

George A. Smathers Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 3/31/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: George A. Smathers
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Biographical Note

George A. Smathers (1913 - 2007) was a United States Senator from Florida who served in office from 1951 to 1969. This interview focuses on the relationship between John F. Kennedy (JFK) and Senator Smathers, JFK's handling of US-Cuba relations, and JFK's interest in the future of Latin America, among other issues.

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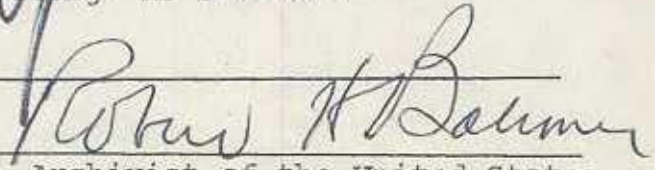
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George A. Smathers—JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE A. SMATHERS

March 31, 1964

By Don Wilson

For the John F. Kennedy Library

WILSON: This is the first interview with Senator George A. Smathers of Florida with Donald M. Wilson as interviewer, and the place of the interview is Senator Smathers' office.

Senator, I thought we might start out by talking about Cuba. Do you remember going into the problem about Cuba with Mr. Kennedy before he was President, say perhaps back in the days when he was a Senator? You might start at that point.

SMATHERS: Yes, chronologically. Well, Don, as Senator and then later as President, Kennedy knew I had made a career of Cuban problems and had several times tried to impress the then Senator Kennedy with what I felt was a very important area in which he should interest himself. He recognized that it was important; however, I don't recall his actually ever having said anything specific about Castro and Cuba in an official way until the campaign of 1960.

Just prior to his coming to Florida, I had gone with him out to Ohio on a trip — a campaign trip — and had ridden with him throughout the day. We arrived at Louisville, Kentucky, late Sunday night and spent the night there. He went on somewhere into the South the next day, — I have forgotten where at the moment. But on that particular trip I talked with him about what I felt he should say about Cuba. As always he listened attentively and with considerable interest, but never made any comment.

When he came down to Florida to speak, he asked me (when I joined him) what suggestions I had for his speech at Miami. He spoke in Bayfront Park. The governor and a lot of other public officials were there. Just prior to the speech while riding in the car, I told him that he should talk about the importance of Cuba in our whole national relations problem, to recognize that it was a danger and a threat to the rest of Latin America, and so on. He said at that time that he had a pretty good speech that he was satisfied with that he had planned to make in Tampa later on that day, unless I had a better proposal. Because he was making several short appearances in the Miami area and there was really no good occasion for a major speech, I agreed with him that it would be better to make the big Latin American speech in Tampa. At that time we had a larger Cuban population in Tampa than we ever had in Miami.

However, I told him I thought he ought to mention Cuba while in Miami, which he did. He talked briefly and as concisely as he always did about the danger of Cuba, the desirability of freeing it from Communism, the importance of it with respect to all of our long-range policies in Latin America. Of course, at that time we were trying to remind the people that it was Eisenhower's administration which permitted Castro to come to power in Cuba. I had talked to the President a great deal prior to that time

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about what I knew from my own personal visits to Herter, — he was then Secretary of State, — urging that they should try to stop Castro before he came to power. Shortly thereafter he took over. I had told Kennedy of the ineffectiveness of those visits. In his speech, Kennedy was very strong in that which he had to say — that his administration would have a commitment to the freeing of Cuba and the strengthening of freedom in the hemisphere. It was a most satisfactory statement all around.

When we got over to Tampa that afternoon — I think he spoke there about 3 o'clock — enormous crowd — he began to talk about the origins of the Alliance for Progress. He made an excellent speech there. He wasn't actually quite as effective as he should have been because he partially read the speech, and the part that he read wasn't as good, as far as the crowd was concerned, as what he said off the cuff. It was obvious, as is usually the case, that a read speech and somebody else's words — I don't know who exactly worked on the speech — but it wasn't as impressive as his own words with respect to the problems of Cuba. But it went over so well, he used the idea again that night in Jacksonville, where again we had the largest crowd that had ever gotten together in that town up to that time. He was enthusiastically and warmly received, not only because of himself, but because of the things he had to say, particularly about Cuba. The people

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of Florida were then, and still are, much more interested in Cuba and what's going to happen in Cuba than in any other area outside the United States. After that, the Florida campaign was over as far as he was concerned.

I recall that before one of the debates with Nixon, he called me, — I think I was in Jacksonville at the time, — and we visited a little about the background of Cuban problems and how much did Nixon really know about the development of Fidel Castro and his takeover of

Cuba. Kennedy knew Nixon very well, and I knew him very well, in some ways a little better than Kennedy did particularly on the point of Latin America, and we discussed that. I saw the TV debate, and Kennedy reminded Nixon rather forcefully, as I recollect it now, that a little research would have clearly demonstrated that Fidel Castro would have turned out to be exactly what he turned out to be, — and that Ike and Nixon were too quick to recognize Castro's Cuba. That was the only mention of it at that time.

Now, after Kennedy actually became president, — I didn't know Dick Goodwin at all, but he told me he thought Goodwin was bright and was going to have him work on the Latin American problems. I never did get too well acquainted with him. I felt then and I feel now that he really didn't know too much about the area, but he is a very smart fellow and like many intellectuals and professors, —

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they write sometimes considerably better than they think in terms of realities.

But anyway, the question arose with respect to Cuba after Kennedy became President on whether or not there should be an embargo. I had urged one, even though in Tampa we have 6,000 cigar workers and a large number of cigar plants there. They were buying at that time about 18 or 20 million dollars worth of cigar leaf from Cuba every year. It seemed to me that if we were really going to be against Fidel Castro we should stop trade, even though it would not be popular in Tampa. So I had urged the embargo and the cutting off of all trade with Cuba on many occasions in the early days when he first came in, and in fact so many times I couldn't even recite them all.

I remember that nothing was developed on it until one night just before he appeared before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1961. He invited me to come over there and take a swim with him and when I got there he had been resting. I went to his quarters and George, the butler, told me to knock on the door, — the President asked me to come in. He was reading a whole sheaf of papers. He went through some of them real quickly and pulled out some marked "secret" from Rusk. It was a memorandum back to the President which he had originally sent Rusk, and which I had initiated to the President,

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regarding the importance of an embargo on Cuba. The President had sent it on to the State Department for assessment. Rusk had written back, citing the fact that there was much opinion against the embargo. But I remember Rusk saying in this paper that he thought it a good idea, and I urged the President to impose it.

Well, I don't know if the dates could be reconstructed but I told the President that I was pleased and I thought Rusk was smarter than I had previously thought him to be. I didn't know Rusk at all, but I can say that I have since come to the conclusion that he is a very able man not only on this but on all other matters.

However, nothing came of that for quite some time. I think probably, four, five, or six months elapsed before the embargo was actually put on. That is, trade was stopped. In the meantime, I had talked with the President this had sort of gotten to be, I guess, a sort of an obsession with me. I talked too much about it as well as all Latin American problems.

I recall when the President made a trip; I think the first trip was to Venezuela and Columbia. Anyway, he got an enormous reception. Of course, Jackie made a speech in Spanish, and that wowed them. But, anyway, I continued to pursue this problem with him. The Alliance for Progress by this time had been announced and he appointed Ted Moscoso, a long time friend of mine, as the Director. I was a little

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critical of the fact that Munoz Martin and some of his people were so influential in the determination of Latin and Cuban policy, and I recall that we had a pretty good argument about it. I admired Munoz Martin, I thought he was great, but I never felt, and don't now, that he was or is a very great friend of the United States. I had heard him in 1946 or 1947 when I was first a congressman, or candidate, when he refused to speak on a platform because an American flag was there. I was in San Juan at the time. So, naturally, I had never been very much impressed with him or his regard for the United States, even though I recognized he was a very smart man, and since has done a magnificent job with Puerto Rico.

However, what I am leading up to is that we finally got to the point where the President, — well, I am getting ahead of myself. I recall when the Bay of Pigs episode came off. Before it came off, we had been over to a legislative breakfast, or I was over there for some reason or other, and he took me out in the hall and he said you are going to read some very surprising and interesting news which ought to make you happy about Cuba. And I said, well that's fine, what is it? And he told me that at that very moment the transports were on their way with troops and everything was in readiness, and Castro would be out within hours.

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Now, I should go back even before that, because one time before we had sat out on the lawn, I recall, and we talked about the possibility of an invasion of Cuba and he had frankly not indicated anything more than a rather objective interest in whether I thought the Cuban people would rally to support an invasion force, did I think those Cubans would really fight, and question of that nature.

WILSON: When was that conversation?

SMATHERS: This conversation was out on the lawn and obviously prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion. It was quite early in his administration. What was the date of the Bay of Pigs, do you recall offhand?

WILSON: April of 1961.

SMATHERS: Somewhere along in March, I would say. We talked about the possibility of whether or not the assassination of Castro would really accomplish anything, — would it be liable to make Fidel a hero? We talked a little about Raoul. I have known Fidel Castro personally since 1947. So we would talk about Castro and the various alternatives.

Then I remember another time again out on the lawn when we were talking about the British going into Egypt to seize the Suez Canal and to defeat Nasser. You will recall Eisenhower and Nixon apparently intervened and brought about a change in British plans and this resulted in a change in British government. I recall President Kennedy

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saying that he felt like Churchill — he used to quote Churchill a great deal — he quoted Churchill as having said I don't know that I would have ever started it. But having started it, I would never have allowed it to end in anything but victory.

WILSON: When did he say that? Just before the Bay of Pigs?

SMATHERS: Before the Bay of Pigs. I want to say that this is where I thought, and I think possibly others thought, the Bay of Pigs would have a different outcome because of President Kennedy's general attitude about things of this nature. Having once started it I felt he wasn't going to stop until it was won.

Now, the morning of the Bay of Pigs — the morning actually before it started — he told me that, that it was on it's way and it would be something pretty dramatic before much longer.

The next thing I recall about it was that there was a party at the White House that night for all the congressmen and senators. I was there dancing with my wife. I recall we never saw the President. He came down very briefly, walked through a couple of rooms, and was gone. The next thing I knew, Bobby invited me into a corner for a moment and said things are going pretty badly, what do you think we ought to do? I said you ought to put the Marines in. I remember Bobby saying — you must be kidding. I said I

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couldn't be more serious. And so, with that, he turned away. He didn't think much of that idea and I guess no one else did either. History only can be the judge of that. But, anyway, that much happened. Thereafter, of course, the invasion deteriorated into a debacle. We all know the sad story. I was somewhat shocked at the way it turned out because it hadn't been too much before that that I had heard Kennedy refer to Churchill's remark with respect and admiration. He was this kind of a fellow and I still think he was this kind of a Churchillian fellow.

I now think that on this particular occasion maybe he was right. But I thought then that he should have gone forward and won, and worry about the public image later.

In any event, I recall talking about it later with him and, frankly, he had become pretty unhappy with the Navy and the admirals. As he recounted it to me, not in great detail, it was just a typical screw-up of the Navy, which anybody who had been in the Marines or Navy or Army in World War II should have known would happen. From the conversation, I gathered that he had gotten a call from Stevenson up at the United Nations, wanting to know was it true United States planes were bombing Cuba. Kennedy had admitted an operation was going on. Adlai had apparently been rather shaken up and Kennedy had said he would get all details and call him back. After he had checked with the

admirals and with the Chiefs of Staff and all they had done was look at their sheet which would indicate at what time the troops, guns, tanks were going ashore, rather than checking out how far it had actually gone, they told the President that everything was in good shape according to schedule and apparently they didn't need the United States air cover. This is what I gathered; I don't remember his actually saying that in so many words. I do recall his belief that it was just a good, simple snafu because the military men had merely looked at their time schedule and had presumed that all was going well and so advised him. It was thereafter that he indicated he had lost confidence in the military hierarchy and was going to make some changes.

BEGIN TAPE II

WILSON: Did President Kennedy specifically mention the Navy when he said he was unhappy about the way things were going or was it generally the military?

SMATHERS: I recall his saying something about being unhappy with the Navy, but I also remember he had some unhappiness about General Lemnitzer who I think was then Chief of Staff and actually I recall his saying at that time — "I have learned one thing out of this that I am not going to put all my faith and trust and confidence in these military people. Never again."

As the conversation developed — I don't know how much of it I have supplied since these conversations myself — as I recollect the conversation, Stevenson had not known anything about the invasion and had immediately responded when the Cuban delegate made the charge Stevenson said it was not true — there was no bombing, there was no attack on Havana, etc. Then he called the President and the President told him there was actually a invasion going on, and then Stevenson stated something to the effect that he was embarrassed, that he would have to resign — I remember that word — it was then that the President checked with the military to see how things were going and they told him that everything was going according to schedule and that by this time of day, according to that schedule, all of

the supplies would have been unloaded and on the beach or inland — and it wasn't the case.

But Kennedy did not know that, so he called Stevenson back and said we have not used planes and we are not going to bomb civilians and so on. Then he had given the order that if everything is already landed don't use any more of the planes. I think some actually had been used but not to a great extent.

This is the story as I got it; however, it turned out that was not the case — things were going badly and it turned out to be a complete debacle.

So the President was disillusioned and disappointed, but he said it was just one of those things. But he was not going to put a lot of trust and confidence in this particular bunch of military people from this point on, and I think that was when he actually determined to have his

own man — somebody he had great personal confidence in — Maxwell Taylor, the man he finally selected to go over and keep informing him even before he became Chief of Staff.

WILSON: Excuse me, when did the President talk to you after the Bay of Pigs — do you remember how long afterwards?

SMATHERS: Just about a week.

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WILSON: Were you alone — what was the locale?

SMATHERS: In his office. His big office there in the White House. We just had a long visit about it.

WILSON: Did he discuss the effect of the Bay of Pigs on the American people? Your state?

SMATHERS: Not particularly — it was something — no, he wasn't as much concerned about that, it seemed to me, as he was about the fact he had made a misjudgement on the basis of incorrect facts and that was what he was so irritated about. He knew it was a devastating thing to him, but as was so typical of him throughout his life — I never saw him worry when things went bad for him — he was not the kind of fellow who involved himself in raking through cold ashes of his own mistakes or mistakes he had been particularly responsible for.

WILSON: Did he discuss with you at all the possibility of using American forces and planes in this conversation?

SMATHERS: No. He had been nice to the extent that he would discuss the matter with me at all. I didn't feel like saying "I told you so" and never did say anything of that kind to him. We had discussed — I'm getting myself confused — later we discussed several times whether or not American troops should

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be put into Cuba. He told me exactly how many divisions the military said it would take — 14 days with a minimum of roughly 75,000 casualties — and all the enormous amount of work that would go into the crushing of Castro.

As I remember, that was after the Bay of Pigs when we were talking about what then ought to be done. And he had given some thought to — at least he had them prepare, I think, some kind of a battle plan that might be necessary to use and I recall his telling me how difficult it would be to take Castro after the Bay of Pigs episode. But on the day we talked about the Bay of Pigs, there wasn't much recrimination on his part except generally with the military and that information which they had supplied him.

WILSON: Let me interject one second. Let me go back, Senator, to that which sounded like a rather interesting conversation you had the day before the news hit the newspapers, and he told you what was happening then. Can you remember precisely what he said?

SMATHERS: I can remember where it was. This is why I think it was at a legislative breakfast; it may not have been, but I recall it was early in the morning, — between 8:30 and 10 o'clock. And I recall we were not in the office part of the White House, we were over in the living quarters part of the White House, on the main floor where we generally have the legislative breakfast.

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The President had gotten very concerned over people overhearing what he might say. I'll add one thought here, — he used to say he had one sure method of talking to people and knowing they were not recording his conversation. He said, — I take them swimming, take off all their clothes, put them in a pair of my trunks, and then I feel reasonably safe about it.

To get back to the answer to your question. We were standing in the main lobby as you walk into the White House, the main door. I don't think I am now conjuring this up, but I think the President put his foot up on one of the seats and we talked there for a few minutes. He said there is going to be some very dramatic and, I am sure pleasing to you, information about this whole Cuban development. And he said — he always used to kid me about Cuba; most every conversation we had would start off in the nature of a kidding conversation — and, as I recollect, it was something like this. "I'm going to let you warmongers have your way — you warmongers are going to be happy now..." And this is the way he approached me with every conversation — always kidding. So, as I recollect that day, it was the warmongers were going to have news that would be very pleasing to them. At that time they were already on their way. That was the morning they actually did make it.

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WILSON: Let me go back to another conversation you mentioned on the lawn. Can we amplify on that a little bit. You mentioned discussing the possibility of an assassination. Can you tell me a little more about what he said on that?

SMATHERS: Well, with respect to that — we talked about a lot of things. He liked to go out and sit in the sun whenever the sun was out. This was not too often in the wintertime. If there were days when he could get out — being essentially an outdoor man he resented the fact — he didn't really resent it — but every time he had an opportunity to get out, he'd get out and so he'd say, — come on let's walk out on the lawn.

It was very nice, and we were sitting there generally going over all kinds of problems, gossipy ones and other ones, and the question came up about Cuba. I don't know whether he brought it up or I brought it up. We had further conversation of assassination of Fidel Castro, what would be the reaction, how would the people react, would the people be gratified. I'm sure

he had his own ideas about it, but he was picking my brain on this particular question as I had heard many times he picked the brains of others. And on those occasions he would very rarely express his own view because he wanted to hear what the other man's view was before he made up his mind, — or maybe he had his mind already made up. He knew if he expressed a

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contrary view, a lot of people couldn't help but be a little tempered in their statements if they knew the President held a contrary view. As I recollect, he was just throwing out a great barrage of questions, — he was certain it could be accomplished — I remember that — it would be no problem.

But the question was whether or not it would accomplish that which he wanted it to, whether or not the reaction throughout South America would be good or bad. And I talked with him about it and, frankly, at this particular time I felt, and I later on learned that he did, that I wasn't so much for the idea of assassination, particularly where it could be pinned on the United States. I did talk to him about a plan of having a false attack made on Guantanamo Bay which would give us the excuse of actually fomenting a fight, which would then give us the excuse to go in there and do the job.

WILSON: Did he make any comment on that idea?

SMATHERS: He asked me to write him something about it. And I think that I did. I don't know if he ever kept any memorandums I wrote to him or whether he just threw them away. I know some of them he saw, but in those days I was writing him memorandums at the rate of about two or three a week about something. I had learned that actually he was a fellow who seemed to get a more favorable impression with the things that he read, distinguished

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from the things that he heard. If it was written and written well, he would be much more impressed with it than even if it were said well. His mind didn't seem to want to hold onto things he heard quite as much as it did with things he had read. So with things I really tried to make an impression on him about I would write to him rather than speak it. I would speak with him and talk with him about it and then, if he demonstrated some interest in it, I would come back and try to work up a concise, well-written, and forceful memorandum on it.

I am satisfied I could actually look at my own records and determine whether or not I sent him that memorandum on this particular point. I know that I did write him, and I think about it, because the idea had first been presented to me by a newspaper man who works for the *Palm Beach Post*. He wanted to volunteer to leave — he had been a former flyer — and he had this elaborate scheme worked out. It wasn't too bad if you were going to do something of this character. And I recall asking that man to send me a memorandum and I in turn sent it to the President with my own remarks about it.

WILSON: About this period we have been talking about which was in the very first months of his term up to and including the Bay of Pigs; did he ever mention to you any

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people he relied upon for information about Cuba, or do you think he was having trouble finding people who could give him good advice Cuba?

SMATHERS: I'm certain he was having a good deal of trouble finding somebody whom he respected and whom he thought was objective who could give him good advice about Latin America. As far as I was concerned, I think he recognized that I probably knew as much about Latin America, — and I used to say, Mr. President, I know a hell of a lot more about Latin America than any of these fellows I've seen around here. I used to try to get him to get some people, even people who had been formerly businessmen and who lived in South America, just to talk with him and get their impressions.

I recall we talked about Peter Grace one time. I was not so much interested in Peter, but he's got some people under him who have been working in Latin America all their lives and I wished the President would talk with him. I told him I think you're getting too much the professorial view of this thing.

Well, I don't really believe that the President, after awhile, put too much credence in what I had to say about Cuba and Latin America because he thought I had oversold myself, first for political reasons, and second, having traveled as I had in Latin America from 1947 up

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to 1960 I had met all the dictators. They were the leaders of the governments, and you couldn't go into a country without meeting Peron, without meeting Stroessner in Paraguay, or in the Dominican Republic without meeting Trujillo; you couldn't go to Cuba without meeting Batista. So I think this sort of made him draw back from me with respect to the problem of Cuba and Latin America which eventually lead, I might add, to his saying to me one time, — this was long after the Bay of Pigs and long after the embargo and other things, — but he finally said to me, "George, I love to have you over, I want you to come over, but I want you to do me a favor. I like to visit with you, I want to discuss things with you, but I don't want you to talk to me any more about Cuba." And this was exactly what he said and I acceded to his request. From that point on, we didn't talk about Cuba.

WILSON: When was that, do you remember?

SMATHERS: Well, it could have been — I would think that it was early in 1962 along about that time. I remember I was over at dinner one night. Just he and I were there, and Bill Thompson was going to join us, but something happened — he would only ride the train — and he couldn't get there. The President was actually fixing our own dinner, and I raised the question about Cuba and what could be done and so on. And I remember

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that he took his fork and just hit his plate and it cracked and he said, “Now, dammit, I wish you wouldn’t do that. Let’s quit talking about this subject.” And so I said all right, it’s fine with me. “I appreciate the opportunity to come over and visit with you, and this subject I won’t bring up again.” And I never did.

WILSON: Before that time did he ever give you his appraisal of Castro as a man? Do you remember his discussing him as an individual?

SMATHERS: No. I don’t remember his talking about Castro. I remember his asking me a great deal about Casto, but I don’t recall his giving me his judgment on Castro at all. Except that he thought he was really a very dangerous fellow.

WILSON: Up until this time when you had the final discussion about Cuba, do you remember anything after the Bay of Pigs that might add to —

SMATHERS: Well, not particularly. This got to be a subject which I stayed away from and he liked to stay away from it. Every now and then he would bring it up — just a little - we’d talk about individuals. I remember we talked about Figueres one time on a boat trip down the river which was long after he said he didn’t want me to talk about this subject. We talked about Beltran who was in Peru, we talked about Betancourt. I had known all these

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people long before he did, and so he would ask me about them and we’d visit about them. I think we talked about Chiari, President of Panama. But actually we never did talk about any policies or any program with respect to Cuba or Latin America, we talked about the Alliance for Progress generally, which we all thought and he thought was a great idea, and everybody I knew also thought it was a great idea. It didn’t go particularly well —

WILSON: I’d like to wait and get into that after Cuba. Maybe we can move to the missile crisis. Did you have any relation with the President before, during, or after the missile crisis?

SMATHERS: I was campaigning in 1962 for reelection. The President, of course, was out making a speech. I actually did not see him with respect to the missile crisis until he sent for us to come up to the White House. He had already made up his mind what he was going to do — his speech he was going to make that night at 7 o’clock.

WILSON: Were you one of the senators —

SMATHERS: I was speaking, and got word to come up and then went to Tampa and flew in an Air Force jet here to Washington. We went to the Cabinet Room. The President handled it masterfully;

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McNamara was there, Rusk was there, John McCone was there. He first had us briefed — I'm sure this story has been told many times. In any event, he asked me if I wanted to stay and hear his speech live. I was the only one in the room outside the Cabinet men when he made that speech that night and I have a picture which shows me looking over the cameras at the President when he made that speech.

Right after the speech, we walked outside. I congratulated him on making a great speech and he was not at all nervous, not at all upset. He said, well, we're really up against it, which was evident of course from the speech. And we visited a minute, and I said, well, I'd better go. And so I left. But that was the last of the Cuban thing until about four or five days later when I had gone back to campaigning in Florida and I read a story in the paper where it said the President had made some sort of a deal with Khrushchev. Khrushchev was going to do this — and the President in turn was going to make certain concessions to the communists. Maybe recognize Castro. This was suggested in the story. I recall that I was in Pensacola, Florida, at the San Carlos Hotel, and I put in a call to the President because it seemed to me to be a very disturbing thing. And I remember, which was always a very pleasing thing to me, that I could always get him on the phone.

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I had a very difficult time sometimes getting the help, but I could always get the President. And so I got Evelyn Lincoln and she said just hold on a minute, and then the President came on, and I said, "Mr. President, there's a story down here that there is some kind of a deal made that sounds very bad. I think you won a great victory, but I sure wouldn't let all the sand drain out of the bottom of the barrel. I'm afraid if you don't say something and deny this

BEGIN TAPE THREE

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WILSON: You called the President and got him on the phone.

SMATHERS: Yes, and I got him very quickly and I told him what the story was in the Pensacola paper and that I had been out on the street for an hour or two — the call was placed about 10:30 or 11:00 and I had seen these people and everybody was greatly aroused. Said it alarms me — you won a great victory and your prestige could never be higher and let's don't let it get away. I hope to goodness you will be able to say very emphatically that there is no deal of any kind and no understanding of any kind with the Soviets, and he said you can be absolutely sure there is no deal.

I remember this very well because later on something came up which indicated that some kind of an understanding had been had. I remember my conversation with the President and that it was plain that there had not been any deal of any nature. Naturally, he was going to have to converse with Khrushchev and talk with him, but as far as any understanding that we would now recognize Cuba, or Fidel Castro, or that Fidel Castro was good, or that he would be taken into the family of Western Hemisphere nations, — no such thing. So I repeated that fact in many speeches during the balance of that day and three or four subsequent days, as long as that particular story was circulating.

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I remember it circulated, it seems to me, for three or four days.

WILSON: Senator, let's clean up the Cuban matter now. Do you remember any other discussions you had with President Kennedy after this phone call up to the time he was assassinated that concerned Cuba?

SMATHERS: I don't remember any. At this time, I just don't remember any.

WILSON: Let me go back a little bit on Cuba to pre-election days — any time up to 1960. Did you ever have any conversations with him about Cuba as an election issue other than that which you mentioned earlier? I might also ask, was Cuba a matter, before he became President very frequently in his mind or not?

SMATHERS: My feeling was that he was not sufficiently aware as to the importance of Cuba, and I used to talk with him rather insistently about it after he became a candidate for the presidency. I used to — every time I had an opportunity — I would try to talk with him about it and I think this is one of the reasons that finally led to the fact that he always identified me with pushing, pushing, pushing.

It always had seemed to me he was well-oriented [Unintelligible] Europe, because of his education, because of Jackie's background, and so on. For instance, he made a speech

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with respect to France's colonial interests in Southeast Asia. He was well informed about that. But it always seemed to me that he had not been as well informed about Latin America, and then when Fidel Castro went in — the Cuban problem — as he should have been. Consequently, I always did most of the talking about this matter, but I really don't think he was impressed with it greatly until he had been in Florida and seen what a tremendous response he got. Of course, that's natural in Florida — geographically very close to Cuba — but I recall that after his visit in Florida he began to insert into his speeches more and more on the subject of Cuba no matter where he was. And I think that after he became President and during that time between the election and when he was sworn in, he was really grasping the overall importance of Latin America in a fashion which he never had before. The Cuban problem was, of course, very much in the paper, and I think it was in that period of time — in his first year — that he really began to

understand and to really appreciate the great importance of Latin America to the United States and to his whole overall foreign relations problem.

I had always thought in the early days, here's a fellow who just isn't very interested in this area, but I must say that after the campaign got underway and about in the middle of it, he began to pick it up, see it,

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talk about it, and talked about it a great deal after that and I'm sure got it into its right perspective thereafter.

WILSON: One final Cuban question — did you ever discuss the problem of Cuban refugees in your state with him?

SMATHERS: No, not particularly, other than the fact of how many we had. When the Cuban refugee problem got to be a tough problem was after he enjoined me not to talk to him about Cuba.

So — Congressman Rogers was always talking about the problem — so we would talk a little bit about Paul Rogers — he liked Paul — Paul never did go for him very much — and we would always laugh about it.

One time I recall the President said, — well, I see Rogers has picked up your Cuban flag and is running all over with it, or something like that, and I said, — Yeah, you've sort of taken me out of the business; I haven't been able to make a speech about what's wrong in our dealings with Cuba, now, for over two years. It was awfully easy to do it when Eisenhower was in; I used to get up at least one a week and have a field day, like Keating did on Kennedy. But when Kennedy got in I didn't make a Latin American speech, I don't believe, — a major one — for two years — 1961 and 1962.

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WILSON: Turning to Latin America more generally and not zeroing in on Cuba. From the time he began this awareness, beginning with the campaign and subsequently, did you ever have conversations with him and can you recall what transpired about economic programs for Latin America, the Alliance for Progress, what was wrong with it, your views which I gather were considerably different from his, can you recall any of those conversations?

SMATHERS: Well, very frankly, we didn't have very many conversations on just the overall problems of Latin America. About the time of the Punta del Este agreement and conference, we talked a little bit about the general overall problem and, of course, that was the first time formally, I guess, that the general concept of the Alliance for Progress had been mentioned in Latin America by one of his representatives. But Wayne Morse, I recall, did go down with some other senators for the conference, but the President and I didn't talk a great deal about it. I thought it was a good idea from the little I had heard about it, and as I began to read about it in the press, I congratulated him on the concept of

it. I was most pleased that he was going to demand a quid pro quo. If they got help in those countries they were going to have to bring about some kind of reform — it would be difficult —

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it would be the people that ordinarily he liked and I liked that would probably be the most critical of this type of reform. But nevertheless it had to be done. This was a better way to do it than having a revolution with bullets and violence. I remember generally discussing it with him, but I am frank to say I don't recall any specific conversation we ever had with respect to the overall program of the Alliance for Progress.

WILSON: When you — in some of your discussions — were you frank with him about your views about some of his advisors such as Richard Goodwin and others, — what was his reaction, if he had any?

SMATHERS: Well, I was not strong on Goodwin, as I have said, and I so told the President. I recall that when he got ready to send a fellow by the name of John Martin to the Dominican Republic he told me about it. I said, "What has he done?" He said, well, he has written some articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* I think, and he has been down there once, and I said, Mr. President, I wish that you'd get a more practical type to go down there. This was after Joe Farland had been quite a really good ambassador at the Dominican Republic and had been most effective I think. (Oddly, Farland cut me up last year.) But I think it was because of my high recommendation of him to the President that the President kept Joe Farland, an Eisenhower Republican appointee, on in the service.

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He put him in Panama. But anyway, — be that as it may — he sent Martin to the Dominican Republic.

WILSON: I just want to get that straight — he kept Farland in Panama — Farland was in Panama at the time Kennedy became President, I'm pretty sure.

SMATHERS: Anyway, he kept him on. I talked to him about Farland — what a top quality fellow he was as an ambassador. I think later on Farland got to figuring he owned Panama instead of being a representative. But he was excellent in the Dominican Republic. So — you asked me did I tell him about what I thought of people. Yes, I told him. I told him that I thought this fellow Martin would accomplish not a thing. I said he's undoubtedly a great writer; something in the *Saturday Evening Post* — I'm not sure — a few articles maybe. The guy came over here and sat here in this office. I talked to him for 35 or 40 minutes and if I have ever seen a fellow who is unimpressive — I consider myself just an ordinary man — but this fellow was most unimpressive. I thought he was a bad appointment and I told the President it looks to me, with the people you know, you could get someone with more ability. I'm afraid, I told him, that Goodwin has got you going on this fellow and I don't think he's going to do you any good in this area at all. Well, he didn't

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have too much to say — he would just listen to those things.

To digress just a moment — a lot of things occurred subsequent to this particular occasion that made it very obvious that the President realized that he was the final source of authority and power. Most all information would finally get to him, and he would hear good things about one man and then he would also hear bad things because that word would finally seep in to him, and he would finally be the possessor of all information. He expected to hear both good and bad about anybody with whom he had any relationship, because there is nobody perfect and he knew he was going to get it. On some occasions he could predict who would say what about whom. He figures there's a type Smathers won't like. I was pretty rough on Martin but he listened I recall. He just looked at me and said, "Well, it's tough to get good men."

To digress another moment — he was going to appoint James Van Fleet as Ambassador to Australia — this was the kind of thing that made you love and appreciate Jack Kennedy — made me love him and I am sure others too. I was getting ready to run in 1962, and he seemed to be pretty much concerned about my race; he was always asking me about it. I said, I am a little worried about Van Fleet. He said, well, I admire Van Fleet — in Greece he did a great job and in Korea. He said that maybe he could take him

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out of the picture. So I said — what're you talking about? He said we could make it impossible. So he told me I had the authority to call Van Fleet and offer him the job as Ambassador to Australia. So I did, and Van Fleet didn't give a "Yes" or "No" answer. He said to let him think about it; he said, can I come to see you and thank you? I don't think I want to take it; I want to make you a counter offer. So he talked to me and he wanted to see the President, so I called the President and we went over there to the White House — and Van Fleet said he wanted to go to Korea. His son was killed in Korea, buried there, he had many friends there — he was too old to go to such a young country as Australia or even New Zealand. The President said he had already appointed someone, already got himself committed to appoint a man. As a matter of fact, I think he is on his way now to South Korea. I recall the General thanked him very much and got up and left. I stayed around; I think that was one of the mornings we went swimming. We talked about Van Fleet and what a rugged man he was and we hoped we could be as rugged and as clear-eyed and manly looking when we got to be 65 as General Van Fleet was. That was the way Jack Kennedy was willing to really go out of his way to do favors for somebody he considered a friend. That was one of the reasons I loved him so very much. I used to knock some of the people over there pretty good. And

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he expected it from me. I think he had me catalogued just about right. I thought professors were excellent as professors — I didn't think that necessarily because they were good writers they could be good administrators.

WILSON: Did he ask your advice on any of the foreign service officers he appointed in Latin America?

SMATHERS: No. He didn't ask for my advice; he did say this to me — he said if you can come up with some really top quality names I'd like to have them, because we are having a very difficult time getting top quality people for these jobs. I knew that was the case. And I am sure, as a matter of fact, just like the case with Martin in the Dominican Republic, I'm sure if Kennedy had been able to pick out actually the man that he wanted and been able to say this is it, he would have gotten somebody — as a matter of fact, I think he told me he had offered this job to about three other people and could get none of the three to take it, before he got to Martin.

WILSON: Did you suggest any names to him in the three years —

SMATHERS: No. I had the same trouble he had — he couldn't find anybody. Frankly, the caliber I was looking for they just wouldn't give up what they were doing. Gene McGrath's brother is now the Bishop — the youngest Bishop in South America. Gene McGrath's family lived in Miami, but he lives in and is a citizen of Panama and his brother Mark

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is also a citizen of Panama and the highest ranking Catholic official in the area. I took McGrath over to see the President one day — and McGrath is an excellent talker, an Irish talker, and he can really make a wonderful impression to begin with. We went out on the lawn and sat down and I recall McGrath sat on the ground, the President sat on the bench and I sat on the bench. I recall one of the arms almost fell off. The President was suffering with a bad back; his back was hurting him at this particular time, and this armrest broke down and it really hurt him and he grimaced very severely from it. I recall that I had recommended to the President that he talk to McGrath, who was always interested in Latin America and knew all about Latin American policies. I said to the President, now, some day you ought to let this fellow give you some ideas with respect to Latin America. He's lived there all his life, he went to school with all these people in the area, he's particularly close to the boys from Nicaragua, the Somosa brothers, they all went to prep school in New England somewhere, — and he's smart. I remember the President saying to me — that guy, he can really talk.

We talked again about the difficulty we had in getting really good men to go to Latin America. McGrath offered to go, but neither the President nor I felt he was just exactly the type that ought to be our representative, even though he was smart.

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WILSON: Did the President talk to you after he returned from his first trip to Latin America — to Colombia and Venezuela — do you remember that?

SMATHERS: I remember he told me he had never received a warmer and greater and more enthusiastic reception in his life, up to that time. When he came back from Germany he told me that was the high point. Each one of his trips apparently got better and better — Mexico was also a tremendous thing. But I recall at that time he told me that he had never in his life, up to that time, felt such warmth from a crowd, such enthusiasm from a people, as he had in Venezuela and Colombia.

WILSON: Did he make any comments about Betancourt or —

SMATHERS: We talked about it — of course, we all agreed that Betancourt is a top quality man. I've heard the President state how much he respected him, which of course is what everybody who knew Romulo thinks about him. I told him my first experience in meeting Betancourt was in 1948 when Betancourt had been a communist and how he had slowly made this transformation from communism into what he now believes in, which is some sort of socialism. But the President thought he was very able and very courageous. But we didn't talk too much about it. I remember the President saying that he had a feeling that if anybody was going to be able to walk that fence between political

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extremes and survive in Venezuela, it would probably be Betancourt.

WILSON: I think we might end it here. We've been at it for an hour. This is the end of reel 4 of the first interview with Senator Smathers.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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