

W. Walter Neeley Oral History Interview, 7/30/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: W. Walter Neeley
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Biographical Note

W. Walter Neeley, West Virginia political figure and campaign chairman for William W. Barron's West Virginia gubernatorial campaign (1960), discusses his role in the 1960 Democratic primary campaign in Clarksburg, West Virginia, the role of religion in John F. Kennedy's (JFK) campaign for presidency, and the influence of the Roosevelt family on JFK's 1960 primary campaign, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

W. Walter Neeley

July 30, 1964
Clarksburg, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This interview is being recorded in the Stonewall Jackson Hotel, Clarksburg, West Virginia, on July 30, 1964, with Mr. W. Walter Neeley, Clarksburg, West Virginia.

Mr. Neeley, would you tell me of your first contact with the primary campaign for Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

NEELEY: My first contact came when a group of citizens of Clarksburg met informally with Mr. Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorenson] and one other representative from the then Senator Kennedy's headquarters. This was approximately one and one half years prior to the primary election. The purpose of this meeting was to ask and receive answers from Mr. Sorensen concerning President Kennedy's ambitions and plans, his program, his policies and so forth. But primarily for some of the members of this group, some of us wanted to know some positive answers regarding religion and communism.

YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, would you review, then, some of the questions that were asked and some of the answers that were given at this meeting?

NEELEY: The first question, of course, asked by myself, was what would be Mr. Kennedy's attitude toward communism? Would he be soft? Would he permit the communists to continue to absorb other small countries without some

proper resistance? The answers which Mr. Sorensen gave to us at this meeting were very satisfactory and reassured us that if Mr. Kennedy were elected he would certainly be most firm in facing up to any problems of property appropriation by the communist regimes.

The other question was concerning religion. Several of us, including myself, wanted to know, and I asked this question, "If President Kennedy were elected, would he be able to uphold his oath of office and conduct his office of president in keeping with the Constitution and the laws of the United States, notwithstanding his fealty and his training and his religious background, experience and devotion?" Mr. Sorensen assured us that if Mr. Kennedy became president, that he would conduct his job as president in strict compliance with all of the laws and that his religious faith would have no bearing, no influence, and no concern as far as his decisions in conducting his office as president of the United States. Needless to say, that answer was one hundred percent correct in light of history and President Kennedy's performance as president of the United States.

YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, as an observer of the West Virginia political scene, how did you feel before the primary about the advisability of Senator Kennedy entering the West Virginia primary to test the religious issue here?

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NEELEY: I felt that this was an excellent testing ground, as everyone now knows, that West Virginia is made up of a cross section, primarily Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, with a great deal of population in the cities being of foreign extraction. I thought it was an excellent testing ground and I was very happy of the results because, in my opinion, political-religious skeleton in the closet was once, last and always brought out and disclosed for what it really was, a figment of the American public's imagination. It proved conclusively in West Virginia that if a man has the proper training for the job of President and he presents his programs properly and to the people, the people themselves will make the decision; and it will be based upon his ability and personality, and not upon his religion!

YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, do you have any other memories of this very early meeting with Mr. Sorensen here in Clarksburg that you might summarize?

NEELEY: Well, I would say that the members who were invited to this dinner meeting were a cross-section of business, professional people, both Protestant, Catholic and Greek religions and that the purpose of the meeting was twofold: to orient the local group on Mr. Kennedy, and to answer questions. It is my opinion that all the questions were answered most forwardly and honestly. There were several questions as to whether or not the economics of our government would improve and we were assured that they would be.

I believe that everyone, including myself, left this meeting with the firm opinion that the then Senator Kennedy was going to make a strong bid and would probably be successful in his ambition to become the Democratic nominee for president.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Neeley, would you go on from that, then, to a description in your own words of your official and unofficial role in the 1960 primary election; how closely affiliated were you with the Kennedy forces and what role, both officially and unofficially, did you play in that campaign?

NEELEY: Officially, I was not connected with the Kennedy forces in the primary. I was committed as the campaign chairman for W. W. (Wally) Baron [William W. Barron] for the Democratic nomination for governor. We were fighting and seeking to obtain a nomination for Mr. Baron. There were other candidates for the Democratic nomination for

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president in West Virginia. We were impressed. We were friendly, and certainly we were told that Mr. Kennedy would gain the Democratic nomination in West Virginia. But, being committed to Mr. Baron, we elected to stay out of the presidential primary for obvious reasons. We could not serve two masters, even though we may, or may not, have been friendly to Mr. Kennedy, Mr. Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], or others who were seeking the nomination in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Well, as a neutral observer, could you analyze for me the effectiveness in methods and techniques of Senator Humphrey as compared with those of Senator Kennedy?

NEELEY: I believe the difference was entirely as follows: President Kennedy, then Senator Kennedy, came into the State of West Virginia with a good organization and he came in here with an organization in depth and in strength. Prior to their coming in, two years prior, he had sent certain representatives in to talk with various small groups in order to find out exactly what needed to be done.

Then when the decision was made to campaign vigorously he had his organization cadre all organized and he was ready to go on a county, ward and precinct basis. As compared with Senator Humphrey, he tried to organize from Charleston only and, of course, the results were self-explanatory. The answer, I believe, primarily, is in the difference between the two men.

Without the organization in depth, I still believe that Senator Kennedy would have overwhelmingly carried West Virginia based primarily upon his superior personality and his ability to convince the people of West Virginia that he was the best man available to be the Democratic president of the United States. And I believe that he was and I think history has proven it to be so!

YOUNG: Well, do you think that there was any policy or ideology difference between the two senators or were they pretty close together and it was an issue pretty much of salesmanship and personality?

NEELEY: Well, I believe the difference was in the personality and sales ability of

President Kennedy. I believe the political philosophies, the ideologies, of both men, which could be termed as progressive, were pretty much the same. The difference in the results was based upon the dynamic personality of one man as compared with a senatorial, dignified, friendly approach on the other.

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YOUNG: Would you evaluate several of President Kennedy's techniques for me—the use of the Kennedy war record, the possible effect and reaction of it in West Virginia, and then we might move on from that to, in just a few words, the effectiveness of FDR, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.] in campaigning.

NEELEY: The war record of President Kennedy had been read and reread by all West Virginians. I do not believe that it was a factor. Naturally, it was a small contributing factor to us veterans to know that we had a candidate for President who had actually been involved in combat experience. I do not believe that this was an important deciding factor; it was a contributing overall factor.

YOUNG: Could you comment, then, additionally on the effectiveness of the Roosevelt family in the campaign?

NEELEY: The Roosevelt family is a positive contributing factor for any candidate in any campaign and I believe that they helped President Kennedy a great deal in West Virginia.

YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, before we started the interview you mentioned that you are really a native of Arkansas and that you arrived in West Virginia by way of the Carolinas. I don't know whether this classifies you as a carpetbagger or not, but as an outsider, at least, how do you feel, or how did you react to treatment of West Virginia by the national press in this Kennedy campaign?

NEELEY: I feel that the press treated the truth rather loosely and I resented intensely the image that some of the members of the press tried to create but most of the American people know that West Virginia is a very rugged mountainous country and naturally we do not run around barefooted and wear coonskin caps!

As a native Arkansan, by the way of the Carolinas, I'm very happy now to be a West Virginian and expect to remain here the rest of my life. I've had the advantage of comparison with other states and I find West Virginia far superior, in many ways, than my native state of Arkansas and the state of North Carolina in which I resided for five years.

But to answer your question specifically, I disliked intensely the loose reporting by some of the irresponsible reporters in creating an erroneous image of West Virginians as uncouth hillbillies!

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YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, even though you weren't concerned with the Kennedy primary campaign itself, did you have any personal meetings with President Kennedy at all while he was campaigning?

NEELEY: I had an accidental meeting with President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], or rather Senator and Mrs. Kennedy at that time. I got on the elevator in the Daniel Boone Hotel and to my surprise and pleasure the Senator and Mrs. Kennedy were on the elevator and the elevator girl and myself!

Since I was acting as a campaign manager for Wally Baron, I took the liberty of introducing myself to Senator and Mrs. Kennedy and assured him that we were delighted to have him in West Virginia and it was my opinion at that time that he was going to win the primary and at that point he was out in front and running strong. The Senator was very tired. He'd been on a long eighteen hour trip throughout the hills of West Virginia. He expressed his appreciation and Mrs. Kennedy, of course, was most gracious as she always is.

YOUNG: This was at the Daniel Boone Hotel in Charleston?

NEELEY: Right. The Daniel Boone Hotel in Charleston.

YOUNG: Well, let's move on then, Mr. Neeley, if it is all right with you, to another subject. Once Senator Kennedy had achieved the victory in the primaries, did you notice the Democrats in the state then closing ranks for the general election or was there at any place a feeling that the President's religion might still be an issue and he might cause some Democrats in the state to go down to defeat?

NEELEY: At a meeting after the primary election which was held by all of the Democratic nominees of West Virginia, this subject was discussed. It was decided then that the question of religion had been settled once and for all in West Virginia. Later on, during the general election, the question of religion, of course, was brought up by some of the Republicans who were also Protestants, who were doing some wishful thinking, thinking that perhaps they could create some friction in the Democratic ranks.

In my opinion, based upon my association with a lot of friends throughout the state, both business and political, that religious issue had been settled in the primary and it was on to victory in November.

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YOUNG: I just wanted to ask you. Did you live most of the time in Charleston during the campaign? Or were you in your hometown of Clarksburg much of the time?

NEELEY: For four months I spent four and a half days out of each week in Charleston and the remainder of the time was spent back with my business, commuting to and from Charleston.

YOUNG: Well, this leads up to the other question which I wanted to ask. We all know that there are many West Virginias—that the state, of course, has many sections. What of Senator Kennedy's programs seemed to appeal particularly to your neighbors in Clarksburg? Was there any aspect that had an especial appeal there since Clarksburg is not part of the mining country as Welch is?

NEELEY: Well, generally speaking, all of his programs were received with a great deal of enthusiasm. The New Frontier, which was received by the younger people, and when I say younger I am speaking of forty and younger—the positive approach to get better acquainted, to better understand many of the undeveloped countries, a positive approach to reeducate and relocate those people who had been out of work due to automation.

Most important, and I think this is psychological, but I think that President Kennedy and his “viga,” as he has been misquoted, and it is vigor where I come from, carried out in his everyday living and his mental thinking, his approach to these problems. He approached them with vigor. He carried them out with vigor and dispatch. And there was not the usual political procrastination on basic issues.

He had a group of good men surrounding him and women. And I believe that he carried out his program with more efficiency and more dispatch in the first year of his presidency than any president in my lifetime, not withstanding the first hundred days of President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] when he came in.

YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, if your neighbors in Clarksburg who normally were Democrats and normally supported President Kennedy, tended to be critical at all, what aspects of his policies might be criticized?

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NEELEY: This is a profound question and I must answer it very honestly. The only part of President Kennedy's program which has been criticized, at least to me, has been the civil rights problem. Most people give to President Kennedy's attorney general, his brother, Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], the responsibility and blame for the civil rights issue gaining so much momentum in the last three years. There are certain inherent resentments that a civil rights program should not be expedited or rushed through. The criticism has been made to me, not of President Kennedy, but of his brother, Robert Kennedy.

YOUNG: Well, is your own town of Clarksburg a place where normally there is a White-Negro problem or is it a community with a relative amount of peace in this area?

NEELEY: We have no civil rights problem in Clarksburg. We are very fortunate. We have a small segment of colored people in Clarksburg. Secondly, these people have lived in Clarksburg for three generations. They are well educated

and integration, always accepted without any argument or any display of hysterics. And I'm a member of the Episcopal Church and we were the first church in Clarksburg to become integrated. There were some lifting of eyebrows and some whisperings behind hands but integration in Clarksburg, in Harrison County, has not been a problem.

The criticism of President Kennedy's attorney general has been on a general basis and not from a local experience basis. We've had no integration problem here.

YOUNG: In other words, it has been a criticism of national policy rather than local conditions?

NEELEY: Correct.

YOUNG: I wonder if we might go back now and just draw a couple of general conclusions out of our conversation so far. If you were to evaluate the importance and the significance of Senator Kennedy's primary race in West Virginia for West Virginia in other words, the impact on the State itself what generalizations might you conclude with respect to the way West Virginians reacted and the significance of the national attention which came to the state?

NEELEY: First of all, I would say that the results of the primary as far as President Kennedy, gave to West Virginia political maturity. West Virginians determined themselves that a man could be a good president regardless of what his religion might be. Secondly, West Virginians are quite aware that President Kennedy was not unaware of how and when and where he got his initial start to become president.

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And President Kennedy, of course, has not been unappreciative in seeing that certain economic advantages have appreciated to West Virginia. And as a small business man, we have needed these additional small businesses to come in here to stimulate our economy, so it has been a wonderful experience economically for West Virginia in that it has stimulated our economy. We have received certain plants and businesses.

Secondly, I think that West Virginia has grown up or matured politically. I'm very happy to have been a part of all this in this very small way.

YOUNG: Have you noticed in your own experience whether any of the many people who volunteered in the primary continued their interest in politics after the primary was over? Have the volunteers maintained an interest after the immediate issue of 1960 was settled?

NEELEY: In West Virginia, and particularly in Harrison County, the answer is emphatically yes. Elsewhere I cannot say. Particularly in Harrison County and in West Virginia generally.

YOUNG: Mr. Neeley, I've been asking a good many questions here. Are there any questions which I haven't asked yet that you would like to answer?

NEELEY: I would like to get this point across. That my wife is far more intelligent and her remarks to me were that I should have become Mr. Kennedy's campaign manager, instead of Mr. Baron's campaign manager for governor. Mrs. Neeley, who is three-quarters Irish and makes no bones about it, was very positive in her likes and dislikes in the presidential primary. She selected Mr. Kennedy two and a half years before the primary, stayed with him all the way, and takes great delight in reminding me that she is a better politician than I am.

YOUNG: I believe, too, you mentioned that you are engaged at the present time in a project that involves the Kennedys.

NEELEY: I'm very proud of this venture. I am the area chairman of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library fund drive and it is presently getting off the ground in that we have key chairmen for geographical areas within the county and we are going to use the normal medias of publicity and advertising—if you want to use that word—that's what it is—to acquaint the people that, regardless of how large or how small, it was President Kennedy's desire that every individual—man, woman and child—be afforded the opportunity to make any contribution, whether it was five cents, five dollars or five hundred dollars.

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And we shall make that opportunity available in central West Virginia. I'm very proud to be a part of this movement.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Mr. W. Walter Neeley of Clarksburg, West Virginia, taped on July 30, 1964, in Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Clarksburg, West Virginia. For mailing purposes, Mr. Neeley's home address is W. Walter Neeley, P.O. Box 149, Bridgeport, West Virginia.

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