

**Frank H. Fischer Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/27/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Frank H. Fischer  
**Interviewer:** William L. Young  
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**Biographical Note**

Fischer was an optometrist and local administrator in eastern West Virginia. He was also President of the Young Democrats Club and county chairman of the Kennedy for President Committee in Berkeley County, West Virginia, both in 1960. In this interview Fischer discusses his work on John F. Kennedy's [JFK] 1960 primary campaign in West Virginia, primarily in the eastern part of the state, and how he first joined the campaign; religious issues facing JFK in West Virginia in both the primary and general elections in 1960; and reactions in eastern West Virginia to JFK's Administration and new domestic programs throughout his term as President, among other issues.

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By Frank H. Fischer

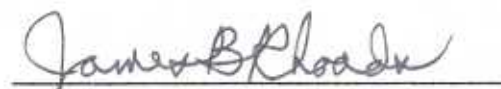
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Frank H. Fischer

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Frank H. Fischer – JFK #1  
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Fischer’s initial interest in John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] 1960 primary campaign in West Virginia
3	The “Four F’s”—Fischer’s advice for JFK on campaigning in West Virginia
4	Combating an unfavorable religious image—JFK meets with Bishop Robert E. Lee Strider of the Episcopal Church of West Virginia
5	JFK arrives in Martinsburg, WV, to answer telephone questions at a local ‘ radio station, 1960
7	JFK versus Hubert H. Humphrey in West Virginia, 1960
9	The religious breakdown of the eastern part of West Virginia, 1959-1960
10	Fischer as county chairman of Berkeley County, WV, for Volunteers for Kennedy—easy to secure volunteers
11	Defeat at the polls in Berkeley County—biggest problems in rural areas and small churches
13	General Election, Fall 1960
14	Reactions in eastern West Virginia to JFK’s Administration and new domestic programs
15	Fischer’s personal moments with JFK and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis during their 1960 trip to Martinsburg

Oral History Interview

With

FRANK H. FISCHER

February 27, 1965  
Martinsburg, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, would you begin at the beginning and tell me how you first became interested in Senator Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] primary campaign in West Virginia?

FISCHER: Thank you. I believe it all began a few years prior to the Senator's campaign in West Virginia when I was selected as president of the West Virginia Junior Chamber of Commerce. I traveled, during my years as president of the Junior Chamber, a total of forty-four thousand miles. In my travels I covered every section of West Virginia. I tried to visit all the state and public institutions and meet as many of the local editors of newspaper, radio, and television as possible. It was our privilege to travel in almost every city over the three thousand size. After my term as Jaycee president, I decided to retire from just about everything except my profession of optometry until one day I received a phone call from an individual named Matthew Reese [Matthew A. Reese, Jr.]. Matthew Reese, at that time, had just finished a term as president of the West Virginia Young Democrats Club. Matt called me at home one evening and asked me down to the hotel for dinner. At that time he informed me that it was the desire of Senator Kennedy to secure someone who had seen the entire state, as I had, who had traveled it, as I had in the last few years. I was, of course, highly flattered and agreed to do so.

Nothing transpired for the next few days. Then I received a phone call one afternoon from Matt, who, at this time, had been assigned to a position at National Democratic Headquarters in Washington, and asked me to be at the Senator's office at 6:30. This call came about 12 o'clock noon on a busy, busy Friday. At first I decided I had no time for this, could not possibly get to Washington, and was tempted to drop out of the entire program. However, Matt presented me with the schedule of the B&O speed liner to Washington and told me to come immediately.

Upon arriving in Washington, we went to the Esso Building, which was the Senator's campaign headquarters. There they had a limousine and a chauffeur waiting for me and informed me I was to go to the home of Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], the Senator's brother, in McLean, Virginia. The meeting, a *very* important meeting, was in progress. In the living room of Bobby's home were nine West Virginians. Also present were Lawrence O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], and I believe Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr.], who later became the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. I was amazed at the intelligence of the group. Bobby was serving as chairman. This was but the first of a series of meetings to determine what the chances would be of Senator Kennedy filing for the primary in West Virginia. I later learned, after about three hours in the meeting—being in complete amazement, I had kept quiet the entire time....

Bobby Kennedy informed me that I had been selected because I had seen the state as no other member in the room had. After three hours he asked for my opinion. Prior to giving my opinion, we had talked about the religious issue in West Virginia; we had talked about the problems of local politics throughout the southern part of the state and, then, the politics in the northern and in the eastern panhandle. We seem to have in West Virginia about four distinct, different breeds of politicians. Everybody is familiar with the southern part of the state. In the eastern panhandle, my section, we still have very much the undecided vote, the cliff-hanger, the tightrope walker. This is something atypical of West Virginia. You pretty well know the results of the average primary in the state by the time the election rolls around, but in this section we don't know the results until 7 or 8 o'clock at night.

[-2-]

Bobby asked my impressions of the possibilities, what the campaign issues should be, what the Senator should discuss, how many appearances he should make and in what sections.

After great thought, my suggestion was we would talk about the "Four F's" and only the "Four F's." He asked what I had in mind in the "Four F's," and I said, "First of all, we will talk about the flag—the flag of the great state of West Virginia, the flag of our country. Second, we will talk about food throughout the state of West Virginia." Not as much now, but in '58 and '59 we had quite a few of the underprivileged, undernourished, underpaid. This took care of two of the F's. The third was the family. As we all know, and as we have heard many, many times, the families of West Virginia have given more of their sons' time and bodies and lives to the service of their country than any other state. Fourth, and, I believe, the most logical of all for West Virginia, Franklin. Everyone looked in amazement, but I felt that Senator Kennedy could talk about Franklin Delano Roosevelt anywhere in our state and win many, many, many friends and votes. So, my contribution to the first meeting

of this type that I attended was food, Franklin, family, and the flag. If you recall, during the entire campaign very little discussion in the political arena of West Virginia covered such things as the international issues, the gold drain, the United Nations. We talked about the four fundamentals that I have just listed.

YOUNG:            Would you then, Doctor, go on and explain your local role or any other advice you may have given in terms of the statewide campaign? Perhaps the statewide campaign first and, then, zero in on your work in your own particular home area.

[ -3- ]

FISCHER:           On the statewide basis, we were in constant contact with the Washington office. Because we had friends and associates in every section of the state at that particular time, I was appointed, unofficially, to find out the feelings of the so-called leaders of the community in several of our middle-sized cities—friends that I had called on in the past.

On the state level I was extremely concerned with the unfavorable religious image we were creating in West Virginia concerning the splinter elements of the various churches—the small church on the side of the mountain and such as that—and some of the very false material that had begun to make its appearance in the mails of the voters.

At a second meeting it was discussed what we could do to overcome this situation. We thought if we could secure a favorable statement from a prominent Protestant leader, we might do something to erase the ill will and the poor picture that had been presented in Wisconsin and was being presented in the southern part of the state. So, a meeting was set up in Martinsburg, or outside of Martinsburg in which the retired Bishop of the Episcopal Church of West Virginia, Bishop Robert E. Lee Strider, probably one of the foremost Protestants in the state of West Virginia, a man highly respected for his knowledge and his dedication to his chosen field.... We knew not what the Bishop's reaction would be to an interview with Senator Kennedy, but we thought we would gamble on it and hope the Senator could impress him very favorably. To watch two men of intelligence and wisdom, a retired Episcopal Bishop and a Senator from Massachusetts something like forty-five years younger than the Bishop, to watch the interview of these two great men, I believe was the highlight of my activities in the '60 campaign. At the meeting we received an extremely favorable statement from the Bishop. This was immediately reproduced and, if you remember, your press nationwide took a more favorable view on the religious issue.

YOUNG:            Dr. Fischer, you were present for the interview?

[ -4- ]

FISCHER:           Yes sir, I was. The interview was at the Bishop's home on a very lovely farm a few miles from Martinsburg.

YOUNG:            Could you describe any of the byplay or any of the details of the

conversation as you remember it?

FISCHER: I believe in the years which I had followed Senator Kennedy there were only two times that he reacted with great skill.... I don't mean only two times, but the two times in which he reacted with great skill, great diplomacy, and much wisdom. The first time was during the interview with the Bishop; and the second time, in which everyone in the world saw how he responded, was during the Cuban crisis. If we could visualize the tension the President was under during the Cuban crisis and realize that he had the stake of the country, and possibly the whole world, in his hands, and think back just a few months before when he had the responsibility of his entire career in the hands of the Bishop and this interview.... Had the Senator received an unfavorable statement from the Bishop, I believe he would have been defeated in the West Virginia primary.

YOUNG: Would you go on then, Dr. Fischer, with the next steps in the primary campaign—any other activities which you were involved in?

FISCHER: The day that the meeting was set up with the Bishop, the Senator flew in from Washington to our Martinsburg airport. His wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis] was to accompany him. The plane was to have come from Bluefield, but there was a bill before the Senate. I forget just the title of the bill, but it had something to do with the import-export of coal. The Senator had been campaigning in West Virginia, and our production of coal is an extremely important issue in West Virginia. Senator Kennedy cut his campaign short in Bluefield to fly to Washington to cast a favorable vote and then fly to Martinsburg. We had an extremely large turnout.

[-5-]

I should digress here just a second. The plane was about two hours late; and despite the fact the weather was not very favorable, despite all these facts, we still had maybe four or five hundred at the airport to greet the Senator. This is in contrast to possibly forty-five or fifty that were in the public square of Martinsburg to greet Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] a few days later.

A caravan was formed at the airport, and we drove to our local radio station, WEPM, where a telephone interview was conducted. The interview consisted of Senator Kennedy and myself in a glass enclosed room on live mikes and a battery of girls receiving telephone questions on any issue whatsoever. I would then relay the question to the Senator, who would respond over air.

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, I know that's a long time ago, but do you remember the general trend of the questions or, perhaps, a few typical questions that might have been asked? Did any particular theme predominate?

FISCHER: Well, the questions, I believe, are generated from the people of the community, and our community is very diversified, therefore, so were the



questions. You must remember we were in the midst of the religious issue. This was extremely important, and many of the questions concerned the Catholic parochial schools and his plans for them as compared to the plans for the public schools. The questions asked by a great many people were what is now recognized as Medicare—at that time increased Social Security benefits; his extreme youth. We even got down to questions of his personal wealth. I remember one question: Would his personal wealth reflect his bearing in office in comparison to President Lincoln's [Abraham Lincoln] poverty? This is the type of question we had.

[ -6- ]

Following the interview at the radio station.... I'm going to tell you one story that I believe was typical of the very soft-hearted, kind man. He knew he had the important meeting with Bishop Strider. I asked Senator Kennedy if he could arrange to take five minutes and drop by a local hospital—not to go in, but I had arranged for a patient to have her bed moved next to the window. The patient had a great admiration for the Senator; her days were numbered. We knew it was a terminal case. We arranged for the caravan to drive by; we paused for a minute; the Senator rolled his window down, stuck his head out, and gave a great big wave to the dying patient. This, I believe, helps to paint the complete picture of the man.

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, you mentioned the difference in terms of the public turnout for Senator Kennedy as compared with Senator Humphrey. In this eastern panhandle section of West Virginia did the two men seem to differ in terms of policies and programs in the primary, or was the difference, would you suggest, more one of personality?

FISCHER: Well, I believe it was both. Senator Humphrey's campaign was very, very poorly planned. He had no county organization as such. Very few funds were available and he had no county chairmen. He arrived in a caravan of a bus and three or four cars. The bus was late. He was warm; he was worn out and, upon leaving the bus, went over to the courthouse square, looked over the audience and saw that the majority of them were gray-haired and white-haired and in their fifties and sixties, and decided to talk about Social Security. One statement which the editor of our newspaper prints every so often is "Don't worry. I'll take care of your pappy in his olden days." I believe this is a direct quote from Senator Humphrey's informal speech.

[ -7- ]

Being so close to the Washington picture, we followed the book very, very, very closely. As the directives would come out, I would try to implement the ideas and the suggestions. We covered the county very well with his newspaper—if you recall his big eight or ten sheet brochure. In the city we covered every door. We set up a large telephone committee, and every number was called, be it Democrat or Republican. I should say that, following the meeting with the Bishop, we went on to Charleston, sixteen miles down the

road, where Senator Kennedy spoke at the Charleston race track before forty-seven hundred people. This was the largest turnout to this date in West Virginia. There was a terrific ovation. I should add that Jackie Kennedy had arrived via a second plane and made a late appearance at the race track. Forty-seven hundred people at this time of the year in West Virginia, sitting outdoors, was quite a feat.

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, I think we've just about reached the end of reel one, so we'll have to run back and change to reel two.

This is the end of reel one in an interview with Dr. Frank H. Fischer of Martinsburg, West Virginia. Reel two will follow.

[BEGIN TAPE II]

YOUNG: This is the second reel in an interview with Dr. Frank Fischer of Martinsburg, West Virginia. The interview taking place in the Doctor's office on February 27, 1965.

Dr. Fischer, would you go on then into a discussion of religion as an issue in this particular section of West Virginia and any particular economic issues other than the ones which you have already mentioned?

[-8-]

FISCHER: In the county of Berkeley I believe we had at that time—'59 and '60—at the maximum, 1,000 Catholics. This includes men, women, and children—everyone. A total of approximately 1,000 out of a population of approximately 33,000. The adjoining counties of Jefferson to the east and Morgan to the west have even a lower percentage of Catholics. The Protestant participation is extremely high. We have more churches per thousand people than any other section of the state. This is one of the reasons we felt a favorable statement from this end of the state would help. As far as the religious issue is concerned, I believe I was the only one—maybe one of only two—county chairmen that were Catholic. The Senator did not know this until long after the general election.

The economics of the eastern panhandle.... Well, Berkeley County is 150 miles from the nearest coal mine. We are a very, very stable community. We have lots of limestone deposits and limestone quarries; we have the great Interwoven Stocking Company, the world's largest manufacturer of men's hose; we have many of the needlepoint factories that make women's wraparound garments for the mail order houses—Spiegel's, Sears, Montgomery Ward, and such as that; we have a DuPont plant manufacturing explosives—nitramine, basically. We have a very fine airport, and, as a result of the airport, we have the West Virginia Air National Guard based here with something like 300 full time employees and 1,000 weekend warriors. We have many, many thousand acres of orchards—cherry, peach, and apple orchards. We're the home of the National Fruit Company, processors of White House brand apples and applesauce, and the Musselman Company, which is now owned by Pet Milk. So you see our economy is very stable, very, very diversified. Due to this, the Senator could not spend too much time on the underpaid and such as that.

[ -9- ]

YOUNG: Do you remember him making any special appeal to local economic interests?

FISCHER: Upon my advice, we decided that this was the best section of the state, the highest income per capita other than the county of Kanawha. We did not discuss this to any great degree.

YOUNG: You mentioned being county chairman. Was this county chairman of the Volunteers for Kennedy?

FISCHER: Yes, it was.

YOUNG: Would you then, Doctor, describe how you rounded up volunteers and give, if you can, a sort of sociological analysis of the kind of people that were interested in helping?

FISCHER: Well, there was no problem whatsoever in securing volunteers for the Kennedy program. The responsibility for securing the volunteers, I guess, fell on my shoulders. I tried to be as diversified as possible. The distribution of handbills and literature in the city proper was handled by a foreman of the Interwoven Stocking Company. At that time they were employing about 700 people. We immediately picked up a great following there. His vice chairman of distribution within the city worked at one of the garment factories. The gentleman in charge of actual door to door delivery of the handbills worked at one of the limestone quarries. So we covered that labor pretty well. I selected as the secretary of the citizens' committee the lady who had just been chosen the outstanding woman of the year for Berkeley County. She, in turn, headed a group of women for the telephone committees. We secured a headquarters room at the junction of two highways approaching Martinsburg, and we had a very large banner painted that said nothing but "Kennedy Headquarters" and had spotlights on it twenty-four hours a day. This drew considerable attention. I was forever running out of campaign supplies. I don't know how many thousand buttons and bumper stickers and such as that. We ran a survey, and our bumper stickers were something like eighteen to one on Main Street on a Saturday afternoon.

[ -10- ]

The county distribution of material was handled by one of the leading farmers of Berkeley County.

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, did you get eighteen to one at the polls?

FISCHER: Unfortunately, we did not get eighteen to one at the polls. Three days prior to the primary, I spoke with headquarters in Charleston and Washington,

and, much to my surprise, they had written Berkeley County off with an approximate loss of 3,000 votes. This was very, very hard for the county chairman to believe, and I knew they had to be wrong. I thought that we would lose the county, but by how much I had no idea. I believe we lost by something like seven hundred and some votes.

YOUNG: What do you think the deciding factors were in the defeat?

FISCHER: The predominant Protestant majority.

YOUNG: In other words, then, religion was a factor.

FISCHER: Yes. Yes.

YOUNG: While we're still on the subject of religion, you spent some time talking about Bishop Strider. Would you analyze the anti-Catholic nature of the battle against Senator Kennedy? In other words, was it the old business of the Pope and the tunnel from the Vatican to the White House; or was the battle fought along other lines; or was it simply not fought publicly?

[-11-]

FISCHER: It was not fought publicly. Possibly, this was because the newspaper and the radio of our area was extremely kind to the entire Kennedy family. We had Bobby Kennedy in Martinsburg; we had Teddy Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] twice. Ted Sorensen made an appearance, and I believe Larry O'Brien came into our section. Red Fay, who was in the PT boat squadron, was here. The press and the news media were very, very favorable. However, Sunday prior to the primary the Protestant churches really shot their big guns. They saved their talks till then, and on several of the Sunday bulletins of the Protestant churches, the religious issue and the tunnel and such as that was mentioned. Our biggest religious problem came in the rural areas and the small churches.

YOUNG: The churches, then, that would normally be considered to be more fundamentalist in belief?

FISCHER: Yes. Yes, indeed.

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, do you have anything more to say about the primary before we move on to the general election? Your activities?

FISCHER: Well, we followed the book very, very closely. We tried to get the necessary press releases and followed all the campaign material that came out of our national office. I believe this was a very typical county.

[-12-]

Going now to the general election.... Is that what you have in mind? In the general election, I thought—and the people in Washington, also—that the professionals, as such—the Democratic county chairmen and county committee members and the city Democratic chairmen and committee—should enter the picture. This was ideal with the folks that had worked in the primary. By this time we were pretty much exhausted, and we needed additional help.

YOUNG: I'd like to interrupt, if I may, on the basis of your statement about the primary election. I understand your point that you were trying to bring together the organizations and so on. Was there a general fear among other Democratic candidates that the President might pull them down because of the religious issue in the fall?

FISCHER: Yes indeed, there was. No, they did not make an issue of this as such, but reserved their comments. I don't believe it was quite as obvious as it was in Michigan with Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] and Romney [George W. Romney], but it was still evident. The county committee became really active, but we had the feeling they were working for the lower names on the ballot rather than the top. This was an unusual general election in which there was a terrific amount of ticket splitting, which is rather uncommon in this county.

YOUNG: In the fall election, what were the results in the county between the two presidential candidates if you can give an estimate, at least, in terms of who won?

[-13-]

FISCHER: Of course, it wouldn't be an estimate in terms of who won. [Laughter] But, gee, I was going to dig out the exact figures, but I just can't.

YOUNG: Well, that information is available, of course. We can just check the *World Almanac* or the state records very easily.

Let's move on from the presidential election to the reaction in this part of West Virginia to the New Frontier and, in particular, the domestic aspects of the New Frontier. In that connection, would you comment on civil rights as a political issue in this part of West Virginia that is, of course, a part of the Shenandoah Valley and a part of the Old Dominion? The civil rights, the Kennedys, and then any other aspect of the Kennedy domestic program might be appropriate.

FISCHER: Well, there was no civil rights issue in this section of the state of West Virginia. Our Negro population is very, very low. It has never been an issue, oh, for.... Well, I've been in this section of West Virginia almost sixteen years, and it's never been a problem. We've had no racial violence of any type in the three eastern counties of West Virginia. Our schools were one of the first sections to integrate

in the state. Well, there's absolutely no problem—no problem whatsoever with civil rights in West Virginia. No violence of any type, no demonstrations—nothing along this line.

YOUNG: Would you go on, then, to just general reaction to the Kennedy years as you observed it from this eastern part of the state?

[-14-]

FISCHER: The most obvious monument to the Kennedy Administration is our new Federal Building in the heart of Martinsburg. For years the politicians of both parties have kicked around the new post office and federal court building. [Interruption] I believe we were talking about the new federal court building-post office. As I said, this had been quite a political issue. Everyone was going to build it, but it seemed as though it rapidly was approved, money was appropriated, and the cornerstone was to say "President John F. Kennedy." This, of course, is a goal we have tried to secure for twenty-some years. In addition, the second monument is better known as the "Martinsburg Monster." This is the Internal Revenue computer center. I feel that the computer center is in Berkeley County because of John F. Kennedy—with the support of Congressman Harley Staggers [Harley O. Staggers]. Without John Kennedy we would not have the Internal computer center in our area. This is a terrific boost to our economy.

YOUNG: Dr. Fischer, along the way have we missed any contacts that you had with President Kennedy or any anecdotes about his appearances here that you would like to relate?

FISCHER: I should mention something about the great First Lady. I was extremely impressed with Jackie Kennedy. Being a professional man and an optometrist, I gathered that she was not feeling too well at the airport. I asked if there was anything we could do to make her a little more comfortable. At that time she told me she had been on her feet for so many hours and thought she'd better get off. I said to myself, "This is a pregnant lady." At this time, no one knew it, I believe. I just asked Senator Kennedy, and I believe I received the biggest grin of his entire career—but no answer. The chauffeur, or the volunteer, that drove Jackie Kennedy to the rally and to the race track in Charleston a very close friend of mine, asked what he could do for her to make her a little more comfortable, and she said, "Let's stop in and get a

[-15-]

Tastee-Freeze ice cream." She had never tasted a Tastee-Freeze ice cream. This was her first experience. It was so good, I believe, he told me she went back for seconds. But this is very typical of a mother-to-be in her condition. Later on, I mentioned to the Senator, "Sorry we did not have pickles at this time, but it was a Tastee-Freeze ice cream."

In the caravan from the airport to the radio station to the hospital to the Bishop's residence to the race track in Charleston and back again to the airport rode the Senator, the driver, and myself. We talked about a great many things. One of the things was his amazing

ability to digest such a vast amount of reading material. He mentioned that the best money he had ever spent was to take a speed reading course in Baltimore as a freshman Congressman. This enabled him to digest and read at a very fast and efficient rate.

I have been asked many times why a professional man would take sides in a primary. So many people say, "Well, Doc, what's in it for you?" There is absolutely nothing in it for me. I will return to the very first meeting with Matthew Reese when he asked me to serve as Berkeley County chairman. I asked him, "Matt, what's in it for Frank Fischer?" He said, "I can promise you only one thing, and that's an autographed photograph of the Senator." This is my most prized possession—an autographed photograph of the Senator with "Thanks and warmest regards, Jack Kennedy." To me this was more than reward for the many hours we have given in our small way to help our country. I thank you.

YOUNG: This is the end of a second reel of an interview with Dr. Frank H. Fischer of Martinsburg, West Virginia. The interview by William L. Young.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-16-]

Frank H. Fischer Oral History Transcript – JFK #1  
Name List

**F**

Fay, Paul B. Fay, Jr., 2, 12

**G**

Goldwater, Barry M., 13

**H**

Humphrey, Hubert H., 6, 7

**K**

Kennedy, Edward M., 12

Kennedy, John F., 1-11, 13-16

Kennedy, Robert F., 2, 3, 12

**L**

Lincoln, Abraham, 6

**O**

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 2, 12

Onassis, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, 5, 15, 16

**R**

Reese, Matthew A., Jr., 1, 2, 16

Romney, George W., 13

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 3

**S**

Sorensen, Theodore C., 2, 12

Staggers, Harley O., 15

Strider, Robert E. Lee, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 16