

Ray V. Fitzgerald Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/25/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Fitzgerald was a South Dakota political figure; State Secretary of Agriculture for South Dakota; Assistant Deputy Administrator, Price and Production; and Deputy Administrator, State and County Operations, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in the United States Department of Agriculture. In this interview he discusses his first time meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK]; JFK's campaign visit to South Dakota in September 1960; the importance of agriculture in JFK's Administration; the reaction to JFK's death in agricultural fields; and the role of agricultural committees in civil defense, among other issues.

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Ray V. Fitzgerald – JFK #1
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	First time meeting John F. Kennedy [JFK], 1959
3	September 1960—JFK made a Chief in the Sioux Nation
3	JFK’s speech at the 1960 National Plowing Contest near Sioux Falls, South ‘ Dakota
6	Why JFK lost in South Dakota
7	Interaction with JFK after the 1960 election
8	JFK makes an effort to promote agricultural industry
9	The county committee system of administering farm programs
11	Reaction to JFK’s death in the agricultural fields and farming communities
13	Agricultural committees play a role in civil defense

Oral History Interview

With

RAY V. FITZGERALD

June 25, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By George A. Barnes

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BARNES: Mr. Fitzgerald, will you recall the time and the circumstances of your first meeting with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]; if you did know him or have an acquaintance with him personally?

FITZGERALD: The first time I recall meeting President Kennedy personally was in 1959 at Huron, South Dakota, when the then Senator Kennedy spoke at a Democratic fundraising dinner. At that time I was living in South Dakota, State Secretary of Agriculture and would-be member of Congress from the first district of South Dakota, active in state Democratic politics. The second time, as I recall, was in June 1960 when Senator Kennedy was seeking support in behalf of his candidacy prior to the Democratic National Convention. Several of us met Senator Kennedy at the airport in Aberdeen as he was arriving for a fundraising dinner. I remarked upon the fact that he must have had a well informed and efficient organization because when he stepped off the plane he said hello to me, shook hands, and congratulated me upon winning the primary contest in which I had been involved and which had been concluded just a few days before. That evening in the lobby of the hotel in Aberdeen my wife, who had not had the opportunity to meet Senator Kennedy at the dinner and who was waiting to return

home with some friends, saw Senator Kennedy getting off an elevator in the lobby with some of his entourage; she spoke to him and introduced herself as Mrs. Ray Fitzgerald and he said, "Oh yes, I know you. I remember you at the dinner and I certainly hope your husband is elected to Congress." My wife thought that was rather remarkable. I also remember that I had prevailed upon a friend to come to the dinner. He was a registered Republican, an official of a dairy association in the state of South Dakota, and not politically oriented. I recall that after the speech this man turned to me and said, "That's my candidate!" As a result he became a Democrat. I thought at the time Senator Kennedy accomplished in one speech something that all the rest of us in South Dakota hadn't accomplished in a good many years of effort.

BARNES: Mr. Fitzgerald, may I interrupt just to ask you to tell us a little more about what office you were a candidate for, and what part you were playing at the moment in the politics of the State during these meetings?

FITZGERALD: I had resigned as the State Secretary of Agriculture in 1959 to become a candidate on the Democratic ticket for the position of Congressman for the first district in South Dakota, a seat which was being vacated by Congressman George McGovern [George S. McGovern] who had become candidate for the United States Senate. I again met Mr. Kennedy—at that time he was the Presidential candidate—in Sioux Falls in September 1960 when he spoke at the National Plowing Contest which was held near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. When we met the candidate

[-2-]

at the airport the Sioux Indians made Senator Kennedy a Chief in the Sioux Nation, and I recall they made me a Brave at the same time and I asked them what I had to do to be made a chief, and they replied that "you have to get elected." But Senator Kennedy they made a Chief even though he wasn't yet elected President.

BARNES: Right at that point, could you describe a little bit of the ceremony—was there a ceremony? Did Senator Kennedy seem to enjoy it?

FITZGERALD: Yes, there was a ceremony; it was quite brief. The officials of the tribe were there, including the Chief; there was a beating of drums, and a little ceremony during which the Chief spoke a bit in Sioux and then translated into English to inform Mr. Kennedy that he was being made a Chief in the Sioux Nation and gave him a name which I don't recall at the present time. The Chief attempted to put a Chief's war bonnet on Mr. Kennedy's head. Mr. Kennedy would have none of that. He didn't want that war bonnet on his head. The ceremony was brief, and he seemed to enjoy it. He remarked on it later. It was one of the first times he had ever been made a Chief and certainly the first time to become a Chief of the Sioux Nation.

I rode in the car with Senator Kennedy out to the location of the National Plowing Contest. It had been raining for two or three days, the grounds were a mess, and when we got to the site of the plowing contest we disembarked and went into a trailer they had set up there for us, washed up a little bit, then went on to the platform. Before the speech was finished—

or during the course of Senator Kennedy's speech—it began to rain a little bit and since Mr. Kennedy wore

[-3-]

neither hat nor coat he got wet. He was very enthusiastically received. Immediately after the speech was over he evaded the State patrolmen and the local police, and jumped from the platform to the ground, walked over to the snow fence that was set up to separate the crowd from the speakers platform, leaned over the fence and began shaking hands with people. I guess there were perhaps 50,000–60,000 people there. I recall that the security people, to protect everybody, locked their hands and put their arms around 3-4 of us to move along this fence. I was almost frightened because the people were insistent on trying to touch the candidate's hand any way they could, shout at him, and I was afraid that the fence was going to fall down and I was sure that we all would be crushed to death because they were about as excited a group of people as I have ever seen in my life.

BARNES: Mr. Fitzgerald, this was the occasion on which the candidate Kennedy made his most important speech on agricultural policy during the campaign. Is that correct?

FITZGERALD: That is correct. And I must say that many people in that crowd—most of the people were farm oriented if not in fact farmers—and their attitude before his speech was not particularly friendly to Mr. Kennedy. I suppose the reason was that he was not from the Midwest nor from a farm area. He had no farm background. And some of them were familiar with some of the votes he had cast as a Congressman, and later as a Senator which were interpreted as being not too friendly to our type of agriculture in South Dakota.

After his presentation a good many minds were changed, or at least fears of the Kennedy policies were allayed. He promised in that speech, as I recall, that he would give all due attention to the field

[-4-]

of agriculture, stressed the importance of agriculture to the welfare of the nation. He said he would favor policies to make much greater use of our agricultural abundance, which, incidentally, he implemented later on through the expansion of the Food for Peace Program. He said he did favor farm programs that would try to control excess production, in turn for which farmers should received better prices than they then were receiving under the administration in power at that time.

So I think that his speech was a successful one; I think that his appeal to the people was successful, and certainly the personal magnetism of the individual was demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt.

I might say that upon the conclusion of the speech and after the handshaking was over, we got into a car with the man who is now Senator George McGovern, who was running for the Senate at that time, Senator Kennedy and I sat up in back of the convertible

car and started for the city. We had quite a time getting out of the grounds because the people insisted on trying to touch, to speak and to shake the hand of the candidate. I recall that when we got into Sioux Falls and started down the streets that the people along the road along the route insisted on trying to grab or touch Senator Kennedy. He was sitting on the outside of the back of the convertible and they could reach him. I was sitting next to him and I recall that a couple of occasions when I actually grabbed hold of his arm because I was afraid they were going to tear him off the car. He wasn't a

[-5 -]

very big man and I thought that they would at least pull his arm off. It was, again I thought, quite a demonstration of his personal appeal which the man seemed to have.

BARNES: Now, what was the outcome of the vote in South Dakota? Did Senator Kennedy carry the state?

FITZGERALD: He did not carry the state. He lost quite badly in South Dakota. This was due to a variety of reasons, as usual. The state is traditionally very conservative and it is traditionally overwhelmingly Republican. About every 20 or 30 years we do elect a Democrat in South Dakota. South Dakota has not cast its vote for a Democratic candidate for President since 1936 and 1960 happened to be a disastrous year for the Democrats in South Dakota. I'm sure that part of the problem was probably religion. We are a heavily Protestant state, and we happen to be a state where the people distrust or mistrust easterners, so to speak. And a Republican tide was running in the state that year. Whatever the reasons, Senator Kennedy lost heavily in South Dakota, as did every other Democratic candidate. After the speech at the plowing contest, we rode in a plane with the candidate to Mitchell, South Dakota, where he again was met at the plane by a motorcade. We traveled into the city of Mitchell where the Senator spoke at the Corn Palace in that city.

BARNES: About what time of year was this?

FITZGERALD: This was September of 1960. The Corn Palace was jammed to the rafters. There was not a single inch of space that was available for one more being. Many of those people had been sitting in the Corn Palace for three and four hours because many people did not want

[-6 -]

to miss the opportunity to meet and to listen to Mr. Kennedy.

After that speech I know that Mr. Kennedy went on to Montana. I believe he had had a breakfast meeting in Sioux City. He spoke at the National Plowing Contest; he spoke at Mitchell, South Dakota, and I know that he had two more meetings that day and was to end up in Montana that evening, so evidently he had a great deal of vitality.

BARNES: Did you see him again during the course of the campaign?

FITZGERALD: I did not. He was not in South Dakota again during the campaign. This was his swing into South Dakota and the last and only one.

BARNES: Now we move ahead a little bit into the period of his incumbency into the Presidency. Is that correct?

FITZGERALD: Yes.

BARNES: During this time did you have meetings with him or were you directly involved with the implementation of his policies?

FITZGERALD: I had no further direct meetings with President Kennedy after the campaign of 1960, except at a fundraising dinner and gala here in Washington, D.C. I might say that in 1961 at the first dinner held out at the auditorium, I walked up to the head table and said "hello" to the man who was then President. Though I had aged somewhat and put on some weight, I thought it very remarkable that he remembered who I was and commiserated with me upon losing the election in South Dakota. I thought it remarkable that he would remember somebody like me with a comment of that kind after the passage of so much time. Otherwise, I had been concerned with the administration of farm programs here in the Department of Agriculture and had had no personal contact as such with the President,

[-7-]

although I have been involved in implementation of his policies and programs at the direction of the Secretary of Agriculture.

BARNES: Well, now, let's see. You came then to Washington from South Dakota to accept your present post.

FITZGERALD: I came to Washington in February of 1961 as Assistant Deputy Administrator for Price and Production. This was supposedly a little group which set the policy of ASCS at that time. Since that time the agency has been reorganized and that position no longer exists. In June of 1962, I became Deputy Administrator for State and County Operations, the position I presently hold.

BARNES: So, during the period from early 1961 until the present you have been heavily involved in the evolution of commodity policy in the administration of the agricultural adjustment programs?

FITZGERALD: Yes, that's right.

BARNES: Have there been instances during this time in which the President's

particular interest in one phase or another of the farm program was manifest—by some action or statement of his, aside of course from the messages to Congress on agriculture, which he did send up?

FITZGERALD: I—it seems to me that President Kennedy made a real effort to acquaint the people of the urban areas of the United States with the accomplishments of agriculture, as well as its problems. I think he did more than any man for a long time to let people in this country know of the considerable contribution made by farm people and by our agricultural industry, a contribution to the welfare of the nation and to its position as a

[-8-]

world power. I think that he has manifested his belief that agriculture and its abundance should be used to a greater extent not only for our own people, but for our Food for Peace Program, our Public Law 480 programs, so that he could strengthen our nation and help the people of the depressed areas of the world.

He made the Food for Peace Program a direct responsibility of his office and assigned it greater authority, put more responsibility in the position of the Director of Food for Peace, and gave every indication of stressing the importance to his mind of the intelligent use of the so-called surpluses of wheat and dairy and feed grains in our foreign policy as well as our welfare programs in this country.

BARNES: Your position for several years has had to do with the operation of the unique county committee system of administering farm programs. I don't think there is anything like it in any other segment of our economy and probably not anywhere in the world. Were there any incidents or occasions in which the special interest of the White House in this democratic and decentralized system of administration was evident?

FITZGERALD: I think the President rather naturally was somewhat far removed in his earlier experience in the elected farmer committee system of administering farm programs. He did become acquainted with it; he became interested in it. In several instances he took the time and trouble to comment upon the committee system and to compliment those who were involved in the efficient operation of the system. One such time was a meeting of state committeemen in

[-9-]

1962 at which time all state committeemen were invited to hear the President and meet him at the Rose Garden at the White House. This was during the time of the Billie Sol Estes scandals in Texas involving cotton allotments, the White House did become interested in that case and the problem and therefore in the committee system. As a result of his interest in the system, the Secretary of Agriculture [Orville Lothrop Freeman] appointed at about that time, a committee of distinguished citizens from across the United States and he gave them this

specific assignment: To make a study of this system, to evaluate it, to come up with alternative systems for administering farm programs, or to make recommendations on the improvement and strengthening of the system. Now, this committee made the study, it did produce a constructive report; and it is my understanding that the report did receive attention at the White House, but whether from the President directly, I'm not sure.

BARNES: The recommendations of the report have been carried out in the main....

FITZGERALD: Almost all of them have been implemented. Some few of them have required legislation. We prepared such legislation following the recommendations and presented them to Congress. Some of these recommendations have not been carried out because Congress has not acted.

I recall in 1963 I attended a world congress of business people in New York City. I was very pleased at the banquet at the dining hall at the hotel. The President of the United States

[-10-]

through the medium of a motion picture film greeted the delegates and in a very short address, he made several points including the point that efficiency in government was good, productivity and output of employees of the government was good, and that he would put the record of efficiency in our government up against almost any of the industries represented at that meeting. I recall with special pleasure that he specifically mentioned the Department of Agriculture and ASCS [Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service], the agency for which I work, as an example of improved productivity and efficiency in Government.

BARNES: Now this brings us right up to the tragedy of the President's death, unless you have other intervening matters that you want to add here.

FITZGERALD: I don't think I do at this time.

BARNES: Do you want to say a word or two about the impact of this assassination in terms of your own personal past relationship with him or in terms of the impact in the farm community as may have been reflected to you in letters from county people?

FITZGERALD: I recall that I was in a meeting in the office of the Administrator of the agency at the—when I first received a report that it was rumored that the President had been shot. Of course the meeting broke immediately. I went back to my office and I recall that one of the secretaries searched around until she found a small transistor radio and brought it in to my desk, and we listened to the sad news. I recall that the secretaries in my office and staff assistants in the other offices and their secretaries came in and sat in that room and heard the announcer

[-11-]

describing the details of the assassination, and I recall that there were a number of those people who were openly crying at the time. I was, of course, like most people, completely shocked, almost unbelieving. I recall that I had an appointment with a man from South Dakota who was in Washington at the time; was supposed to meet him for dinner—of course, I cancelled that engagement and went on home in the evening, and I might say the whole family, my wife and even the young children were in a state of shock because Mr. Kennedy had been a by-word in our house and was very highly admired.

In my work I come into contact with farm people, and people who administer farm programs in every state and every county in the Union. The expressions of grief at the tragedy of President Kennedy's assassination was universal among all those people whom I have met since that time. I think that somehow or another President Kennedy managed to capture the imagination of people, farm people, rural people to a greater extent than any other man, with the possible exception of Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]. There were so many people who seemed to have, though they had never met the man personally, had only seen him on the television or heard him on radio or seen him at the movie theater—seemed to have a personal attachment somehow or another—sort of an emotional thing with President Kennedy. So, of course, these people were completely and absolutely shocked and were in deep sorrow for a good long time to come.

[-12-]

BARNES: Mr. Fitzgerald, your job in the Department, you administer the committee system in the states and counties, and as I understand it these state and local organizations have had an important assignment in respect to civil defense. Would you like to comment on the role that they play and on any evidence of particular interest on the part of President Kennedy, and what this network of agricultural committeemen could do in the area of civil defense?

FITZGERALD: Yes, the Department of Agriculture has a very important position in Civil Defense, defense readiness here in the United States and the agency with which I am associated, ASCS, has some definite assignments in Civil Defense as a result of Presidential assignment to the Secretary and through the Secretary to the agency. At the time of the Cuban crisis, though we had these responsibilities for some time, the President's personal interest in the civil defense posture of the United States, especially in the areas of preparedness and planning for attack, in resource preparedness, in the feeding of people, in the positioning of supplies of agricultural commodities, became very evident. As a result of his personal interest in the problem of civil defense at about the time of the Cuban crisis, I think about October of 1962, the Department's program and the role it plays in civil defense received a new impetus and almost a new direction at that time.

At the present time the Department has responsibilities and my agency has responsibilities because we have offices in almost every county of the United States and in every state and these people—locally elected people who run our county offices, have knowledge of the local area and intimate concern with its problems—are given

[-13-]

considerable responsibility. Partially, I suspect, for the reason that because they are local and because they are elected, direction is more easily received from them and is more accepted by the people to whom direction is given. The President indicated at that time his personal interest in defense preparedness, in planning for any eventuality and as a result through direction of the Secretary we made a complete resurvey of our defense posture and our civil defense responsibilities in the Department and in the agency. I know that the President after the Cuban crisis of 1962, expressed to the Secretary his gratification for his defense planning and readiness of the agency, ASCS, and the Department of Agriculture.

BARNES: Were the county and state committees given special assignments in the total fabric of the civil defense program?

FITZGERALD: Yes, the state and county committees are responsible for such things as the developing working relationships, a sort of a contractual relationship with certain industries of the United States, and with local distributors of such things as feeds, fertilizers and farm machinery, even petroleum, gas for the tractors and farm machinery. If a crisis does occur, we have agreements with these dealers, with the distributors, with the manufacturers so that our county committee can almost instantly get into the business of rationing these resources. So their responsibility is considerable. Besides that, they have some more responsibility for the positioning of food stocks for keeping a list of the inventory of the food stocks in the immediate area at all times and working very closely with the local county and state civil defense authorities.

[-14-]

I recall that the President was especially concerned with the safety of the government employees of the workers in the event of an attack of some kind. As a result of his interest, we have reassessed our emergency state offices, for instance. Now, as a result of the Cuban crisis and as a result of this new spirit in civil defense, we have resurveyed our emergency state offices and stocks. These will be used in the event when an attack so that the people who run the state office will have some place to go and from which to operate these important civil defense responsibilities. The President, through the Secretary of Agriculture expressed personal concern for the safety of the people who have been given responsibility for running programs which I thought was rather remarkable.

BARNES: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Fitzgerald.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-15-]

Ray V. Fitzgerald Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

E

Estes, Billie Sol, 10

F

Fitzgerald, Mrs. Ray V., 1, 2, 12

Freeman, Orville Lothrop, 10, 13-15

K

Kennedy, John F., 1-15

M

McGovern, George S., 2, 5

R

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 12