the conflicts we are faced with there now.

FRIDDELL: Well, the beginning of his political career, in a sense, was in the Pacific too, was it not?

BATTLE: Yes, I expect so. Of course, I think that after his older brother's [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] death he probably had always concentrated on a political career. As you well know, and as everyone well knows, the Kennedy family is a wealthy family and there is not much to be gained by seeking more money and by going into business, and all of them have resolved to dedicate themselves to public service. And if they perform their duties well there, then the country progresses and develops, and that is their whole motivation. I think that Jack Kennedy had made his resolve down there to pursue a political career after the death of his older brother, Joe.

FRIDDELL: And the public awareness of his political career often began with PT 109, does it not?

BATTLE: Yes, undoubtedly so. It was an unbelievable experience and of course it is one that has become very much publicized. I think the real political impact began to take effect during the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries before the election.

FRIDDELL: Your acquaintance, your friendship, with Mr. Kennedy

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dates back to those Pacific days, doesn't it? Could you tell me, Mr. Ambassador, how that occurred, how you came to meet him?

BATTLE: Well, I don't remember my actual meeting Jack Kennedy as such. I was commanding officer of a PT boat, and I think at the time we met he must have been an executive officer on one of the boats. They arrived in the Solomons ahead of me and when I got there it was a reasonably quiet time. Guadalcanal had not been secured, but there was not too much sea activity at the time. You might say it was the lull before the Rendova-New Georgia campaigns, and I can recall many instances of discussions and comradeship with Jack Kennedy and many of the other young naval officers in the squadrons at that time. The squadrons pretty well lost their identity once we were out there and we were operating together with two or three boats from different squadrons in one section. I was not in the section of boats that Jack Kennedy was attached to the night his boat was cut in two, but I was on the operation, and my boat made the first attack on these destroyers. We had radar; we were one of the two boats in the squadron who had radar at that time. I can remember clearly what a pitch-black, dark night it was. After we

made our attack, one of our torpedo tubes caught fire and obviously gave away our position. The destroyers, one of them turned on us and chased us and closed to under four hundred yards, which is point-blank range on the water, and we still couldn't see him. It was that dark. We could see the flashes from his gunfire, but we couldn't actually see the boat. And the purpose of the Japanese maneuver, of course, was to relieve the Munda Airfield on New Georgia. Now, they had to go in through very restricted waters and take off people and supply the ones that were left there. They succeeded in getting in, and I am sure that it was on the way out that the Kennedy boat was cut in two. The point I want to make is that it is certainly understandable to me how this can happen because if there is a great deal of confusion, gunfire, flares, et cetera, in one sector and a very dark night, it is almost impossible to see a fast-moving destroyer until it is right upon you. Our procedure in those days was to, until we made attack, was to move ahead slowly on one engine. The PT boat didn't operate, as is commonly thought, at high speeds until it had made its attack. It tried to sneak in, set up its position on the target and attack, and use its speed to avoid being sunk after its

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position was disclosed. It is perfectly reasonable that the Kennedy PT was moving ahead on one engine—that is exactly what anyone would have been doing under the circumstances—and those Japanese destroyers were quite fast. There were five of them, and one of them came out of the night and struck him. After this happened, of course, the tremendous effort exerted by Jack Kennedy was just unbelievable, the things he did. People who are interested in this can get an accurate documentation from Bob Donovan's [Robert J. Donovan] book, *PT-109*. Donovan went back to the area; he interviewed everyone. I was on the operation, and he had found out some things about that operation that I didn't know. He interviewed the natives who ultimately found their group, the crew, and I think it is a very accurate description of what Jack and Lenny Thom [Leonard J. Thom] and Barney Ross [George H. Ross] and some of the rest of the boys did in an effort to keep their group together and ultimately be rescued. Incidentally, the coast watcher who finally picked them up became a very close friend of mine in Australia. He was an Australian accountant who was acting as a coast watcher in the Solomons in those days.

FRIDDELL: Did you hear him repeat any anecdotes from that period, Mr. Ambassador?

BATTLE: No, I don't think so. We discussed this many times, and I met at the annual reunion of the coast watchers quite often, and of course John Kennedy was their hero. I don't think that there is any particular anecdote that I can remember.

FRIDDELL: What memory do you have of Mr. Kennedy from those Pacific days? What was his physical appearance at that time?

BATTLE: Well, he was a lanky young officer, bright, active, highly idealistic,

obviously intent on making the greatest possible contribution he could. Always concerned about the welfare of his crew—this was one of his outstanding traits—and always concerned with the same intense drive of perfection that he exhibited in his own self-discipline and in his own administration.

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FRIDDELL: How did you see him out there, in what context? Was it in the work with your ships? Did you see him in a social way? What way?

BATTLE: There wasn't much social activity. We all ate together, of course, when we were on the beach, and we all participated in whatever recreation there was, softball or anything that resembled sports. He was a very active participant; he was a vigorous swimmer, and he was quite an intellectual too. He was always reading and involving himself in political discussions, historical discussions, any type discussion that would develop his mind. As early as that, he was intently training his mind for whatever lay ahead.

FRIDDELL: Do you recall having such discussions with him, bull sessions or even arguments on issues of that sort?

BATTLE: No, I don't recall any specifics such as that. We did discuss things at length on several occasions, but I don't recall that I developed at that time any idea of his political philosophy or anything other than here was a fellow that was intensely driving his own intellect, intensely developing his own self-discipline even at that time.

FRIDDELL: When or how and when—I guess it would have been in 1960, would it not, or maybe earlier than that—how and when did you reestablish your friendship? Did it come through John F. Kennedy or one of his brothers? How did you become engaged in the 1960 campaign?

BATTLE: Well, of course, John Kennedy went to Congress, you see, from Massachusetts, and my living in Charlottesville is not too far from Washington, so I would see him from time to time and drop by his office from time to time. We kept up our contacts, and of course, he made the exciting if unsuccessful run for vice presidential nomination when my father was chairman of the Virginia delegation. It must have been in 1956, and at that time he endeared himself to the Virginia delegation. Of course, Dad was quite foremost in this particular endeavor. And then Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] was at the University of Virginia Law School in Charlottesville, and later on Ted [Edward Moore Kennedy] came to the University of

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Virginia Law School, so through family connections plus the old friendship that developed in the Solomons, I think we kept in pretty close touch.

FRIDDELL: Since you were in such continuous touch, there is no one moment then that could be signaled or marked as the time when you became engaged in the 1960 campaign. You were practically involved in it almost continuously from when it began to build.

BATTLE: Well, that's true. And I don't remember the date, but I met with a group of people at Bob Kennedy's house early in 1960 or late 1959, and they knew that I had practiced law in West Virginia after I had finished law school. They had the people there, the West Virginians who were going to work on the campaign, and I joined them there, and that was the beginning. As I said, I don't remember the exact date. After the campaign started, the first thing I did was to drive Bob Kennedy through the southern part of West Virginia, through the depressed coal field area and introduce him to people that I had met down there and see that he got a good feel of the situation.

FRIDDELL: At that time, did you have a title, Mr. Ambassador, in the campaign or a particular area in which to work?

BATTLE: No, not at that time. Then I went back after this particular trip through West Virginia, I went back to Huntington and based out of Huntington, helping Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] who was in charge of the whole area of southern West Virginia throughout that particular campaign.

FRIDDELL: This was the primary campaign in 1960.

BATTLE: Yes, the campaign which Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was running against Jack Kennedy.

FRIDDELL: And then as convention time approached, you were the liaison man for three or four southern states, were you not?

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BATTLE: Yes, that would be Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and North Carolina.

FRIDDELL: How did you operate in that assignment?

BATTLE: Well, that was merely keeping track of and trying to obtain delegate votes, the delegates to the convention. I think that in order to really put this in perspective something need be said about the West Virginia primary. It was there that the Catholic issue was the strongest, and with many, many different

types of religion in southern West Virginia (and very few of them were Catholics), these religions were quite hostile initially to John Kennedy because he was a Catholic. The manner in which he handled himself out there was demonstrated so well how he was going to conduct himself in later years. He handled himself, his approach was direct, forthright and honest. He said, "This is what I believe, this is my religion. Here is how I propose to conduct myself if elected." Just at one stage of that campaign this approach paid off fantastically well. There was a man in West Virginia, Bishop Strider, Robert E. Lee Strider was his name, and he lived up in Charlestown, West Virginia. Through a friend I had a contact with Bishop Strider, and Jack Kennedy was going to make a speech in Charlestown. So we arranged a meeting with him, and after the speech we drove up to Bishop Strider's home. The first thing that the Bishop said as he cordially ushered us in was that he had never voted Republican but once in his life and that was in the Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith] election, and he did it because Al Smith was a Catholic.

FRIDDELL: That was a nice opening, wasn't it?

BATTLE: Senator Kennedy looked at me with, "Well, why did you bring me here?" [Laughter] Then he went on and he said, "Young man"—and I can remember it almost directly—he said, "You have handled this thing so well." He said, "Mr. Smith would not discuss it. He said, 'This is my religion; it is my business, it is nobody else's business,' in effect, and he would not discuss it. And this caused some of us who were not previously afraid to be afraid." Then he said to Senator Kennedy, "You have put it on the table, you have discussed it frankly and fairly, objectively and honestly,

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and anything I can do to support you, I am willing to do." He then sat down and wrote out a long statement endorsing Senator Kennedy, and the affect to the southern coal mine region was unbelievable because Bishop Strider at that time was probably one of the most beloved people in West Virginia, one of the most respected. Here is just one instance where the direct, open and honest approach that Jack Kennedy took to everything he did paid off. Again in the West Virginia primary in Huntington, when he was coming through Huntington, we had a breakfast for businessmen. One of them took him to task on his minimum wage proposals. Senator Kennedy explained to the gentleman that these proposals only affected large businesses, businesses that had a certain gross income a year and asked him if his business had that. The gentleman said, "Yes, it does." Senator Kennedy said, "Well, then you won't like this bill, and I'm for it." This approach—that man came up after it was over and said in effect that that is the first time a politician hadn't tried to sell me on something that I didn't want to be sold on. He said, "You told me directly where you stood. You knew I was on the other side; you knew I wouldn't like it. And for that reason, I'm going to support you."

FRIDDELL: Going back to the Bishop, did Senator Kennedy—was this commitment then, at that time by the time you all arrived, unsolicited,

or did Senator Kennedy have to make any explanation? Was the Bishop's mind already made up?

BATTLE: Oh, the Bishop's mind was made up. I knew that before we went out there that night. It was just lucky that we had.... Well, I knew the Bishop's daughter—she was a secretary in our law office in Charlottesville—and I knew how he felt, and through her we were able to determine that he would be willing to make this endorsement.

FRIDDELL: What was Senator Kennedy's reaction after you all left the Bishop's office? Did he have anything to say, as you recall, any comment, any expression of exuberance?

BATTLE: Well, he always controlled his emotions pretty well, but he was quite pleased about it. There was no doubt about that.

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FRIDDELL: Well, that takes us through West Virginia, does it not?

BATTLE: Yes, there is an awful lot that we learned from that West Virginia campaign. I think the charm of Jack Kennedy was beginning to show through; the doubters were beginning to become believers because he was such an underdog, when he went in there as a Catholic, as an unknown and of course with quite a bit of power behind Senator Humphrey.

FRIDDELL: Let's turn to the Virginia campaign. Did you begin making overtures at this time, Mr. Ambassador, to the Virginia political leaders to determine how they felt or how Virginia would go? When did you first begin those, and do you remember how you came to be his spokesman in Virginia, Mr. Kennedy's spokesman?

BATTLE: Well, I suppose I stepped into a void on that question because most Virginians, leaders of course, were supporting Senator Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], naturally and normally. The reason I was supporting Senator Kennedy, of course, the reason I was even in politics was because he was a close personal friend and I had complete confidence in him. In the winter of late '59 or early '60, I took Senator Harry Byrd, Jr. [Harry F. Byrd, Jr.] in to have lunch with Senator Kennedy. We went to Senator Kennedy's apartment in Georgetown and had a delightful lunch. Senator Kennedy did not ask Senator Byrd, Jr. to endorse or support him, but when we left Senator Byrd said that he wanted to make his position clear to Senator Kennedy, and it was that he, of course, and Virginia would have to support Senator Johnson. Senator Kennedy said that he clearly understood that. Then he went on, and he said, "But I don't think that Senator Johnson

can possibly gain the nomination this time.” He said that he would not support Senator Symington [Stuart Symington II], and he said that he would not support Senator Humphrey, he would not support Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], and he closed by saying, “All of us, Jack, are extremely fond of you.” And that, of course, was the beginning of our effort to put John Kennedy number two in the minds of Virginia leaders behind Lyndon Johnson.

FRIDDELL: It seems to me that sometime during the campaign—in fact I'm sure that you gave me an interview in

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which you suggested Mr. Johnson should switch his attentions to the office, to the post of vice presidency. How did that come to be in your mind, Bill?

BATTLE: Well, I'm not sure that that's exactly right. I think I remember the interview. We had several of them. What I was trying to suggest was that the Democratic ticket, the strongest possible Democratic ticket would be John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and this of course would tie together the two extreme geographical areas of the North and South, would put two men up of proven ability, particularly Senator Johnson, who would add maturity and political knowledge to the relatively, still then relatively unknown Senator Kennedy.

FRIDDELL: Well, was there any moment in your association with Mr. Kennedy in which he indicated his mind might be running along those lines?

BATTLE: Well, there were several. On several occasions we were talking about it. The first one, I was inquiring of him whether or not he had committed to the number one spot alone or whether or not he felt he shouldn't start off with the number two spot. He said that he had committed himself to the number one spot and felt that he did not want to change; there was particular reason, that there was only one man who he saw in the running that he would feel had the capacity to be president and one man that he felt he would be willing to serve as vice president under, and that he didn't think that man had a chance to get the nomination because at that time he was from the South and that was a pretty severe handicap. Of course, the man he was talking about was Lyndon Johnson.

FRIDDELL: Well, do I recall an incident in which you were on the golf course with him?

BATTLE: Well, that was the 4th of July, 1960 at Hyannis. We discussed the same thing.

FRIDDELL: Well, how did that go? Relate that to me as it took place.

BATTLE: Well, I don't remember the exact details but we were

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playing along and we were discussing the situation, of course. He knew I was pressing for Johnson as vice president, and he just commented that he didn't think that Johnson would take it at that time, it didn't seem to be in the cards. That's about all I really recall about that particular conversation.

FRIDDELL: All right.

BATTLE: Well, of course at that stage you see that...

FRIDDELL: It seemed to me that at some point you were telling me, or telling perhaps some of the other reporters, of a time I pictured as being on the golf course in which you suggested to him that he might take the number two spot, and he said something to the effect and you told us that I think, "Oh, no, he preferred number one." And you asked, "Well, who would you want for number two?" And he said over his shoulder on his back swing maybe, he said, "Lyndon Johnson."

BATTLE: No, I don't remember that, Guy.

FRIDDELL: Well, it makes a good story. [Laughter]

BATTLE: No, I don't remember it happening that way, of course. It was obvious in the end that he did prefer Lyndon Johnson, and I think it came as some surprise to a lot of people (and maybe to Jack himself) that Lyndon Johnson was willing to accept it.

FRIDDELL: Getting back to the Virginia campaign, how did it go in these early stages? Did it go smoothly, or did it become apparent to you that the Democratic organization, many of their leaders would not become committed to Mr. Kennedy?

BATTLE: Well, we knew that, of course. We knew that as long as Lyndon Johnson was going to be in the running that the Virginia leaders would be supporting Lyndon Johnson, and Jack Kennedy knew that and there is no question about it. And it was going quite smoothly. He had a very affectionate—people had a very affectionate regard for him,

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and the more they got to know him the more they liked him. Harry Byrd, Jr. remarked to me on several occasions that the only thing that worried him, acknowledging, as he always did, that he didn't think Lyndon Johnson could gain the nomination, the only thing that worried him was Jack Kennedy's ability to get the vote in a tough presidential campaign with a tough

Republican nominee. What we were directing our attention to was to convince Harry, Jr. and Senator Byrd [Harry F. Byrd, Sr.], who was the acknowledged leader of Virginia politics, of course, that Jack Kennedy could get the vote, that he was well enough known and that he did have the ability to get the vote.

[BEGIN TAPE II]

FRIDDELL: Mr. Battle, we were just at the point where you were suggesting that we had come to another chapter in the story of Mr. Kennedy's Virginia campaign. With what does that chapter concern itself?

BATTLE: Well, in the 1956 Democratic Convention, the Massachusetts delegation was seated directly in front of the Virginia delegation or vice versa; they were contiguous delegations. The Kennedy brothers became very popular with the Virginia delegation. It was a fast friendship, one that resulted in the Virginia delegation giving strong support to Senator Kennedy's run for the vice presidential nomination at that time. This friendship between the Kennedys and Virginia continued, and it was growing, although we all knew it was not growing to the point that the Virginia delegation to the '60 convention would vote for Senator Kennedy in lieu of Senator Johnson. But it was a warm feeling and a feeling that all of us felt would result in the Virginia leaders supporting Jack Kennedy if he did obtain the nomination.

As I said, one of the main questions in the mind of the particular Senator Byrd, Jr. was Jack Kennedy's ability to get votes and conduct a successful winning campaign against a tough Republican opponent, and we had set the target, an agreement between ourselves, as the Oregon primary in which Senator Kennedy was running against Senator Wayne Morse [Wayne L. Morse] of Oregon. Senator Byrd felt that if he could win this one, that this would certainly dispel any doubts of his vote-getting ability.

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FRIDDELL: By Senator Byrd, you are speaking of State Senator Harry Byrd, Jr.

BATTLE: Yes. It so happened that the Oregon primary had coincided exactly in time to the Virginia Democratic Convention at Virginia Beach to select delegates to the National Convention in Los Angeles. The night before the primary, two things happened. One, the leaders agreed that they did not want an instructed delegation. This was, to my way of thinking, a very sizeable step forward for the Kennedy forces. And two, Senator Byrd, Jr. told me again that he was watching with great interest throughout the Oregon primary.

The next morning, the morning of the Virginia Convention, I saw Senator Byrd, Jr. I had just received the first returns from Oregon which showed that Senator Kennedy was running way ahead of Senator Morse in Senator Morse's own state, and I was anxious to deliver these to Senator Byrd. When I did, he was obviously very disturbed with something else and told me it just didn't make any difference anymore. This was in the convention hall at Virginia Beach.

FRIDDELL: And this is still Senator Byrd, Jr.

BATTLE: Yes. And I asked him why, and he said, "Have you seen the morning paper?" I said, "No, I haven't seen the morning papers." So I went and looked at the morning paper, and what had happened was that the morning paper had carried a feature story to the effect that Governor Almond [James Lindsay Almond, Jr.], then Governor of Virginia, had desired an uninstructed delegation. Now, it has no place in this interview, but it should be said that there had developed an extreme and bitter rift between Senator Byrd, Sr. and Governor Almond, and this rift carried down throughout the supporting factions of both people and resulted from a disagreement on how Virginia should handle the school integration issue. Then I went back to Senator Byrd, Jr. and I said, "Well, Harry, I don't understand what difference this makes."

The upshot of the whole thing was that Senator Byrd's group, the Byrd faction if you will, saw this interview by Almond, by Governor Almond, as an effort to display to the people of Virginia that he controlled the convention, that is, by coming out in the paper and saying that he favored an

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uninstructed delegation after it had been pretty well agreed that the delegation would be uninstructed and this agreement had not been made public. He scooped the field, as it were, on this announcement. And with this, the Byrd group said that they were determined to instruct that delegation just as tight as they could, as you well know, and we had to vote the unit rule, and we were instructed to vote for Senator Johnson whether he was a candidate or not. There was no way we could break that instruction under any circumstances. And it was so drawn, and the unfortunate thing is, that it was drawn not because of any hostility to Senator Kennedy, but because of local political controversy.

FRIDDELL: What did you do after the convention at Virginia Beach?

BATTLE: Well, of course, I went as a delegate and I continued to work as hard as I could to see that Senator Kennedy's image, if you will, in Virginia was good and that this situation didn't really affect it. Then I went on out to Los Angeles, working with the Kennedy forces there.

FRIDDELL: What was your title there, what was your assignment?

BATTLE: That is when I was assigned as liaison for the delegations of the several states. As we all know, Senator Kennedy won the nomination on the first round, Senator Byrd, Sr. did not attend the convention as he was in Switzerland. Senator Byrd, Jr. was there as an active, vigorous, effective supporter of Senator Johnson, but unfortunately left right after the nomination of Senator Kennedy.

FRIDDELL: Was Senator Byrd there as a delegate? Senator Byrd, Jr.

BATTLE: Yes, he was a delegate.

FRIDDELL: My impression was that he was there in his capacity as a newspaper correspondent covering the convention.

BATTLE: He was doing both, but he was a delegate.

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FRIDDELL: I didn't notice that he was, or wasn't aware that he was as active as you indicate he was.

BATTLE: Oh, he spent most of his time down at the Johnson headquarters. But that is neither here nor there on President Kennedy, of course. Right after the nomination that night, Bob Kennedy called me and asked me if I would join Senator Kennedy and a few others at Senator Kennedy's rooms the next morning to discuss the vice presidential nomination. I told him I would, but that I was not a political leader in Virginia and that I would prefer to bring one of our political leaders along. He said this was fine by all means. I tried to reach Senator Byrd even at that early date to ask him to participate in this meeting, and he had left.

I ultimately took Governor Almond along and, of course, that is the historic meeting in which Senator Kennedy had a number of political leaders from all over the country and which he went from one to one seeking their advice on a vice presidential candidate. That was the meeting in which Governor Ribicoff [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff], of course, made such a fine statement. He was the last one to be called on. Many of the more liberal people were absolutely adamant against having Senator Johnson. Governor Ribicoff made a statement at the end to the effect that because he felt he was the best man available to represent all of the people of the United States and that he felt very strongly that Lyndon Johnson was the best man to help him represent all of the people and that he could prove this by having him as his vice presidential nominee.

FRIDDELL: Then, was it there that you were assigned or got the first intimations that you were to conduct the Virginia campaign?

BATTLE: Not at that particular point. It was in Los Angeles, and here again we get to the point that later gave President Kennedy trouble in dealing with Senator Byrd in the United States Senate. In Virginia we have two factions; as most everywhere, we have a conservative and a liberal element. Up until then, the conservative element had not supported the Democratic nominee for many years past. They didn't support Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] in his latter years, they didn't support Truman [Harry S. Truman], and they didn't support Stevenson either time. These were the people that had been

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quite friendly to Jack Kennedy and these were the people that I felt we must have in order to carry Virginia for John Kennedy. As a result, we met with Bob Kennedy. I say "we"; we had with us State Senator Thomas Blanton [Thomas H. Blanton], who was Chairman of the Democratic Central Committee in Virginia, and Sidney Kellam [Sidney S. Kellam], who was National Committeeman from Virginia. We couldn't get Senator Byrd; the senior Senator wasn't there, and Senator Byrd, Jr. had left.

The effort was to make certain that the Byrd people played an active part in the coming campaign to keep it from being grabbed up by the people in the past who had been unable to carry the state for the Democratic nominee. The result was not that Senator Byrd Sr. but, at this meeting, I was appointed coordinator for Virginia. Now, this wasn't campaign chairman, and Senator Byrd, Sr. was later to remark to all of his friends, "What are the Kennedys trying to do, turn the state over to Bill Battle!" Well, the opposite was the intention, to keep it from being turned over to anybody and putting it into the hands of people very friendly to the acknowledged political leaders of the state at that time. It didn't work that way and, of course, Senator Byrd and his friends caused me to be named campaign chairman by the state Democratic committee. That was the end of any of their participation on behalf of the Kennedys in that campaign. We had to raise our own funds, we fought an uphill battle all the way. Governor Almond was quite active on behalf of Senator Kennedy, and this again, in my opinion, caused Senator Byrd to be more inactive.

It finally developed, when we were making considerable progress in Virginia and the issue became in doubt, that one of Senator Byrd's closest associates, Speaker of the House of Virginia, Blackburn Moore [E. Blackburn Moore], came out with his famous letter to me which reached the newspapers long before I ever received it, asking me to deny Senator Kennedy would appoint a Negro to a federal judgeship which then existed in the Western District of Virginia. Of course, the only thing I could say in reply was that Senator Kennedy would appoint the best qualified person and would do so only after consulting and having the advice of the local bar associations concerned. But this particular move by what must be considered the Byrd forces had a very, very damaging effect and I think changed or determined enough votes to have made the difference in the slight margin by which Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] carried Virginia.

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FRIDDELL: Was there any other factor in the campaign that helped Mr. Kennedy, or was there a factor that helped?

BATTLE: Yes, I think his own direct, forthright approach to things, and he came to Virginia, making three speeches in Virginia. I will always remember one of these comments. The first speech he made could be called a campaign speech, after his nomination was made, in Alexandria, Virginia. I met with him in the afternoon before the speech and he asked me what he should talk about. I told him that I thought at that time he ought to discuss the religious question, certainly among other things. He was very reluctant to do it. He said this campaign has just begun, and he said, "I don't think I should do it. If they attack me on the religious question, then I will answer them, but I

am not going to be the one that puts the religious question up front and uses it as a campaign issue.”

Of course, he was right. I had lost sight of the fact that this really was the beginning of the campaign because I had been in the other primaries and had been faced with this difficult religious issue in southern West Virginia. To me it was of paramount importance. But he said at that time something that has always stuck in my mind. He said, “This is my judgment. My judgment may not always be good, but it isn't bad.” I think that is the way he judged himself, and his judgment, in my mind, was generally always good and certainly never was bad. He was a man of great judgment. His ability to understand, to size up a situation and to take action, direct action.

FRIDDELL: What was the impact in Virginia on President Kennedy's appearances here? You remember, he made one three stop...

BATTLE: Two stops, one in Norfolk and one in Roanoke. And the impact was what you might expect from a man of the magnetism of Jack Kennedy. The Norfolk crowd was tremendous. It was such that we were separated from Ken O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], who was his campaign assistant and had his speech in Norfolk. He was going to give a speech on fiscal responsibility, which was the main issue in Virginia, of course, and he lost that speech. [Laughter] He later gave that speech in Roanoke. But we were making our way up to the stands to the rostrum through this terrific crowd, and he turned to me and said, “I haven't got my speech, what must I talk about?”

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I said, “Well, the only thing I know that it's a Virginia audience and you just praise Jefferson [Thomas Jefferson] and damn Nixon and you'll be all right.” [Laughter]

It just happened that Nixon had been to Richmond several weeks previously and had posed as a Virginia Democrat; he told the people that he was a Virginia Democrat. Jack started off, and I'll never forget it. He made a tremendous speech off-the-cuff with no notes, and he started off by saying that he understood that Mr. Nixon had been in Richmond and had told people that he was Jeffersonian Democrat, and then he quoted—he had such a fantastic knowledge; he could pick quotes at any time. Of course, he was a great student of Jefferson. He said that a contemporary of Jefferson's had once written that at the age of twenty-nine—and I am not sure I am accurate on these various dates—that Jefferson was a master statesman, master politician, accomplished violinist, he could dance the minuet, he could survey a field, he could plot an eclipse. Then in his Massachusetts tones, he said, “Now what, what has Richard Nixon in common with Thomas Jefferson?”

I think that again exemplifies one of the great gifts that this man had; he was not only tremendously intelligent, he was not only a hard-fighting, tough political leader, but he was also a man that had great warmth and great wit and never, never lacked the ability to laugh at himself or to enjoy a humorous situation.

FRIDDELL: Does anything stick in your mind from Roanoke and the Roanoke

visit? That is where your father introduced Mr. Kennedy to the audience.

BATTLE: Well, he made a tremendous impression there and, of course, after his speech the reaction was so outstanding I think that he was beginning to think himself that he might carry Virginia. Virginia, you know, when the campaign started, was classed by his pollsters as the worst Kennedy state in the nation, and we had come up from the worst to one that was questionable. The polls at this time had shown it 51-49 for Nixon. And after all of that gain—and this was just at the time that Blackburn Moore came out with his political jab about a Negro judge—it looked as though he might well carry the state. He vaulted over the rostrum, over the railing on the stands right down into the crowd and was prac-

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tically mobbed on the spot. We had a terrible time getting through and getting him over into the airplane and on his way again.

FRIDDELL: As I remember, he made his way to a phone booth to check in with Robert Kennedy.

BATTLE: Yes, he did. He went over and made a phone call.

FRIDDELL: He was in Chicago.

BATTLE: Yes.

FRIDDELL: Do you recall what your father said in the introduction? To me that was the most striking part of it.

BATTLE: Well, I think so. He, Dad, was always extremely impressed by Jack Kennedy, his ability, his honesty, his intelligence, and he in introducing him expressed all of this to the 15,000 or 20,000 people who were there and closed by saying in effect that the people of Virginia had known him [Battle] all his life and that, as I recall it, as the shadows were lengthening on him certainly would be no time for him to deceive the people of Virginia.

FRIDDELL: He put it on a very personal plea. He said, “Do you think that as the shadows begin to lengthen for me, that I would deceive you?”

BATTLE: Yes.

FRIDDELL: That was a very fine speech. Do you, after his appearance here, and then there was the letter of which you spoke—did you have hope up to the night of the election that you might carry Virginia?

BATTLE: Yes, we did. Yes, well, we felt we had a chance but it is very difficult to analyze these things, and I knew that when the hand of Senator Byrd, Sr. was seen in this fashion, when the effect calculated could be only harmful, the purpose could only be harmful to John Kennedy,

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that we had a more difficult task and one that would be hard to bring off. I was disappointed but not particularly surprised at the results.

FRIDDELL: After the campaign, you became—in effect, you remained somewhat as Mr. Kennedy's political spokesman in Virginia or as his liaison man, did you not, in a sense?

BATTLE: Yes, that is true. After he was elected, because of the then almost hostility of the other Democratic leaders, I suppose I felt a need to continue to represent him from the state. This is another quality of John Kennedy. He was always willing to accept back in his friendship and in his group people who had opposed him if they wanted to come back, but he never, he never forgot the help of a friend. He was intensely loyal and always looked back to the people who had stuck by him in difficult times.

FRIDDELL: Had you sought a post in the administration?

BATTLE: No. No, I felt I could help him better by staying in Virginia and doing what I could to bring the Virginia delegation in Washington closer to his administration, bring him and his knowledge and his people closer to the people in Virginia.

FRIDDELL: So it was through his invitation and insistence, I suppose, that you accepted the post of Ambassador to Australia.

BATTLE: Well he didn't insist, but he certainly asked me if I would want to do it. We had discussed things, and that was the result of a telephone call after he had appointed Byron White [Byron R. White] to the Supreme Court.

FRIDDELL: What was that all about, the call?

BATTLE: Well, I called Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] to tell her to tell the President at her convenience what a terrific appointment that was. Byron White's appointment, in my opinion, was one of the best that had been made in many

a year and is so typical of President Kennedy, or was typical of President Kennedy. Mrs. Lincoln said, "Well, he is standing right here. You tell him yourself." We chatted for a moment about this and then he suggested or asked me if I wouldn't do one of two or three things. This job in Australia was one of them, and as a result, I did it.

FRIDDELL: You say on the phone in the somewhat casual encounter he suggested two or three offices.

BATTLE: That's right. He always had these problems ahead in front of him. He had disciplined himself so tremendously in his mental capacity that he was not a man that was upset by things; he was someone who looked objectively and he was, as I said, someone who always could see the brighter side.

I think we spoke a moment ago about the time at the golf course in Hyannis when we discussed the possibility of President Johnson's being vice president. That was the weekend that President Truman attacked Jack Kennedy's candidacy and asked, Jack, in effect, "Are you ready, Jack?" That is the way President Truman finished up his speech. He, of course, was supporting the candidacy of Lyndon Johnson. "Are you ready, Jack?" he said.

My wife [Frances Barry Battle] and I were the only ones in the group that weren't members of the family, the Kennedy family, and we were all up there for a relaxing 4th of July weekend. It turned out that Senator Kennedy decided that he had to answer this speech, that it had to be answered and had to be answered promptly, so the weekend was spent drafting and typing and correcting and redrafting the speech that he finally made, which was such a beautifully done reply to President Truman's attack. Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] came in; he and Senator Kennedy worked at length on the speech, and they didn't have a typist. My wife typed it, draft after draft, and every time a draft would come off, Jack would sit down and telephone various friends around the country and read this speech to them to get their reaction. He called people of all philosophies in the Democratic Party, business, labor, liberals, conservatives, all types.

Finally that night before dinner—we were having dinner at his house that night—we were sitting around. You know, they are not drinking people; I think one cocktail before dinner

is about the most I ever saw him take. We were gathered around in his living room, and he read the speech one final time. He then went around the room and asked for everyone's comments of course, we all sort of felt we would like to have a hand in one of his speeches, so everybody had a comment to make. He accepted them graciously, he didn't necessarily incorporate them all in his speech, but then he got to my wife, whose name is Barry, and she was a very devoted and is a very devoted supporter of his. He said, "Barry, what do you think?" She said, "I think it's tremendous." He closed up his speech, he put it down and he said, "That's it, if it's good enough for Barry Battle, Jake Arvey [Jacob M. Arvey], it's good enough for me." [Laughter] Here again the great Kennedy humor, the humble approach, the

down to earth approach that just made everybody that came in contact with him completely devoted to him.

FRIDDELL: Mr. Ambassador, one of the hangovers, so to speak, of the campaign was the effort of Mr. Kennedy to appoint Governor Almond to a Federal judgeship. What, basically, lay at the root of the conflict?

BATTLE: Well, Guy, after the election I was called on to make recommendations for particular presidential appointments, and my endeavor all the way through and the endeavor of those who worked with me was that the jobs of judges and district attorneys, things of that sort should go to those people who were most competent, who would serve with the greatest distinction and who would be most appreciated by Virginians. I realized that there was a conflict that I hoped I could resolve between the Kennedy administration and some of the Byrd people, and Senator Byrd and I felt that if we did select the best possible people, that Senator Byrd would go along with them. In fact, I cleared every suggestion we made with Senator Byrd before it was presented to the President.

Governor Almond was one of the exceptions, and it gave rise to a great deal of bitterness. Governor Almond's time was expiring, and he very much wanted to be appointed to the District Court in Virginia, Federal District Court. Senator Byrd and his people were very much opposed to this, and although I expect it was political, I felt their case had merit because Governor Almond had been right in the middle of the controversy of the school integration question. I felt that—and I think

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ultimately Governor Almond realized that—I think that then in such a controversial position that he would be hard put as a Federal judge to decide questions that inevitably were going to arise in the Federal Courts of Virginia and that this would be the most important question that we would be faced with for some time to come and that he just, because of his involvement, could not take an objective view. I told this to Senator Byrd, and he was greatly relieved by it. I am sure he didn't want to buck Governor Almond, but he was prepared to do it, and it would have been a terrible fight.

I then told Senator Byrd that the President was thinking of appointing Governor Almond to the Customs and Patent Appeals Court, a Federal Court that sits in Washington and would have nothing to do with the affairs of Virginia, and this delighted Senator Byrd and he told me at that point that he thought that was an excellent appointment and that he would see to it that the nomination was promptly confirmed. With this information I passed along to the Attorney General, Mr. Robert Kennedy, he passed it along to the President and the nomination was made, and from that point on things got quite difficult because the rift between Senator Byrd and Governor Almond widened because of a radio broadcast I think that the Governor made in Roanoke. I wouldn't go into that in any detail....

Senator Byrd called me in his office one day, and he began by saying, "Bill, I didn't tell you I would support Governor Almond's nomination, did I?" I said, "No, sir, you didn't

say it in those words; you told me that you thought it would be a fine appointment and that you would see to it that it was confirmed without delay.” He said he just couldn't go along with it after what had happened, that he just didn't know what he was going to do. I told him at that time that it was up to him what he did, but that I wanted it clearly understood that before the President made it and it was only made after the President received this approval from Senator Byrd and that if any publicity was attached to the matter that made it look as though the President was trying to run over Senator Byrd or retaliate for lack of previous support, that I would be called on to put the record straight.

It was shortly after that that I went to Australia, but as you know, this appointment was dragged out for many, many months. Actually Governor Almond served as judge for almost a year before

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he was confirmed, I think, and it caused a great deal of controversy in Virginia and I'm sure the upshot was not to enhance the opinion of the Kennedy administration in Virginia and here again, he bore the burden of something that was not his doings at all.

FRIDDELL: Was that the only instance of friction in your job as patronage chairman, so to speak?

BATTLE: Well, I think it was. None of our nominees, none of the people we suggested that had to be confirmed by the Senate, none of them were held up at all.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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