

Claude J. Desautels Oral History Interview – JFK #1, 5/16/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Desautels, Special Assistant to the President for Congressional Relations (1961-1966), discusses his relationship with Lawrence F. O'Brien, his work as an advance man during John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign, and his responsibilities as Special Assistant to the President for Congressional Relations, among other issues.

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Claude J. Desautels—JFK #1

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First of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Claude J. Desautels

May 16, 1964
Washington, D.C.

by Louis Oberdorfer

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DESAUTELS: This is Claude Desautels. I'm administrative assistant to Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien]. Mr. O'Brien is the special assistant to the President, responsible for congressional liaison.

OBERDORFER: Will you tell us about the origins of your connection with Mr. O'Brien and through him with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

DESAUTELS: I first met Larry O'Brien just about the same time I first had the privilege of meeting President Kennedy. In 1949, after the Democratic sweep of President Truman [Harry S. Truman] in '48, there was a substantial number of new Democratic congressmen who came to Washington. Both of us went to the Hill with freshmen—newly elected members. Larry came down with a congressman from Massachusetts and I joined the staff....

OBERDORFER: What congressman was Larry working for?

DESAUTELS: Foster Furcolo. And I had joined the staff of newly elected Congressman Wayne Aspinall [Wayne N. Aspinall] of Colorado. Larry was on the second floor of the old House Office Building; we were on the third floor. And two doors down from us was the young congressman from Boston, John F. Kennedy.

And the floor below was Larry and across from where Larry's congressman had his office was my then congressman from my home district, the First of Massachusetts, Republican John Heselton [John W. Heselton]. Congressman Heselton had been friendly and very helpful to me while I was a student at Georgetown [Georgetown University]. And I'd maintained my relationship with him afterwards, so one day he

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introduced me to his across-the-hall neighbor which was Larry O'Brien. And then Larry and I developed a good, a close relationship socially as well as exchanging—since both of us were green on Capitol Hill—exchanging information, and what was happening of interest to my boss in the committee that his congressman was on which was the Appropriation. And he was very interested in parks that were being—in legislation that was pending affecting Massachusetts at the time. And he would ask me how the legislation was progressing through the committee my congressman was on which was the Interior and Insular Affairs, which has jurisdiction over parks and that sort of thing. Larry left Washington after the 1950 election. And we met again about '58 or '59 when he was at the time assistant to Senator Kennedy who was being projected on the national scene as a potential presidential candidate and we would have—when he was in the city occasionally—we had a luncheon or dinner and discussed the political situation as it existed at the time and the effect on the then Senator Kennedy. In '59 through the, President Kennedy, Senator Kennedy at the time asked me at one time if I would keep my close relationship with Larry, and Larry would call on me from time to time to see if I could be of assistance to them.

OBERDORFER: You were then still employed by Congressman Aspinall?

DESAUTELS: Still employed by Congressman Aspinall. And early in 1960 after the Senator announced his candidacy for the presidency, Larry asked me to participate with him in several meetings, which I did. And one of those meetings had to do with President Kennedy entering the Maryland primary. Because at that time I'd transferred, by that time I'd transferred my residence from Massachusetts to Maryland. And so I had several meetings with him then and then went with him to statewide meetings that he arranged in Baltimore to organize an overall John F. Kennedy committee in the state of Maryland. He asked me to participate in that and then take active part in the Montgomery County. He had asked Blair Lee [Blair Lee III] to be more or less the chairman of the Kennedy committee in Montgomery County, Maryland. And then with Blair, worked with him and kept in touch with Larry all through the—up to the Maryland primary. And then I went up to the Convention in 1960 and worked under Larry's jurisdiction as a coordinator with certain delegates on the floor of the Convention during that week. After the convention we returned here and, of course, my boss had his own campaign. Larry, as you know, was in charge of overall organization throughout the country for the Democratic National Committee. He asked me if I would—early in September—he asked me if I would take the job of coordinator in one of the states. Of course, that would have meant to be gone from Washington, which was about mid-September right, through November and that was just a little too much. I did have a certain responsibility to Aspinall. I'd been with him by that

time since '49; this was '60. And although he didn't happen to have a very extensive campaign and our own work for his own reelection was in

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pretty good shape, still—and he was willing for me to take some leave of absence to help the Democratic nominee, but not be gone for that extensive length, period of time—so I had to decline that. Then a little later on Kenny [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] asked if I would take an advance trip which only entailed anywhere from two to five or six days at a clip and then I would be back in Washington, could resume my work for Aspinall, and possibly a week or ten days later then take off again for another four or five days—and this was more convenient, in my responsibility to Aspinall. So I did more or less the advance work and ran into Larry, but did not work under his jurisdiction during the fall campaign. Then after the election, in that transition period, Larry did ask me to come down—on a part time basis—and assist him at the National Committee in some of his responsibilities at that time, which I did. Then, of course, January 21 he asked me if I would come down here and chat with him which I did, and then he asked me to find an empty office, and throw your hat and coat and there you are. And I said, “Well, exactly what will I do?” And he said, “I don't know. We've just come in today. Whatever I give you from time to time, but we'll be working with the Congress.” [Interruption]

OBERDORFER: Now, Claude, in the period prior to your appointment here on the White House Staff, do you recall specific episodes of personal contact between yourself and the then Congressman or then Senator Kennedy?

DESAUTELS: Oh, yes. Innumerable memories come back. As I mentioned, I think earlier in this session, Louis, we were on the third floor of the House Office Building, I mean Aspinall's office. Congressman Kennedy, at that time, was two doors down, so there was almost daily contact: seeing him in the hall, or occasionally he would come into the office if he wanted to know, seeking information of one kind or another. Or frequently I might drop into his office on one or two matters. I remember vividly prior to announcing his candidacy for the Senate, I think early in '52, one day he approached me in the hall and said—this I think was around January '52—he said, “I don't have too many contacts with some of the various language groups in western Massachusetts. Could you line up some speaking engagements for me?” [Interruption] Well he did. He mentioned it directly, specifically some French language group. So I said, I assured him I'd be delighted. I'd make some contacts, friends and family up there and see if—line up some speaking engagements. And I think, if I recall, he gave me some dates. He suggested certain dates that would fit into his overall schedule. To make it brief, why we did line up several in Pittsfield, the Franco-American Club, and some in Adams and North Adams. And when the actual trips materialized, the dates came up, he asked me if I would join him up there. He was going—possibly it was a Thursday—he was going to Boston, and then his meetings were scheduled in Pittsfield, Adams,

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North Adams, Williamstown on Saturdays and Sundays. So then I would meet up with him. He'd leave on Thursday for Boston, and I would join him in Pittsfield. This happened, if I recall, at least, oh possibly three or four weekends in the spring. And I remember some of the meetings, you know, in Adams that gave me a couple of.... There was a clue to cut off the.... 'Cause he'd made his talk, mostly on foreign affairs to some extent, some of the trips he had made. I think early in January of 1952, right around December or January he had gone to Poland and some of the Iron Curtain countries in eastern Europe, and western Europe too. He was talking extensively on his recent trip to eastern Europe. And after his talk, he would throw the session open to questions and answers from the floor. And sometimes these had, you know, had a tendency to go on and on and on. So I had a slip of paper with one or two questions which was sort of a cue to cut it off. And when he'd look a certain way in the hall, that was my cue to get up and ask the question, and then after he answered it, then he thanked everyone for coming and then he would stand in the back and shake hands with the audience. So I think I participated in about three or four of these trips in western Massachusetts. And I recall in the fall in September of '52—[Interruption] I think it was September, yeah—and as you know he had a very small staff as a member of the House. He had Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] of course, who was in Boston for the campaign. He had two young ladies—one was on vacation, and one was handling the office at the time—and a certain hearing came up. I remember that the hearings were held, I think it was in the Department of Commerce, but it seems to me it was a labor matter. I'm a little vague as to what.... In any event, he had decided he was to come down and testify at these hearings being conducted by the agencies. And his secretary—this came up suddenly—and his secretary called me since we were across-the-hall neighbors and good friends and said, "The Congressman is coming in." And at that time he was suffering, his back was bothering him, and he was on crutches. And, consequently, "He can't too well go in a cab and that sort of thing, could you pick him up at the airport and take him to this hearing and more or less stay with him and be of any assistance that he needs? And here is some of the material. And I've got to stay here, 'cause Boston's on the phone and there's no one else." And that sort of thing. So I remember she had come with me. We both went to pick him up at the airport, because he had various papers that he needed and questions to ask, and she was more knowledgeable certainly being one of his staff people to fill him in than I was. So we picked him up at the airport and went to this hearing. Then she returned to the Hill to take care of the office. I spent the day with him, and he came up for lunch, then later that day flew back to Boston, 'cause I remember one comment that he made in the car. He was talking about the difficulties of running for statewide office, particularly from the point of view of finance, in his own case. And I remember he made the comment that because I have some money.... Oh, he said, "It's difficult to get any contributions for a campaign, particularly

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in my case because people think I have a certain amount of wealth and the contributions aren't coming in." And he went on about how difficult it was, and, of course, that the legal barriers that prohibit candidates—a candidate to finance beyond certain limits his own campaign. So I remember his complaining how difficult it was to raise funds for his own

Senate race that fall. After, of course, after he had gone to the Senate, I didn't see him as frequently as when he was an across-the-hall neighbor on the House side. So my meetings with him were, you know, infrequent. Occasionally, Aspinall had a weekly radio show which was more or less my responsibility of lining up the guests, writing out the script, that sort of thing. So about, I'd say, once a year we'd call his office...

OBERDORFER: Senator Kennedy's.

DESAUTELS: Senator Kennedy's office—and ask if the Senator would appear on the Congressman's program. So that gave me an opportunity to see him every so often because he always would want to see the script. And sometimes he made certain suggestions which was Aspinall's policy. We'd prepare questions but by any means they are not ironclad. If my guest, whoever that may be, wants to change it, or is annoyed, fine. What he wanted was an interesting program and he was amicable to any suggestion. So whenever these occasions came up the then Senator Kennedy would be on Aspinall's show. I'd go over, show him the script, and if he had any suggestions, which he did, changing questions or discussing what his reply, what his response would be, so occasionally like that I did see him.

OBERDORFER: Do you remember any specifics of changes that he asked?

DESAUTELS: Well, of course, as the presidential campaign of '60 neared, I remember I think we had one question—I think it must have been '59, maybe the summer of '59—asking what his intentions might be toward '60. And he looked at the question, and he sort of giggled, and said.... I made it quite clear that the Congressman had said, you know, "If the Senator is embarrassed with this, doesn't want to go into this, we'll take it off. It's certainly not my intention to embarrass him." So I told him that and that we had this question with regard to does he plan to run for the presidency in '60. And he said, "No, no, no. That's all right. Leave it on. Leave it on." And, of course, I always went with the Congressman when they cut the tapes. I always participated, or at least witnessed the recording sessions. So when the actual tape was being made, the actual recording, and the Congressman asked the question, when he again chuckled, and he said, "Wayne, ask me that about six months from now." So that's the way he handled that one.

OBERDORFER: What was the appropriate date of this film, radio

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tape?

DESAUTELS: Well, it was either, I think, late spring, like June or July because it was a Monday that this was cut. And I think we made it quite early. Aspinall would like, always did these things quite early. By early I mean between, before 9:30, between 9:00 and 9:30, because by 10:00, committee meetings. And he's always very judicious. The committee starts at 10:00, and he's going to be there at 10:00 on the nose.

So, I think it was around 9:00, it might have been scheduled for 9:15. 'Cause then I recall that morning—when that morning came—the phone rang and it was Senator Kennedy himself saying he had just got in from the West. He was a few minutes delayed, but he was on his way right now from the airport. And would this be all right or did we want to postpone it later. And he said he'd be there within ten, fifteen minutes. So, he did. And I guess it was 9:30, maybe twenty minutes to ten by the time he arrived. This might have been one committee when Aspinall got there a few minutes late, because in the course of the recording naturally we always had questions on conservation of interest to the West. Because in the course of the recording one of these questions came up. And the Senator said, "Well, Wayne, just a few hours ago I was flying over your state." So he was coming from somewhere in the West. He had just been over Colorado and some, of course.... He had mentioned upper Colorado River project which was of great importance to the entire Rocky Mountain area at that time which I think, if I recall, was under consideration in the Congress. And as Senator Kennedy expounded on these views on conservation, on the importance of our natural resources, the value of reclamation projects and that sort of thing which was always a subject that would come up, not exclusively, but at least one or two questions during the fifteen minute interview....

OBERDORFER: Now, can you recall any other incidents of personal contact with then Senator Kennedy, prior to the campaign, or if not, during the campaign?

DESAUTELS: Well.... I mentioned I think earlier that on one of these occasions when going through, preliminary to cutting a tape or something—I think possibly we also made, Aspinall also made a T.V. film for use by the stations in Colorado during that summer—and at that time, that's when he mentioned that, you know, "Larry is assisting me in whatever plans materialize. And I know that you and Larry have been friends for years. You've told me and he's told me. And I'd like for you to stay in touch with him." And I think he probably, he asked me if whatever plans he had would I, could he count on my support and whatever help. And I assured him that whatever I could do I certainly would want to do it. So I think it was one of those sessions when I went over to show him a script that he had said, "You and Larry are good friends, I'd like for you to stay in touch, and you'll hear from him from time to time if things materialize." And I think later in '59

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this came up again on one occasion where I may have seen him somewhere, purely by chance possibly, you know, that he mentioned stay in contact with Larry. This came up, you know, I remember vividly several occasions I guess in the '59 period, "Stay in touch with Larry." So that he knew of our relationship and apparently Larry had said when they discussed plans more you know, in detail, Larry and Kenny, that apparently Larry would say, "Well, we could maybe use these fellows." I got the impression that possibly my name came up. 'Cause every time he'd say, "Now I know that you're talking with Larry and I want you to stay in touch with Larry." So this came up several times in '59 and whenever I'd see him. And late '59 when there was a great deal, you remember, publicity, he's going to announce

momentarily, any day now, any day now, it seems to me that at that time somewhere I may have run into him by chance and—oh he gave me the definite impression, you know, that it wouldn't be long now, and the decision was all made and set. But he gave me that impression, I suppose, to also let me know, but again asked me, "Can I count on you, your support?"

OBERDORFER: Do you remember any more about the circumstances and the context of that meeting?

DESAUTELS: No, because I think most of those, they weren't any planned, appointment type of meetings that I had. It was either running into him possibly in the hall in the Capitol, or in the Senate restaurant, or.... It was a chance type of meeting, not any scheduled appointments, that I was, when I'd run into him. But he was always, as you know, had a moment to stop if he saw you in the hall, always had a smile, always had a visit in a minute or two. And frequently this Larry situation: "Say, keep in touch with Larry now. We'd like your help." Or, "How do things look in Colorado? How do things look in the West?"

OBERDORFER: How about during the campaign. Did you have any experience directly with him during the campaign?

DESAUTELS: Well, when he came to the.... Right after the West Virginia primary, you remember, he came to.... Then it was about a week later that the Maryland primary was following. So he spent one day, or the good part of one day in Montgomery and Prince George. And I traveled with him that day. So we had.... I think we started bright and early in the morning, and touring various shopping centers in Montgomery County. And then he addressed a women's Democratic luncheon at one of the country clubs in Montgomery County. And after that we went into Prince George and then left 'cause this was the Prince George boys' responsibility, the ones who were working there. And he came back that same week when, the latter part of the week for a rally at the University of Maryland. And this was combined, sort of Montgomery-Prince George and, you know, several thousand, ten or twelve thousand people. So we had been involved in organizing the rally together

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with Prince George. So I ran into him there in the Maryland primary. And then I made one trip with him, I think it was June of '60. If I recall he had gone to New Jersey. It was a state-wide picnic, a Democratic picnic at Spring Lake, New Jersey. That's where it was, Spring Lake, New Jersey. And I forget how this came about. Of course, Larry was on the road a great deal in that period, as you know. And one person that I'd always been told to stay in touch with—if Larry was not available—was Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith], and you know, down at the Esso Building. Frequently I'd go down with Steve. Because by that time, of course, it was beyond Maryland. You were also talking Colorado, you were also talking other states, and Larry, Steve, Kenny, whatever you pick up that can be of help. And that's the way

we wanted it. So frequently I'd see Steve. And I don't remember the circumstances, but something had come up in New Jersey where I knew some of the delegates—some of the people who were going to be delegates—personal old friends. So it came up that Steve said well he was going to New Jersey for this Spring Lake meeting in late June. And could you go up with him? It was one of those.... I think he left around two or three in the afternoon. The Senator was then going on to New York, but as far as I was concerned, after I had met these people I could come back to Washington. So I had flown up with him to Spring Lake—and I think John Bailey [John Moran Bailey] was on board and Ron Linton [Ronald M. Linton] and a couple of press and just a very few people. We flew to Spring Lake and...

OBERDORFER: Was it the *Caroline*?

DESAUTELS: ... Yes, Chuck Roche [Charles D. Roche] was on. Chuck Roche—it wasn't Ron Linton. It was Chuck Roche who was on board. It was the *Caroline*. Flew up to Spring Lake. And he made his talk and visited with delegates and I went and sought out people that I had come up to see. And when we left, we motorcaded, we motorcaded from Spring Lake to Camden. He was to speak at a rally there, if I recall, and then he was going on to New York. So I motorcaded with him to Camden, and then someone was good enough to take me into Philadelphia and then I took the train back. But I remember the motorcade from Spring Lake to Camden. We had nothing to eat at Spring Lake. You know you go to these picnics and, of course, you're busy. He had to make speeches and everybody wants to talk to you and that sort of thing. So none of the party that was traveling with him.... If I recall, I think about two or three cars because we had picked up the, I guess, the National Committee or state chairman from New Jersey at the time, Thorn Lord. He had driven into Camden with us. So there were about two or three cars in the motorcade. The Senator was with Lord and John Bailey. And I think Chuck Roche and I were in the second car. So we had nothing to eat. And I remember we were driving into Camden and—well, everybody was hungry—so Senator Kennedy decided to stop at Howard Johnson's. So we pull into

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Howard Johnson's and the people in the restaurant recognized him right away, and you could see that the people were going to come up. So he quickly said to one of us, or Chuck Roche or a couple of us, "Why don't we all get hot dogs and coffee and we can eat in the car and resume our ride?" And he had a little briefcase, you know, if he needed a change of clothes or something. So he said he was going to go and freshen up and he disappeared into the rest room. Within a few minutes you could see that some of the men thought, well, maybe they should go to the rest room too and wash their hands and that sort of thing. And it was a very small one. So, I think it was John or somebody suggested that maybe you'd better go and sort of stand watch at the door. And I remember walking in and he was in the process of changing shirts. And so there were other people that were coming in to get his autograph and he said that good heavens he couldn't even change his shirt in peace. So I more or less blocked the door until he had changed his shirt, and combed his hair and washed his hands. And back we went into the car with hot dogs and coffee.

OBERDORFER: That's a very interesting episode.

DESAUTELS: At the Convention, of course, you know occasionally when we.... being coordinator, the job Larry had assigned me of coordinator with some of the state delegations, I worked with Utah and Colorado, occasionally taking delegates up to his suite in the Biltmore [Biltmore Hotel]. In the fall campaign, on those trips that I advanced naturally, as you know, the procedures that they had worked out, that Kenny had worked out, was that the first person, when the *Caroline* landed, the first person who went on board was the advance people to fill him in on any last minute details on what was to take place while we were there, and who was who, and who were the people waiting on the ramp and that sort of thing, exactly the route. So that on those occasions where I did advance, why we'd be the first one on board the plane to fill him in on last minute details.

OBERDORFER: How many cities did you advance?

DESAUTELS: Well, the first one was with Jim McShane [James J.P. McShane] in Sioux Falls, South Dakota which was to be the big, his major farm speech because that's one of those farm ploughing contests. You know, they come from far and wide. And I think there was a hundred thousand that come from all over the Midwest area. So the first place that I advanced was Sioux Falls, South Dakota. And I remember when he landed, we had a problem as you always do in that sort of thing. They have a lot of Indians in that area.

OBERDORFER: What was the problem, the Indians?

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DESAUTELS: The Indians, of course, wanted to present him with headgear and make him an honorary chief. Well that was fine, but also place the Indian gear on his head. And, as you know, he had a horror of anyone placing anything on, that sort of thing. He felt it demeaned the office and looked clownish and that sort of thing. So, the local people were quite insistent that if he was not going to go through this ceremony with the Indians, he might as well not stop at all. So it was agreed that he would stop and you had one of those situations that you played by ear. So there was a ceremony at the airport of presenting him with the headgear. And the Indian chief placed the war bonnet. As it came down, his hands went up, and I don't think it touched his head for a second. And there again he had, I guess, a fear of seeing those pictures in print and he felt it was clownish and I don't think I ever saw.... It was so quick I don't think any photographer had a chance to get a picture of it. Then from there...

OBERDORFER: What other advance places?

DESAUTELS: Well, there was Buffalo. A tremendous rally in Buffalo. Jim McShane and

I. He was making a.... That was an upper New York swing tour. And he had come in from Pennsylvania, first he had landed at Niagara Falls. And Jim was handling, we were sort of helping each other the day of the arrival. Prior to the candidate's arrival Jim was working exclusively in Niagara Falls and I was exclusively in Buffalo and then we sort of helped each other, worked together. So he came into Niagara Falls and then a cavalcade through some of the nearby communities. Then, if I recall, he flew to Rochester. Then we rushed over to Buffalo when he came into Buffalo that evening for an evening rally. Then he flew into Albany and motorcaded to Syracuse the next day. So after Buffalo we stayed overnight and then we had been asked to come to Syracuse to help there. So the next morning we went over to Syracuse. And Buffalo probably was one of the great rallies that.... Well, of course, there were many great rallies in the campaign, but this certainly was one of the.... It came right after the first debate. So that enthusiasm was running.... It was right after the first debate.

OBERDORFER: Probably a turning point.

DESAUTELS: So it was one of the great rallies. We had tremendous crowds all over Buffalo.

OBERDORFER: You mean going around the streets you had great crowds.

DESAUTELS: Yes. There were two big stops. One was a hall that held—oh, I don't know—the seating

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capacity must have been around 2,000 people and, of course, there must have been about 10,000 in the street. The auditorium, the big Buffalo auditorium, I think the seating capacity is around 20,000. And it was jammed to the roof with another 10,000 outside. And, of course, the streets were all lined up. It was, well, evening. We had a tremendous crowds all over Buffalo.

OBERDORFER: Claude, do you remember any other particular personal observations of the President or personal conversations with him on any of these occasions when you were advancing him or were the first person onto the plane when he stopped?

DESAUTELS: Well, you know, those moments are so hectic. He was always, you know, interested and he would ask various questions.

OBERDORFER: Try to reconstruct one or two.

DESAUTELS: Well, I don't.... You're only on board the plane for, at best, three or four minutes. And I would give him the piece of paper, and, of course, most of the time he had it anyway. It was just sort of last minute double check.

OBERDORFER: What was on the piece of paper?

DESAUTELS: The people greeting him, at the airport, then the names of the various candidates, whether it was Senate or congressional candidates, gubernatorial candidates, key candidates in the area.... And that sort of detail. Anything in particular that was to take place, something like at the airport, the Indian ceremony, any particular ceremony that was to take place, what it was and what was expected of him, his role. I remember in Wichita—it was in Wichita Falls, Texas—and both came, the presidential and vice presidential nominee came in. That was what, late October I guess. You remember that they had pictures of the two candidates in boxing gloves and, of course, Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] was on the mat and Kennedy was the champ and superimposed the two faces on these two boxers. And, I guess they were circulating around Texas and I got hold of one. So after the rally in Wichita Falls he and Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] then went into the airport and cut some films for last minute use in Texas. You know, these one-minute paid advertisements on television. And we showed him one of these pictures and he said he had—I think he said he had seen one or heard of one when he, on a recent swing in California, when he was coming from California. He'd heard of it in California, but hadn't seen one. And he got a big chuckle out of it.

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OBERDORFER: Now, are there any other highlights of the campaign that you think are noteworthy for this purpose, in the context we are talking about, that is, personal contact with or personal observations of the President?

DESAUTELS: Well, as I mentioned, Louis, in January of '61, Sunday afternoon, about Sunday noon, early noon, I got a phone call from Phyllis Maddock, Larry O'Brien's secretary, saying, "Are you going to be available today? Will you be where you can be located?" And after the festivities of the inauguration, like everyone else, I was physically exhausted and I said, yes, I was planning to stay home all day. And she said that well, Mr. O'Brien wanted to talk to me and would get back to me later. I think that came around one o'clock or so. And about four another call came and said Mr. O'Brien wants to see you at nine o'clock tomorrow morning at the White House. You know, I'd never been near this place except to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. To think at nine o'clock I was walking through the gate, that in itself was a big thrill. So at nine o'clock the next morning I came in and was ushered to Larry's office.

OBERDORFER: Was he already in the office he's in now?

DESAUTELS: No. He was to the left of me at that time. It was a very large office which we have now divided into two rooms. And—it's a little bit repetitious—but what he said is that, "You're going to be my administrative assistant and your responsibility will be to assist me in whatever assignments come our way, of course, primarily dealing with the legislative program and the Congress." He said the

President wanted to have a man as liaison with the Senate. And he told me that afternoon he was seeing another gentleman who would be working with the southern members. Of course, that turned out to be Henry [Henry Hall Wilson, Jr.]. And beyond that everything was still quite flexible as to the final make-up of the, how the staff would operate. And, as I said, he said, "Find yourself an office and throw your hat and coat, and start." Right then and there on Monday morning at nine o'clock. I think the main thing that in those early period was staff flexibility. Because not only you had the President's legislative program, this was a new Administration. This was just the dawn of the new Administration. And, of course, the one thing politicians are interested in is jobs. And congressmen and senators were writing, calling, wanting to come down constantly on recommendations for various appointments to policy making positions within the executive branch. And, of course, the mail was tremendous, so I started working on that.

OBERDORFER: What was that like?

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DESAUTELS: Congressional. And, of course, Larry being director of organization, a lot of mail had been addressed to him at the National Committee [Democratic National Committee] from state chairman, national committeemen down to plain citizens offering their services.

OBERDORFER: Was any of this mail addressed to the President?

DESAUTELS: Oh, yes. A great deal of it was addressed to the President, but it came to Larry's attention involving...

OBERDORFER: And were you preparing replies for the President's signature?

DESAUTELS: No. Mail that wanted his personal attention, of course, was sent down to him, and if he made a response the letters were typed downstairs and then just brought. Occasionally, in those early days, we might have mail, but not a great substance that we were preparing for the President at that time. Most of the mail was going under, the mail that we were handling was going under Larry's name, either congressional mail or plain citizens' mail. But my function, I guess in a nutshell, has been more or less carrying out the details of the policies and programs that, which had been laid down by Larry after meeting with the president. And one of the few things, of course, we tackled was his relationship with the Congress. He had spent fourteen years in the House and Senate. He had a great deal of his own knowledge and capacity, but how to bridge the gap now from one end of the avenue to the other, what means should we use. We proposed—Larry proposed and the President accepted—that committee chairmen be invited down individually. The committee chairmen could come down, meet with the President and say, "Now, Mr. President, this is the recommendation you've made which comes to my committee. We have jurisdiction over this. And here are our problems with some of the bills you've proposed. Here's my schedule. Here's how I intend to handle it." And give the

President exactly what the chairman anticipates in his own committee, whether this is going to be problems within our own side, whether the problem's from the opposition, from the Republican members of the committee, the minority, and that sort of thing. So we, that was one of the first things we set up, Larry set up, early in January: bringing down committee members, for about a fifteen minute appointment, which we felt was beneficial for both. For the President, it gave him an opportunity to have a personal visit, establish a personal relationship with the committee chairmen. And, of course, he would have an immediate grasp of the problems, since he had served in there. He knew how the committees operated. And it gave, of course, the committee chairmen an opportunity to come down and hear, which was helpful to him in his dealings. Then

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he could go back and tell his committee members when they go into executive session how the President feels very strongly about section 202 or that sort of thing because he had had a personal opportunity to discuss the bills with him. And another procedure we established immediately was late afternoon coffee hours. Every member of the House and Senate were divided into small groups so they could have a better chance to visit with him. And all the members were invited. I think we had about ten or twelve. We averaged about thirty to thirty-five congressmen at a session, would come down and he'd spend an hour and a half visiting socially with them. That was the first two things we established. And then, of course, Larry participated in all the legislative leadership breakfasts on Tuesday mornings. And the President would be brought up to date. Larry, you know... Because from here it's practically impossible to keep track of every single bill that the Administration's interested in. So within the first few weeks we were here Larry sent a memorandum to every cabinet officer, every agency head, asking them to submit by noon on Monday a current report of exactly where every major bill that the department or the agency was responsible for, exactly where they stood, what stage of congressional action were they in—both in the House and Senate. So we briefed those, analyzed them down, broke them down and then we'd prepare a memorandum to the President from Larry by Monday afternoon, which Larry would take in to the President Monday evening so that he was updated on the current status of all major legislation, both the House and the Senate. After the breakfast then Larry would come back on Tuesday morning, and call the staff in and give us whatever assignment resulted from the discussion that had taken place at the leadership breakfast. At that time, of course, then Mike Manatos [Mike M. Manatos]—who had not joined us then, but then had by early February, mid-February—was responsible for the Senate. Henry Wilson from North Carolina was working with the House. And then by that time Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue], who had been closely affiliated with Larry at the National Committee and for the first few days after the Inauguration more or less remained at the Committee, spent a great deal of time here on patronage problems but gradually moved in here and worked with us exclusively on legislation on the Hill. And Dick would work with northern members, east, west .

OBERDORFER: How about Chuck? [Charles U. Daly]

DESAUTELS: Chuck wasn't here at the time. Chuck didn't join us till '62.

OBERDORFER: Now, did this work in the early days bring you into personal contact with President Kennedy at all?

DESAUTELS: Oh, yes. Of course, my personal contacts with

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the President were not as extensive as with Larry. But the coffee hours, the President wanted not only Larry, but the other members of the staff to be there. And sometimes if a member had a problem, a personal type of problem rather than a legislative type of problem, he would call over and—it happened to me personally—he'd call you over and say, "Now Congressman So-and-So has a problem and get all the facts and details from him and I want a report on this by morning and see what you people have done within twenty-four hours"—in a couple of instances within twenty-four hours—"what's been done to correct the situation." So at all these coffee hours we were there. Here, on the business part, in the sense of my attending meetings, business meetings where the legislation was discussed with the President, no, I did not attend. The only one who went from here, of course, was Larry, 'cause he had the overall responsibility. The way we—Larry was sort of the bridge between Congress and the President. So Larry was the one who participated and then would give us our assignment and I would carry out the policies and decisions had been made downstairs in detail. But whenever there was a ceremony of some kind, bill-signing ceremony, which we had, of course, the details were worked out here. And we participated in those. I mean we were present, witnessed...

OBERDORFER: Did you invite people to the bill signings?

DESAUTELS: Oh, yes. The President, as you know, being very conscious of members of Congress, always insisted at any of these ceremonies that naturally that the congressmen and senators were invited and that those invitations were extended by here.

OBERDORFER: By you personally?

DESAUTELS: Yes.

OBERDORFER: And how was the line-up of personal invitees determined?

DESAUTELS: Well, of course, the author and the committee that had had jurisdiction over the bill, the chairman, and the ranking people, subcommittee chairman, the people who were on the subcommittee who handled the bill and had been primarily responsible, both from the majority and minority side.

OBERDORFER: Was this automatic? Or was there sometimes some ad-libbing about who you asked and who you didn't ask?

DESAUTELS: Oh, yes. Well sometimes it was difficult to ask, to invite someone to witness a signing of a

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bill into law who violently opposed it even if he was one of the ranking members of the committee. So, he always saw the list of, the proposed guest list—before they were invited.

OBERDORFER: Do you recall any specific changes that he asked in the guest list?

DESAUTELS: Well, he never did to my recollection. I don't recall that he ever deleted a name but he would often add.

OBERDORFER: Can you comment specifically on that?

DESAUTELS: Well, if you mean by name, I remember that this did happen on occasion where you'd get a phone call saying, "Well, how come Senator So-and-so hasn't been invited, or Senator Y?"

OBERDORFER: Do you remember a particular incident like that?

DESAUTELS: Well, I think... [Interruption]

OBERDORFER: You mentioned a moment ago that the President developed a procedure of inviting each of the committee chairmen down for a meeting. Do you have any kind of record that an historian could use who wanted to identify each of those meetings?

DESAUTELS: Oh, yes. Of course, any one who comes in to see the President, a record is kept of it. In this case, of course, these appointments were scheduled by us, by Larry. So consequently, we would contact the chairman and tell him that the President would like to see him on Tuesday at ten o'clock or whatever time and date it might be. And Larry would then prepare a memo for the President's attention of key legislation pending in the committee's chairman and, if any, what problems might be attached to them, what the, as we knew it, the schedule at that time. In other words, if a bill is now in the hearing stage, or the hearings are going to start next week, or the executive session to mark up—so that the President would be knowledgeable from our end as to where we stood. And so Larry would prepare a memo that we'd take down. So there *are* records of these meetings.

OBERDORFER: And do you have any way that either you or an historian could get at the play-by-play of the arrangements for congressmen to attend the signing

ceremonies?

DESAUTELS: You mean the proposed guest list, how it was prepared and the calls were made and did we have

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records of who was invited?

OBERDORFER: And could you reconstruct for me either now or at some other time incidents where the President modified the guest list by adding to it?

DESAUTELS: Possibly so. There were several instances where he would remember personal conversations that he might have had either by phone or at one of these coffee hours and remember, and recall the member's interest in the bill. And it might have been a member who was not on a committee but was helpful on the floor. And he would recall it and would say, "Make sure that Senator So-and-so or Congressman B be included. I saw by the list that you folks didn't have him on for one reason or another." And this possibly might be because of a conversation. Of course, one of his qualities, you know, that every conversation he had on congressional matters pertaining to legislation, he was always very meticulous in keeping Larry informed. And occasionally, I might forget to include, not being aware, to include a particular congressman and he'd always catch it. But there weren't too many of those because by and large we.... That's why I can't give you names because they were very few and isolated. But I'm only pointing to the fact that he always knew who was coming and those rare instances where we might have overlooked one fellow for one reason or another, he would catch it.

OBERDORFER: And did he call you personally about it? On occasion?

DESAUTELS: On occasion, or via Larry.

OBERDORFER: Was his means of communication by telephone or would he send you a buck slip or what?

DESAUTELS: Well usually by telephone, with me. Occasionally it was the telephone—but in many instances, of course, it was through Larry. No it was usually by telephone, not by buck slip.

OBERDORFER: His method of working did not include notes back and forth. It was more telephoning.

DESAUTELS: Well, to me.

OBERDORFER: With you, yes.

DESAUTELS: Yes.

OBERDORFER: Over the period of the Administration how many times, just to get a measure, how many times a day, a week, a month, over the whole period do

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you think you had telephone conversations with the President?

DESAUTELS: Well, not very many.

OBERDORFER: A dozen?

DESAUTELS: Oh, no, not even that many.

OBERDORFER: Half a dozen?

DESAUTELS: Possibly so.

OBERDORFER: And how many meetings with him do you think you attended?

DESAUTELS: Well, all these ceremonies in his office, in the mansion.

OBERDORFER: Yes.

DESAUTELS: That we...

[END OF TAPE]

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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**Claude J. Desautels Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
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