

**Samuel C. Brightman, Oral History Interview – 12/29/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Samuel C. Brightman  
**Interviewer:** H.W. Brawley  
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**Biographical Note**

Brightman, deputy chairman of the Democratic National Committee, discusses his work as a public relations representative for the Democratic National Committee, his assessment of John F. Kennedy's (JFK) presidential campaign before and after the 1960 Democratic National Convention, and JFK's strengths and weaknesses, among other issues.

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(signed) SC Brightman  
(Date) December 31, 1964

Accepted:

(signed) Wesley Farrow  
(date) Jan. 5, 1965

\*not available for publication until 1973

Samuel C. Brightman

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Oral History Interview

With

Samuel C. Brightman

December 29, 1964

Democratic National Committee, Washington, D.C.

By H.W. Brawley

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BRAWLEY: This is H. W. Brawley, Executive Assistant to the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee, about to interview Samuel Brightman, Deputy Chairman. Sam, would you give us something of your personal background?

BRIGHTMAN: Yes. I was born in Missouri in 1911. I was educated in Missouri. I worked on newspapers and radio stations. I was a Washington correspondent in 1941 when the war broke out. I enlisted in the service. When I got out of the service I worked in the government briefly, went back to newspaper work at the *Louisville Courier-Journal* briefly, and then in 1947 I came with the Democratic National Committee and I have been here ever since.

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BRAWLEY: Sam, how about giving us a rundown on the presidential campaigns that you participated in?

BRIGHTMAN: Well, I participated in the 1948 campaign, which was a very exciting campaign. We were the underdogs but we never gave up and Mr.

Truman [Harry S. Truman] never gave up. This is known as the “give-them-hell whistle stop campaign.” Actually, he was reading the Republican record all across the country, and as everyone knows now, he won. I was also in the 1952 and 1956 campaigns. In all of these, I should add, I was in the area of public relations. In 1948 I was the number two man, and from 1952 on I had the top job in that area for the National Committee.

The 1952 and 1956 campaigns were difficult campaigns because we had been in a long time, we were running against an extremely popular man. I would say that in retrospect there was not much we could have done to change the outcome there, but that we must have been doing something right because we were able to

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take control of the Congress in 1954, hold it in 1956, and increase our strength in 1958. The Democratic Party retained its basic strength and popularity during those years even though we were beaten badly twice for the presidency. The 1960 campaign was another cliff-hanger like 1948, and again I think every little inconsequential thing that we did in that campaign all added together to the final result. I should say that the National Committee, in my experience, in the Democratic Party is basically a backup operation carrying out the policy decisions of the nominee. Within my adult lifetime the only time I have experienced where the presidential nominee didn't exercise this close personal control of the campaign was in the campaigns of 1952 and 1956.

BRAWLEY: Of course, Sam, over the years many people—and I can recall quite a few—have been called “Mr. Democrat,” but in my estimation you are “Mr. Democrat.” You spent more time and more effort aiding and assisting Democratic

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candidates over these many years, and you have been intimately acquainted with all of the candidates for president and vice president since 1948, as you said. Why don't you comment on the first time you met John F. Kennedy and your reaction then.

BRIGHTMAN: The first time I met John F. Kennedy was at a dinner which Gael Sullivan, who was then Executive Director of the Democratic National Committee, gave for the new Congressmen who had been elected in 1946. This was, of course, in 1947. My first impression without knowing anything at this early stage about their political ideology was that this was a fine group, that they were effective people. They had to be effective to win in 1946, which was not a vintage year for the Democrats. There was John F. Kennedy, John Blatnick [John A. Blatnik], George Smathers [George Armistead Smathers], I think Dick Bolling [Richard W. Bolling] was in that group, there was John Bell Williams and William Jennings Bryan down from the South. I personally do not agree with all of their

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beliefs, but I think they have proved to be effective congressmen according to their likes. My first reaction was really not to pick out individuals, but to think that these people were all articulate, effective people who were good for our party because we were bringing in young blood, which is an essential of continuing the party in a position of strength.

BRAWLEY: I'm going to ask you a little bit about your 1960 pre-Convention role, and I want to preface this question by a little remark. You know, those of us on the other side who were trying to gain the nomination for Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] always thought and felt that the National Committee staff was pretty much John F. Kennedy. As you talk about your pre-Convention role, would you care to comment on this? Whether it is true or not?

BRIGHTMAN: I think there were individuals who had their personal commitments. I don't think that the party machinery was turned over to the Kennedy people. Let me tell you a couple of brief

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incidents to show how well organized the Kennedy pre-Convention was. The only press secretary of a potential candidate who came around and talked to me about the problems that a candidate has with the news media and how to cope with them in the period at the Convention before you come to a vote was Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger]. I told Pierre what I knew from my previous experience, and I would have told the identical thing if any other candidate had sent someone around, but no one did. We (in the public affairs office) gave the same number of press credentials at Los Angeles, floor passes and other passes, to each potential candidate. As far as my office was concerned, we were scrupulous in helping them set up their press conferences, in giving them anything such as seating charts that they might need for their operations.

Nonetheless, the feeling was existing, there is no doubt about it, that we were playing favorites. We took some of the wealthy Los

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Angeles and Beverly Hills people who had arranged the bulk of the financing to bring the Convention to Los Angeles to the Convention Hall, and we took them around and showed them how we had spent their money, how we had decorated the hall, dressed it up, the arrangements we had made on the platform, and so on. One of these men got me aside and said, "I have made a bet of five thousand dollars that Senator Kennedy is not elected on the first ballot. What would you do?" I said I would lay that bet off as fast as I could. He said, "You are just like everybody else there. You are prejudiced in favor of Senator Kennedy." This was not a thing for publication. I would not have said anything approaching that for publication; I was trying to do this fellow a personal favor because he had worked very hard

to raise money for the Democratic Party. I was just giving him the situation as I saw it from my experience. He went out and bet

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another five thousand. Fortunately, he is in the position where his family won't go hungry, because he lost that bet. But there is no doubt that there was this feeling, and I honestly attempted to be scrupulously fair in this situation.

Deep down inside I had a personal preference, and I'm not going to say what it was, but I can assure you that nobody, either the candidate or anyone on his staff, knew that I had this and I don't think you could find a clue in my activities there that I let it show in any way, in action or words.

**BRAWLEY:** Of course, at the time, the one man who was accused of doing this was the then-Chairman Paul Butler [Paul M. Butler]. Would this, do you think, have any basis of fact at all?

**BRIGHTMAN:** I suppose the most prominent example of that was when he told a supposedly off-the-record dinner of news media that he thought Senator Kennedy was going to get the nomination, and probably, on the first ballot. They asked him

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off the record his evaluation. Other chairmen I have known would just not have answered the question. Paul was a very forthright fellow, and he answered it. Going home he said, "Did I do something bad there?" I said, "You sure did! It is going to be out tomorrow, printed by somebody who wasn't at this thing and doesn't feel bound to what you said." It did come out and actually I think it was embarrassing to the Kennedy supporters rather than helpful. But I think this gave all the other candidates the idea that he was trying to create a bandwagon situation for Senator Kennedy and aroused their suspicions and, of course, once you suspect anybody of favoring the other side in politics when a person has as much power as the National Chairman of the party, it's not very hard to find little things and build them up into big things.

**BRAWLEY:** Of course we know, Sam, we both lived through it and history will certainly prove it, that the Kennedy organization pre-Convention was

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one of the most effective I have ever seen in the Democratic Party. Let's go to the campaign now after the Kennedy-Johnson ticket was selected at the Convention. Why don't you discuss the campaign itself and sort of rate the people around the presidential nominee, John F. Kennedy, and give us your evaluation of the effectiveness of the team itself in conducting this campaign.



BRIGHTMAN: I think it was an extremely effective team. I have never seen in any convention in my experience the efficiency of communication of the whole operation that the Kennedy group had at Los Angeles. The campaign, I would say, was not quite at as high a level of efficiency, because you have to bring in a lot of other people. In a pre-convention thing you can almost always get a first person decision. In a campaign there are many times when someone two or three persons removed gives you the decision. I think it was a good campaign. There's always waste in a campaign,

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but this campaign covered everything and we spent money in a way that we have never been able to spend it before in my experience, and, of course, we wound up with a much greater deficit than the Republicans.

In a race that close, every little thing down to sending a note and a picture to a grade school class, which maybe brings two parents' votes in, in a race that close what you might call your marginal activities in communications and public relations are vital. Mr. Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] didn't need those things in 1952 and 1956. Mr. Johnson didn't need them in 1964, but we did them anyhow. In 1952 and 1956 we didn't have the funds to do some of those things, but I think in an election as close as 1960, that every little marginal effort, no matter how unimportant it may have seemed, was vital to the overall result. I think it was a good campaign. My personal feeling is, from talking to people around the country and from the mail, that the—to

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belabor the obvious—that the first debate was the turning point, not only in the response of the public, but in the enthusiasm and the confidence that the Democratic Party workers received from watching that first debate.

BRAWLEY: In your statement just a minute ago you brought out one point that maybe you might want to elaborate on a little bit. Discussing the Kennedy team, we both realize that this was a close-knit operation for a long period of time. Now, once they got the nomination, as you said, they had to expand that force to conduct a nationwide campaign. In your opinion did they fully utilize the people of the National Committee staff and the new people brought in to the fullest extent, or did they still tend to work as a close-knit group?

BRIGHTMAN: Well, I think they could have improved morals if the nominee had taken time to go through all of the offices—Citizens, National Committee, and the rest—and shake hands with everybody down to the messengers and file

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clerks, which had been done by previous nominees. I don't know why it wasn't done this time. It sort of came forcefully home to me when I was up spelling out Pierre Salinger at a dinner in New York and Senator Kennedy did go around the state headquarters and shake hands with everybody, and the effect on the morale was practically visible to the naked eye.

I might add that I don't feel that I was taken into the family in 1960, and I didn't particularly expect to be, but I think we had the money, the latitude, and the opportunity to utilize the party machinery, the Democratic National Committee contacts, for maximum value, not only for them, but for other candidates. As you are aware, in some states there were scars where there were Democrats who had been on the wrong side in the pre-Convention thing who could be reached through Democratic National Committee channels and who were still smarting a little bit—maybe there had been a coordinator put in their state and they

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felt they weren't being treated properly—and I think that that was one of the useful things that the National Committee did, to get the maximum out of these groups.

BRAWLEY: Sam, where were you when the assassination occurred?

BRIGHTMAN: I was at the Democratic Club in the Carlton Hotel. I was having lunch with Milton MacKay, the magazine writer, and we were talking about possible magazine articles on some of the Kennedy Administration accomplishments that had been very well publicized. They called me over to the phone—my office had gotten the bulletin here—and told me that the President had been shot. I saw no need to upset the people there, so I went back and told Milton that we had to drink our coffee and get back to my office. I got my check right away and we came over the office here at the Committee. But before I left, someone else had had a call from his office and everybody had left his meal and was huddled around

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the television set there.

BRAWLEY: What is your evaluation of the good traits and weak traits of President Kennedy?

BRIGHTMAN: Well, I think his strongest trait was his ability to not only get along with people but to inspire people, both as individuals and *en masse*. It is a curious thing that this man with his gift of understatement could stir an individual or group more than some fiery orators are able to do. His rapport with crowds was amazing, as you know. He was a very fastidious person in dress, manners, and reserved, almost, in his manner of speech, yet he was able to communicate with individuals individually or in a group and to arouse their zeal. Of course, this is the first president who was younger than I am. He managed to hold the respect and support of my generation, but he

aroused something more in the generation following me. He brought many people into politics who hadn't been in, and he became a

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symbol of youth up to young middle-aged not only here but all across the globe. I think that was his greatest strength.

If I had to say where I think he had a weakness, I think that his background in the House and Senate may have led him to be a little more cautious than he might have been. I think possible, no one will ever know, in retrospect, that in the first wave of excitement after his great inaugural speech of 1961, that he might have put some things through on the strength of public opinion even though the establishment in the Congress would not have been particularly happy with it. This is something that we will never know the answer to, and historians will argue about for a long time.

In balance, I think he had a tremendous potential, and I think that the Cuban confrontation in 1962 had given him a strength that he never had before, that he would have been able to use had the Lord let him have a second term.

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**BRAWLEY:** Of course, Sam, as an expert in public relations and public opinion, and also an expert in Democratic politics and having watched this game for a long time, what is your opinion of the response of the country to John F. Kennedy?

**BRIGHTMAN:** I think there is a generation which feels almost a personal loss, as though they had lost a brother. I think that what has happened since the assassination shows that he was loved, shows that he was respected. Since his death, unfortunately, people have put out all kinds of tawdry mementoes, but even these have not kept the real John F. Kennedy from shining through. We still get mail here asking things about him and asking for pictures. The weekend after the assassination, we all know about how people stood in line up at the Rotunda, and so on. In this place there was a steady flow of children, people in worn clothing, just coming up here and asking if they could have a picture of him to take home and save. I think he probably had more love even among

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the people than Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had. I think partly that is because there is such a heavy population in the age group which identified with him, and the same age group didn't have the same feeling about FDR; he seemed somehow, more remote. I think the theme he hit on his inaugural address, a new generation is coming in, probably summed up where his greatest single strength with the American people lay.

I think technically that he did an excellent job of using the communications tools available to reach the people. I think many persons will remember those press conferences

for a long time, particularly when he had a fairly dry joke to throw away in answer to a rough question. I, as I guess all do, think that we have a great President now, but I think it is unfortunate that Senator Kennedy, with the new strength that he acquired in the 1962 confrontation, didn't have the chance to go on with his program.

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BRAWLEY: Do you have anything else to add, Sam?

BRIGHTMAN: I think that is all. Thank you, Bill.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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March 2, 1966

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Dear Mr. Morrissey:

I have attempted to untangle a few of my more awkward sentences on the transcription which was made in my office at the Democratic National Committee on December 29, 1964, according to my copy of the release I signed.

The task of bringing harmony between persons and groups who might have been at loggerheads before the Convention was not my job and I am not very familiar with what was done in that area at the state and local level. The point I was attempting to make was that some Democrats who did not feel close to the people Mr. Kennedy brought with him into the campaign would call someone like myself whom they had known for sometime so that they would be talking with a friend when they asked help in getting a speaker, for campaign materials, for advice on how to deal with an issue, or whatever.

Personal contacts get into a campaign in many curious ways. For example, the author of a magazine article about the death of President Kennedy's brother who knew me sent me some unpublished material he had gathered in researching the article. I passed it on to the Johnson people and some of it was used in the mentions the Vice Presidential candidate made of that tragic flight during the campaign. The point of the reference was to meet the religious issue tangentially by reminding listeners that Catholic and Protestant alike died together in that flight.

To amplify a little another area of my interview you mentioned, it seems to me that most Presidential campaign material is either candidate-oriented or issue-oriented. Both, of course, are important. Some persons voted for Mr. Kennedy because they were tremendously attracted by his personality. On the other hand, some persons voted for Mr. Kennedy who may have had strong anti-Catholic prejudices which were overcome because they were strongly attracted by the position of the candidates and the Democratic Party on some issue important to them. Medicare may have been very important with elderly people, for example, even though they may not have regarded Mr. Kennedy's youth as a plus factor. Much of the issue oriented material had been planned by the Committee staff before we knew for certain who would be our nominee.

As to the special statements, mountains of letters, etc., they are in your files, I presume, and would be well worthy of deailed study. As an example, I recall that the late Pat

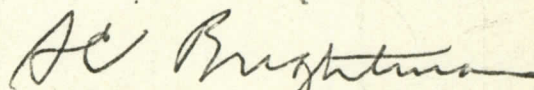


Frank, a skilled writer of fact and fiction, did the first draft of a detailed exposition by Mr. Kennedy on the areas of our Society which the editors of the Saturday Review of Literature thought would be of special interest to their readers. The result was a thoughtful and interesting bit of reading for Saturday Review subscribers which was in sharp contrast with what I regarded as a rather perfunctory and dull response from the Republican candidate. How effective this was in changing the views of some intellectuals about Mr. Kennedy I do not know, but in any event a good deal of effort was expended on what most politicians would regard as a highly marginal group.

There are many specialized publications in our country with much narrower interest than Saturday Review of Literature, and when they asked for statements or articles we attempted to provide them with a serious and factual response rather than a perfunctory canned reply.

I really am unable to be more helpful than this without doing a major job of research, so I do not think there is anything to be gained by another interview. However, if you feel at any time that another recording session would be useful, I can find the time to answer whatever I can ~~add~~ without taking the time to go back through the old files.

Sincerely,



Samuel C. Brightman

Mr. Charles T. Morrissey  
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