

**William Ruder Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/13/2003**  
**Administrative Information**

**Creator:** William Ruder

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**Biographical Note**

William Ruder (1921-2011) was the Assistant Secretary of Public Relations for the Department of Commerce from 1961 to 1962. This interview focuses on economic issues that arose during the Kennedy administration and the internal operations of the Department of Commerce, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

With

William Ruder

November 13, 2003

New York City

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: How did you come to be appointed to a position in the Kennedy administration?

RUDER: I was minding my own business! I had not been involved in the Kennedy campaign, except that I was an ardent admirer of him--I had many arguments with my Republican friends--and of course voted for him and thought that this was the beginning of possibly a new era in American politics.

One of my clients was Milt Shapp [Milton Jerrold Shapp] who was the CEO of Jerrold--they're the people who made the television antenna--and Milt ran for governor of Pennsylvania. He was a flaming liberal, as I was. And he heartily recommended me to either Dan Fenn [Dan H. Fenn, Jr.], who was the recruiter at the time, or to Luther Hodges [Luther H. Hodges]. I'm not sure. Hodges was Secretary of Commerce designate at the time, and this was the interim between the election and inauguration. I was in the office and I got a phone call. A guy said "This is Luther Hodges and I'm going to be Secretary of Commerce." And I said the equivalent of "This is Pope Pius and I'm glad to talk to you!" And he said, "Oh, no, no, this really is.... I've heard nice things about you, and can you come down?"

So, of course, I went down, and he was sequestered in an "insy winsy" little interim office--he and Paul Johnston [Paul Alexander Johnston], who was his attorney general in North Carolina. Hodges served as governor of North Carolina longer than anybody. They had a law that you cannot succeed yourself, but he was lieutenant

governor and within a month or two after their election the governor died, so he was able to serve as governor for something like seven years. Paul Johnston was absolutely brilliant, and the two of them interviewed me and I could see the eye contact between the two and the shaking of heads and I knew things were pretty nice. I got a phone call the next day saying they would like me to come down as a special assistant to the secretary.

What they were interested in was somebody who had communications skills and also was not frightening to the business community, because Kennedy had really scarred the hell out everyone in the business community. Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] had sort of mentored me politically. I was sort of a volunteer public relations man for Hubert.

STEWART: Are you from Minnesota?

RUDER: No, I just knew Humphrey. I called him up one day and said I'd like to help. I talked with him and he encouraged me to take it. He said this would be wonderful. I took it and went down in early February, I think it was. I had five kids. We lived in Westchester. I stayed at the Willard Hotel, just across the street from the Commerce Department.

After a little while Johnston, who came with Hodges up from North Carolina, in charge of administration, at Commerce Department, left (he had committed himself to only three months or so, just to get things going) and they asked me if I would take that job. They created this thing--assistant secretary for administration and public affairs--which apparently got clearances in Congress. I was scheduled to go up for confirmation and the day before the hearing a couple of guys, one from Commerce and one from the White House, showed up at the house at about 9 or 10 o'clock at night. I invited them in and they said "Bill, we don't think you should go up because your FBI file had some awful stuff in it and it could be embarrassing."

I said I've never done anything that I would be particularly concerned about showing up on the front page of *The New York Times*, and I'm going up and if you guys refuse to let me go up, the day after tomorrow there will be a full page ad in *The Washington Post* about the courage of the Kennedy administration! At which point they said "We'll get back to you." And they called me first thing the next morning and said o.k., go up. So I went up and it was a piece of cake.

STEWART: What was the problem?

RUDER: I did not know what the problem was until a couple of months later. Being in charge of administration, security reported to me, so my own file came up to me for approval. Well, it turns out that some guy who used to work at Ruder & Finn said that we represented Russian Intourist, the travel agency, and that we made a presentation to them and they were paying us a lot of money to us and they had put a fee in a Swiss bank account and so forth.

General Electric International had been our client and when the confrontation with Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and Khrushchev took place in the model kitchen of the Moscow trade show and Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] banged on the refrigerator,

my man who was handling press for General Electric was there because it was in a GE kitchen--which was not by accident! The Intourist guy said "what do you do?" and my man explained it to him and he asked if "you guys would be interested in working for the USSR," to promote tourism.

I wrote a letter to the State Department asking if this was in the national interest and they wrote back saying, yes, it is! So I wrote a big proposal and gave it to the embassy here and nothing ever happened--nothing. They never even said thank you. And that was in my file as a *fait accompli* and the Swiss bank account and all that kind of nonsense about whatever they call those informer people--agents, I guess.

And another item in my file was that I was seen going into the Czech embassy on a certain time on a certain day and seen coming out later. I've never been near the Czech embassy in my life!

So I took this into Hodges and said "this is awful. I think we ought to ask Hoover to give me one of these full-field investigations, where they start from zero--every dime you own and everything else--and work forward." And they did, and of course it came out clean as a whistle and then I said I'd like a lie detector test, which was kind of humiliating. It's like an electric chair, and they are behind this window, and they say there are only three answers--yes, no and silence. They were, of course, very polite to me, because after all I was an assistant secretary.

And they said "Is your name William Ruder and do you have any other names or aliases?" Now nobody calls me William--everyone calls me Bill or Billy--so I started to get charged up. And of course I had to say "Yes!--to that whole string of questions.

And then they said, do you live at 6108 Kennedy Drive, in Maryland, and do you have any other safe houses. So of course I still had my house in Harrison NY so I have to say "yes."

In any case, it all turned out fine and I asked Hodges to ask Hoover to write a letter and to have it put in my file, so the FBI, ONI, CIA and to say that I was an upstanding American citizen. Unfortunately nobody ever gave me a copy, although I did see it. So that was the root of the problem.

And that's how I got involved.

I had locally been the head of the Democratic committee in Harrison, which was basically a Republican town. I loved it and it was fun, but I had nothing to do with any broader political work from there.

STEWART: You had not had any experience in Washington?

RUDER: None whatsoever. It was the most thrilling time of my life. Every single day it was like studying for a final exam.

Hodges used to call the Department of Commerce the attic of the government--if they didn't know where to put anything, they put it there. Fisheries was in it. Weather was in it. National Bureau of Standards was in it. Census was in it. Of course economics was in it and all that stuff, and a big bunch of that reported to me so I had to study. I would take home a pack of studying every night so that I could talk to these guys. It was a wonderful thing, just wonderful!

STEWART: Did you get immediately involved in the atmosphere--the social life--of Washington at the time, or was there a social life for you?

RUDER: No. There was a social life, but I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anyone in the White House. I had five children. They moved down later. I wanted them to finish their term in school. They moved down in early June and we bought a house, or rented a house. Before you know it, everyone is inviting you to parties at the embassies. The only one we went to was the French embassy where they had footmen with white silk stockings and knickers. It was so awful we said we would never go to another one again! That's the only one I went to.

Mine was a very "inside the department" job. Hodges took care of the White House. Gudeman [Edward Gudeman], who was the undersecretary, took care of Congress and I took care of the inside. So I rarely had any social intercourse with anybody.

STEWART: Could you talk about Hodges a bit. From all that has been written, he had a difficult relationship with the business community right from the start.

RUDER: It wasn't exactly right from the start. He had been the head of Fieldcrest Mills and then ran for lieutenant governor of North Carolina. He was a very interesting and complex man. He and Paul Johnston desegregated the public schools in North Carolina without a ripple, way before the ruckus in Birmingham and so forth. On the other hand, whenever one of the black attendants would come into the secretary's office to refurbish the fire, I could see him tense up. He was a very complicated guy.

The business community was o.k. with him until.... There was the Business Council, which was "umbilicated" to the Department of Commerce. It was supposed to work through the department and had been accustomed to receiving private briefings on everything.

Hodges, Gudeman and I went to their annual meeting, not at the Green Briar, but that other fancy place down there.... White Sulpher Springs? And everybody was awfully nice to us and expected Hodges to be, in effect, of service to them. And then Hodges--who was infuriated by the clubbiness of this and the tightness and secrecy of it, said that from now on all meetings will be public, to be attended by the press.

The Business Council was infuriated. They disassociated themselves from the Department of Commerce. They called themselves "Business Advisory Council" or something like that--but became independent of the government. And Hodges became the *bete noir*.

On the other hand, Hodges singly and solely managed the textile legislation. It took about eight months to do. This was a tariff situation, very much contrary to free trade and all of that, but he did it and I think, for whatever contact I had subsequently, he was revered in that industry and the people in North Carolina loved him. He had started the Research Triangle in North Carolina. And that really changed the economy of the state.

STEWART: Didn't he take steps to replace to replace the chair of the committee--

Ralph Cordiner [Ralph Jarron Cordiner] from GE [General Electric]--who had been involved in some price problems in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration?

RUDER: What happened is this: There had been the Philadelphia price fixing case in which Westinghouse and General Electric were hauled up on a price fixing thing and Westinghouse, interestingly enough, and the facts were really there, said "the facts are there, the buck stops at the top" and, I forget the guy's name, "I take responsibility as CEO." General Electric, on the other hand, said "We didn't know anything about this. It's not our fault. These are all accounting guys."

That was a highly celebrated case. My point of view was that the public confidence in the honesty of the business community was seriously shaken. I suggested that we start a Business Ethics Advisory Council and that took an executive order. We wrote it up and it was a beautiful operation. It had 24 men (they were all men!). Half of them were businessmen and half came from journalism, religion, business education--people entrusted to looking at business from an objective and perhaps critical point of view.

Fred Lazarus, the head of Federated Department Stores, was the head of it and, the guy--big retailer from the West Coast. We started by trying to come up with a code of ethical conduct. We quickly realized that that was not possible and if you did it it would hang up on the wall and would only be noticed in six months when you took it down and they saw the dust marks!

But what we did was to come up with a series of questions that we thought management should be asking of themselves and of their colleagues, continuously. And that was going along rather nicely. I left after about two years or so. It didn't have a rabbi after that so it just atrophied. It was a pity.

STEWART: There was a bit of opposition among some in the business community?

RUDER: Oh sure, they thought that this would be some kind of offense against them--but the 12 businessmen were picked with extraordinary care, like Fred Lazarus and guys like that. They managed to calm that down and after the first two meetings I got no sense that there was any opposition, after they realized we weren't going to come out with a big mandatory ethical code.

STEWART: Or a big government program of some kind--

RUDER: Yes, yes.

And that was great fun for me. I was so excited when the president said we could go ahead with it. I didn't meet the president--Hodges handled it all.

I didn't have much contact with the president--very little. When he made his speech to the National Association of Manufacturers, which was, I think, his first formal presentation, which would have been in the late spring of 1961, I was the guy who sat next to him on the podium, holding the speech and handing it to him. I was stunned by his nervousness. His hands were shaking. After five or so minutes, he got into it, but this

was his maiden voyage to the business community and it was a good speech. I can't tell you now what was in it but I think it was an honest speech. I think it was a non-confrontational speech. But on the other hand, I think he talked about what was important to him.

STEWART: I believe I read that he was the first president in 50-60 years to speak to that group?

RUDER: That may have been, I don't know.

STEWART: Could you talk about other contacts with the president, if any?

RUDER: One time, everybody was sick and I went to the cabinet meeting. And that was lovely. This was at the time of the steel crisis. The president and Bobby Kennedy were furious. The president said, "Who knows Roger Blough?" (The chairman of US Steel.) Nobody knew Roger Blough [Roger M. Blough]. I did, but I had no leverage. At the cabinet meeting, you sit constitutionally. And all the "unconstitutional" new guys sit way out there. Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] was labor secretary and he was way down at the far end on the right and he came up with "six degrees of separation" (I know Sam, who knows Ralph, who knows...) and the president looked down there and said "For Christ's sake, Arthur will you shut up!"

An interesting incident took place in a contact that I did not have directly with him, but that Gudeman had with him, after the Bay of Pigs. There was a cabinet meeting. Hodges was in Europe, so Gudeman went. (Gudeman was a terrific man, in my opinion. He was the number two man in Sears before and then at Lehman Brothers before he came in.) And the president came in and, of course, everybody was feeling awful, and he looked around the table, according to Gudeman, and he said, "For Christ's sake, how do I get the truth around here!"

I really didn't have other contacts with the president.

Then, of course, I left not on a planned basis. My company was Ruder & Finn and my job was bringing in the business and managing the three larger clients, Coca Cola, Philip Morris and Bristol Myers. And the business had gone into a serious loss situation. It's a family business and David Finn (my brother in law) and I were both supporting our parents. And David's father and mother both came down with cancer, so here the business was going down the drain and I loved those people dearly, so I told Hodges I really had to go. And I think the guys in the White House were kind of ticked off at me, so I didn't get a "Dear Bill" letter. I got a "Dear Mr. Ruder" letter, which I was disappointed at--but here I am at age 82 and it doesn't matter a bit!

But they were very nice to me in the sense that they arranged for the family to come to say goodbye to the president. It was a Monday morning and he was coming back from Hyannisport and the helicopter was later than they expected, so they said, well why don't you go roam around. So, Eric, who was the youngest, who was 3 or 4 at the time, I guess, had a thing about vacuum cleaners. And we were in the State Dining Room and they were cleaning the carpet so he helped vacuum the State Dining Room!

And they said the helicopter is five minutes away, so we went down on the lawn and watched it come down and then went in and Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] gave the President lollypops to give to all the kids.

STEWART: What kind of dealings did you have with the White House staff, with Mike Feldman [Myer "Mike" Feldman] or others?

RUDER: Relatively little, but it was with Mike. Very bright, very nice, very warm. One or two times I had trouble because part of the conceit of the White House was that everyone could read as fast as the president. I remember one time I went over on an issue related to the Maritime Administration, which reported to me. There was some new kind of thing about the barges on the Mississippi River and it was a 22 page document, so I went over and I sat next to Mike's desk and I asked if he would mind looking this thing over and letting me know if was o.k. and--"just give me a buzz and I'll come back over." "No, no, wait," he said. He went through it, "zip, zip, zip." I said to him, "Mike do me a favor, don't tell me now, call me tomorrow and tell me what you think. I really don't want a snap judgment."

Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] was very pleasant to me. We only bumped into each other a few times. I had no work with them except a couple of times with Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], who was in charge of appointments, so if there was someone who was terribly important I'd call him. Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] I met though rarely had to work with him. But after Washington, when I came back, and Fred had become a public relations man, he was very warm and I enjoyed getting to know him. Kenny O'Donnell impressed me as being remote, hard to penetrate.

So I am very pleased with the way all of that worked, because I had no political ambitions, so for me to be a completely inside man--the commerce department was huge then, the Bureau of Public Roads was in it, this was before the DOT was started, we had 40,000 employees or something like that, all over the place--I learned a lot.

STEWART: Anyone else on WH staff? Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger]?

RUDER: There were times when we had to clear something. The rule was if you had good news the White House had first crack at releasing it. If it was bad news "let us know, but do it yourself." It was on that level that I had contact with Pierre. It was all done mostly by telephone.

The White House staff and the men in the government who became close to the White House staff were a very close club. And since I was so excited about what I was doing I was not interested in furthering a political career and making nice and all that. I didn't invest any time in making sure I had tennis game over there, or whatever people did!

STEWART: Did you know Gene Foley [Eugene P. Foley], the political person in Commerce?

RUDER: I didn't have anything really to do with him, because he was political.

STEWART: In terms of dealing with the substance of any of the major issues--steel prices, tax cuts, etc.--did you get seriously involved, or was this done mostly through Hodges?

RUDER: Yes, only through Hodges. The "E for Export" was my idea. At that time we had a serious problem with the balance of payments. (It looks like the "good old days" now, but it was seriously looked at then.) I had this idea of reviving the old Army Navy "E" of wartime, but just reverse the colors, instead of the the E being blue on white. We set up criteria and companies could apply for it, and it was rather successful. Again, it was one of those things that when there was no rabbi it kind of faded out. I don't know how long it stayed. And that also needed an executive order, which the President issued.

STEWART: You left in the summer of 1962, and then came back for a time in 1963 to do some work on the ratification of the Test Ban Treaty?

RUDER: Yes, Ruder & Finn was retained by a group that the White House had set up that could engage a public relations firm. And we did a hell of a job! The assignment was to build grass roots understanding and support for senate confirmation of the Test Ban Treaty. We worked like slaves on that and I think we did a very good job. Even though the outcome was not all ours, of course, we provided some of the nice space for it.

This was not a government contract. We had a contract with a group of private people.

STEWART: Did you do anything in any other administrations?

RUDER: When Carter was president his press secretary started a small advisory group and asked me to join that, which I did. We had a couple of meetings and you get ten guys around the room all wanting to show off how smart they were! It really was not useful, and we only met two or three times. That's the only other Washington post I had. I was also on the transition team and handled Commerce with Ira Milstein as my partner.

STEWART: How did your name get on the Nixon "enemies list"?

RUDER: I don't know. One time Castro [Fidel Castro] came here, to the UN. And he made a speech at the Waldorf, and I went. And a lot of people were invited. I honestly don't know. I consider myself a bleeding liberal. At Ruder & Finn we tithed ourselves 10% of our time for billable work. And I would monitor the John Birch Society and see who they were aiming at and then I would volunteer our services for them--Mary Calderone [Mary S. Calderone] and the Sex Information Education Council and the World Federalists and other people like that. Maybe that is how it happened, I'm not sure, but I was thrilled.

STEWART: Any final comments?

RUDER: We had the red telephone on our desks. It was for White House calls. It rang and it was Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] and he said "Mr. Secretary"--and when some big shot starts to call you "Mr. Secretary" you know you're in deep trouble already! "Do you have a man by the name of 'Joe Blow' on the payroll?" I said, "Mr. Vice President we've got 40,000 people here. I really don't know. I'll find out and call you back." He said "I'll hold the phone." So I pushed all the buttons. Every so often I'd come back and say, "We're still working on it." Finally we found this guy. He was a consultant and he wasn't doing anything, but I found out we had been asked by the White House to put him on as a consultant and there is a 120 day limit.

Well, I never heard such language in my life. Johnson just went right through the roof. He said "I want you to get rid of that guy right away." I said, "Mr. Vice President, I'll tell the secretary." So, I went in and told Hodges and he called the White House. Apparently this guy had something on Johnson and they wanted to sequester him in the Department of Commerce so they could use him if necessary. I think he would up someplace at a weather bureau in Alaska where no one would ever find him!

STEWART: Any other controversial political appointments?

RUDER: I did not get many of them. I got some from Congress, which were very disappointing--in fact were sheer blackmail. Mike Mansfield [Michael J. Mansfield], for example, called up one day. We had about 30 field offices to help local businesses and we had one in his state (Montana) and he wanted a guy to be appointed head of it. Well the guy couldn't write his name, practically. We retested the guy but he kept flunking. Finally, Senator Mansfield said, "Mr. Secretary, you better come up here." So I went up and he said, "I want that man hired by Monday and for every day, after Monday, that he isn't hired your appropriation will come down a million. Bear in mind that I'm chairman of your appropriations committee in the senate." I went back and told the secretary and of course we hired the guy.

The other thing we did (I'm not sure I was the initiator or not) was start the United States Travel Service. This was part of the trade balance program. We had to pick a man to run it and I thought it should be an advertising man and we got someone from J. Walter Thompson. I think he was terrific and he helped me develop the whole program, and run it, and then this conflict of interest came up and he resigned from J. Walter Thompson in order to continue helping me.

Then we had to pick an advertising agency and, of course, in the big agencies they all knew people in the administration and there was a lot of pulling and tugging. And we finally picked Olgivie, without political pressure. But we had to fend off a lot of political people. That was all approved and the legislation was all approved.

Don Petrie [Donald Archibald Petrie] was the head of Avis, as I remember, and he wanted the job and he got support from the White House and, I think, from LeMoyné [K. Lemoyne Billings] himself, who was very interested in the Travel Service. Hodges owned a Howard Johnson franchise and he had a friend who was his partner in that and a

couple of other things, so he considered his buddy an expert in travel, which of course he wasn't, certainly not international travel. And there was a big pull, fight and tug between Hodges and the White House and Don Petrie was no slouch and he knew just how to push all the buttons. And Hodges stood firm and this guy was appointed head of the Travel Service and that was part of the growing distance between Hodges and the White House and their feeling that Hodges was old school, deep south--in some ways he was and others he wasn't. Hodges used to say he was the last cabinet member who was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and he was kind of proud of that, but the people in the White House felt the other way about it. That was a highly contentious time. The atmosphere in the secretary's office was very tense. And the relationships with the White House were not at all good. It really had deteriorated, and I think they were glad to get rid of Hodges, whenever that happened.

I learned a huge amount. The exciting part of life was that I and I think almost all of us felt that there was nothing that was impossible, nothing that could not be done. It was such a heady time. I worked my butt off. I think I made a difference in the department. There were things that wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for me--budget procedures, personnel policies and things like that. And I loved it! I often wonder what would have happened if the president had lived. And sometimes I think the world would have been a hugely better place and then sometimes I wonder "Did it take Johnson to put through all the civil rights legislation?"

Of course, I don't know how good the Kennedy White House was at moving legislation. I honestly don't know, but Johnson was incredible. My hope was that I would be able to go back and forth, that I could come back to Ruder & Finn, fix it, make enough money so that I could go back on a government salary and maybe take a different job and learn different things and just flow and ebb like that. But I was urgently anti-Vietnam and therefore *persona non grata*, and then Nixon came in and that was the end of that. So it was a nice idea, but never grew to fruition, but I still lived a very happy life anyway.

STEWART: How did you become so anti-Vietnam?

RUDER: I don't know how it happened, specifically, but the body counts, the draft, the irrelevancy of it to our national security and the way the cost of it was beginning to seriously intrude on social services. My oldest son became of draft age and I encouraged him to look into conscientious objector counseling and then his number came up and it was so ridiculously high that it became a moot point, so he didn't have to do it, either honestly or dishonestly. But I thought that the national debt, the body count, the dishonesty of it--it got worse and worse with Nixon and Cambodia, of course, and Kissinger [Henry A. Kissinger]--and the polarization of the country and the drug culture that was emanating from those times.

I got involved in a lot of the campus unrest in terms of trying to calm it down. My clients were Coca Cola and Philip Morris at that time--two great brand names--Marlboro cigarettes--and the kids were starting to boycott them in the easy way, namely you could boycott them and not deprive yourself. All you had to do was drink Pepsi instead of Coke or smoke Camels instead of Marlboros. So a number of us were working on campuses to try to encourage some kind of rational response in terms of their opposition to the war,

and I could see what it was doing to the psyche of these young people and it just scared the hell out of me.

And that had nothing to do with Washington or my relations with government. I was not involved in any of that.

I found it hard to go back to Washington. I was on the school board in Harrison and I stayed on the school board even when I was down in Washington and I would fly up at the end of the day to go to the school board meeting. In those days the last shuttle was at 11 or 11:30, and I would come back because I wanted to maintain my kids' ties to Harrison. And I remember when I was up there on departmental business and I wanted to say, "Don't you know that Rome's burning?" And after coming back, and it took about a year, I would meet somebody from Washington and I would want to tap them on the shoulder and say "Hey don't you know there's a real world out here?" It was a complete reversal. I found it hard to go back. A few times I took my kids back as they got older, to see my old office and all of that, but that's about it.

But it's wonderful. I wouldn't have given that up for anything!

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Name List

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