

John Cogley Oral History Interview—2/20/1968
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Biographical Note

Cogley, a journalist, executive editor of *Commonweal* (1950-1955) and an adviser to John F. Kennedy's (JFK) presidential campaign staff (1960), discusses JFK's 1960 Greater Houston Ministerial Association speech, JFK's relationship with Catholic and Protestant leaders, and the Catholic issue in the 1960 election, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN COGLEY

February 20, 1968
Santa Barbara, California

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: When did you first meet John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]? When did you first get involved in his candidacy?

COGLEY: I got involved in his candidacy before I actually met him. Sometime in 1959—I think it was in '59—he wrote an article in *Look* magazine. And in the course of the article he said something like this: “For the officeholder, no obligation transcends his duty to live up to the Constitution.” This brought on a rash of editorials in the Catholic papers and also in some Protestant papers, including *Christianity and Crisis*, criticizing him vigorously as being a

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secularist, a man who had no religious sense.

At the time, I wrote a column in *Commonweal* in which I argued that he was perfectly correct, having thrown in the important words “the officeholder.” In other words, if a man can’t conscientiously live up to the oath of office, his moral obligation is to resign, for he shouldn’t try to play it both ways. And this later was incorporated into the Houston speech where he said he would resign if he felt required by the Constitution to act against his conscience. After my *Commonweal* article appeared, I got a letter from him, which was my first contact with him. It was nothing but a thank you kind of letter. I don’t even have the

letter; I threw it away. It just says that what I had written was his position. As a matter of fact, I don't think it had ever really dawned on him before, but in the

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Commonweal column he saw a way out of this bind he was in at that time because he was catching hell from the religious press.

Somewhere early around this time, I was converted to him—I mean to his candidacy. I was almost ashamed to support him because here I was known as a Catholic editor who had always made a big thing of being anti-sectarian. I had taken it for granted that if a Catholic was going to run for the presidency I was probably going to be against him. All of a sudden one came along that I actually was for, and I found it slightly embarrassing. But somewhere along this time I became committed to his candidacy without his knowing it or anyone else's knowing it. That's how it all began.

STEWART: And then during the campaign you were called on to review the speech that he was going to make before

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the Houston ministers?

COGLEY: Well, it was a little more complicated than that. I was here at the Center [Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions] at that time. I got a telephone call out of the blue from Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan], whom I did not know but who knew of me. I think I vaguely had heard of him someplace, but I didn't know him personally. He asked me if I would be willing to join the staff of the campaign. This was soon after the nomination in Los Angeles. Dungan said that they realized that the religious issue was going to be a real problem so they had set up a branch of the campaign called "Community Relations," which was a euphemistic way of saying "the religious issue," to deal with it. To head the branch they had enlisted James Wine [James W. Wine] of the National Council of Churches, assisted by a man named Art Lazell. Lazell was a

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minister; Wine was a Protestant layman. I was asked to be the third one on this team.

I went to Washington, arriving there on Labor Day, 1960. The office had already been established. There wasn't much going there yet. The notion was that I would stay as long as it seemed feasible—I mean, as long as it seemed to be necessary. I stayed a month. Most of the big religious issues took place during that month—including the meeting called by Norman Vincent Peale; the Ministers' meeting, which was held in the Mayflower Hotel. By accident, I was staying at the Mayflower Hotel and recognized some of these people when they assembled and caught on to what the meeting was all about. I saw some of these rather famous Protestant clergymen whose faces I recognized, and I got wind that something was going on.

STEWART: I've heard that someone had some inside knowledge

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of exactly what was going on at that meeting. Was this through you, or was it someone else?

COGLEY: I don't think it was through me. I think that knowledge came from many different sources. I certainly did not attend that meeting; I just knew it was being held.

The Houston speech was planned and was given during that month. I went to Houston with Jim Wine on the day the speech was given. We went, rather, the night before to the Rice Hotel in Houston. And at the Rice Hotel at breakfast we met with the representatives of the group of ministers the candidate was going to speak to that night in order to draw up some ground rules for the confrontation. We apparently had the authority to draw up these ground rules. The rules that we drew up by agreement on both sides were that there would be no screening of questions,

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that the candidate would take them as they came from anybody in the audience. We thought you couldn't go any further than that. There was an odd part of that, and that was that the minister who headed the delegation got worried about the fact that the Church of God people, who were extremist, anti-Catholics from Texas, might get on the program and give a bad image of Texas Protestantism on national television. So he was interested in keeping them from asking questions. Of course we wouldn't have been terribly unhappy had they appeared. However, none of them did appear; at least, they didn't appear on the televised program.

STEWART: You people were definitely interested in the more radical, more unreasonable type of person?

COGLEY: It never even dawned on anybody, this, until the minister brought it up. And then when he brought

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it up, we stayed with the original plan. "No, we'll stick with the agreement. During whatever T.V. time is left over for questioning, people can stand in line and ask whatever they want to ask." And we didn't care who they were. He agreed to that finally. There would be no screening of questions beforehand. There would be no bringing questions up to the platform for picking and choosing because we felt that that could have a look of the contrived, of wanting only the right questions and so on. Now we did this without any consultation with Senator Kennedy—at that time "Senator" Kennedy—or Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] or anybody else.

And then we flew to San Antonio and picked up the campaign party. The candidate was going to speak at the Alamo in the afternoon. There was a great deal of interest in this speech of the evening, although

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it was not taken nearly as seriously as later it seemed to be. It was just to be one more speech along the campaign route, and I don't think anybody put tremendous emphasis on it. Interestingly enough, Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] was on the campaign plane, and Ladybird [Claudia Alta "Ladybird" Johnson], and Senator Yarborough [Ralph W. Yarborough], Mr. Rayburn [Sam Rayburn], and others. I don't know who the others all were.

Mr. Wine and I had lunch on the plane with Sorensen while the candidate spoke at the Alamo. Sorensen, to say the least, wasn't terribly happy about the fact that we had agreed to the candidate's answering any questions that came along. He felt that we had put the candidate in a terrible spot by making this agreement. I remember he said: "They can ask him anything, and he's on television!" I think Wine and I were both nervous about how it was going to come off because it was true, we had put him in this spot.

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STEWART: He thought there could have been some screening of the questions or some agreement as to the types of questions that could be asked?

COGLEY: Sorensen never got specific about what he actually wanted. The die was cast. There was no changing the rules then. But he was not terribly happy, and he said that the Senator was nervous about the speech and wouldn't be too happy about the agreement we reached. But the Senator, after he finished his speech at the Alamo, came back to the plane, and he didn't seem to be at all upset about what we had done. He seemed to take it as one more ordeal he had to go through. And so on the way back to Houston, and waiting around the airports too, I threw questions at the candidate of the kind he would be likely to be asked after he finished his speech.

STEWART: Excuse me. This was your first meeting with him?

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COGLEY: Right. His voice was in bad shape—he was saving it at the time, so he replied mostly in writing. He kept handing me long, lined yellow sheets of paper with the answers on them, and I kept tossing them away. Suddenly it dawned on me that I shouldn't be throwing these things away, since this might be an historic moment. So I saved one. I still have it.

STEWART: Did you feel confident after asking him these questions that he would do all right? What were your impressions as to his understanding of the questions that he would be asked?

COGLEY: I don't remember if Wine asked any questions or not; it was mostly my baby at this particular point. In any case, I think I covered every question he was ultimately asked, but I also asked him some complicated theological questions which I was afraid he was going

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to be asked, which were much more sophisticated than the questions he actually was asked when he got before the group.

He was a little nervous about the way he would reply to some of them. He obviously had two audiences in mind. One was the Protestant audience he was going to talk to; another was this large Catholic audience out there, this large Catholic population, and he didn't want to say anything that would indicate to them that he had somehow sold out his religion or sold out the Church. And so he was aware that he had to walk a tightrope. I think his answers were honest and forthright—but in some cases he was a little dubious: "If I say this, will there be an implication that I don't want anyone to draw from it?" I can't remember the conversation exactly, but I remember this very well.

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I also remember that evening during the actual talk, remembering that no question came up that we had not covered earlier in the airplane brainstorming session where I played inquisitor.

STEWART: And after that, as you say, the thing died down to a certain extent as an issue.

COGLEY: After the Houston speech, he got piles and piles of mail; all mail concerned with religion was sent to us. I can't remember how many letters, but there were an awful lot. Later I tried to find those letters and found that they got lost. Nobody knows where they are. At least no one knew a few years ago.

STEWART: The letters that came in?

COGLEY: Came in. A nun, Mother Patricia Barrett [Maryville College, St. Louis, Missouri], was doing a study of the campaign, and I wrote to Ralph Dungan and asked him if he could get her these letters and the anti-Catholic pamphlets that came in. Some of the pamphlets,

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incidentally, were fifty years old at the time, and were yellow with age. But Dungan said that he couldn't find them for her. So, I don't know where they are.

After the Houston speech, everything seemed to calm down. I saw no further reason to stay in Washington. I came back here to Santa Barbara because I wasn't doing much at

that point and the religious issue seemed to have been settled. Then the Puerto Rican bishops spoke out. I just about got back here when the Puerto Rican bishops came out with their statement. It started up the controversy all over again. My part in that was strictly limited to telephone calls with Ted Sorensen and Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and a few others.

STEWART: They were asking what they should do?

COGLEY: Yes, just for some opinion about what should be done, if anything.

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STEWART: They finally did get the Apostolic Delegate to make some kind of a statement, didn't they?

COGLEY: I don't remember that. I have a memory of Kennedy's simply saying that it didn't affect him at all. To everybody's surprise, it didn't blow up nearly as big as everybody thought it was going to. I remember around the Center the day the Bishops' statements came out that everybody thought this was the end of the line. And I must say I felt somewhat that way, too. Then, after some discussion, it was concluded the best thing to do was nothing and hope for the best and say nothing because Kennedy was in the spot of having been embarrassed by these bishops and didn't want to escalate the whole thing. And it seemed to work out all right.

STEWART: And after that you had no further contact to speak of?

COGLEY: Well, after he was elected, I had nothing of any substance—a few letters. There was another

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incident. I don't know if it's ready for publication yet; you'd have to check this out with Ralph Dungan. I take it you've interviewed him.

STEWART: I haven't talked to him personally.

COGLEY: Well, I was appointed during the Cuban Missile Crisis, it wasn't because of the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it just happened to be at the same time—I was appointed to the selection board at the State Department. And while I was on this job in Washington, the missile crisis blew up. During the hours when the Russian and American ships were approaching each other, everything was very tense, I got a telephone call at the height of it from a man I barely knew, whom I had met here at the Center in Santa Barbara—Donald Michael [Donald N. Michael], who was in Washington at that time. The rule at the State Department for the selection board was that one shouldn't be called out of the conference

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except for something very urgent. And I was called out on an urgent message, so naturally I thought something had happened in my family. I was rather nervous, I remember. When I got to the phone, it was Donald Michael, the last man in the world I expected to hear from on something urgent, a man I had met only about a month or six weeks earlier. He said, "You are about the only Catholic I know, and the only person who can do anything now in this situation is the Pope." [Pope John XXIII] And Michael said, "You've got to get the Pope to make a statement." I didn't have any idea how one got a statement out of the Pope, so I pooh-poohed the suggestion. I thanked him for his confidence in me but said I didn't know what I could do about it.

And I returned to the conference, went through the day, and all day long it kept haunting me that there was some reason why I had gotten this telephone

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call. I was almost getting providential about it: Why did I get this telephone call? I got almost obsessed with the notion that this really was a good idea, and that evening I went back to the hotel in Washington about 6:30. I telephoned Ralph Dungan at the White House and told him what had happened—the suggestion had been made to me and I thought it should be passed on to the President. Dungan was very encouraging. He shared the notion that such a statement would be very helpful to the President at this particular time if the Pope were to make it: for one thing, it might get the right-wing off his back. He also thought a statement from the Pope urging caution and urging both sides not to get too wild, to be carried away, might be just what was needed. He said that he would try to do something about it. I don't know what he did—and you'd have to ask him what he did—but I know that the next morning

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The *Washington Post* had a headline, something like "Pope John Urges Caution on Both Sides."

STEWART: You didn't suggest any approach to him or any way of....

COGLEY: He had his own approaches. I passed on the suggestion. That was about the only part I had in this whole thing.

STEWART: It would be very interesting to see just how it did come about. There was nothing else, then, during the Administration of any importance?

COGLEY: No.

STEWART: Let me go back a little bit. Do you recall what your earliest thoughts were,

say, in '57 or '58, when it became apparent that he was going to run in 1960? Do you recall what your thoughts were then on having a Catholic candidate in 1960? Did you feel the country was ready for it or had changed enough since 1928?

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COGLEY: Let me say first of all that in 1956 I attended a dinner given by Freedom House in New York. The two speakers were Senator John F. Kennedy and Clare Booth Luce. I thought Kennedy was about the worst speaker I had ever heard in my whole life. He talked into his tie. He gave a dull speech. I was terribly disappointed.

I had always taken an interest in him. One reason, a very simple reason, is that by accident I was at his wedding. I happened to be in Newport, Rhode Island, the day in which he got married. I was making a retreat at Portsmouth Priory outside Newport, and we went into town on Saturday morning to get something and saw a large crowd standing in front of St. Mary's Church there. We got out of the car and walked over to find out what was going on. It turned out that it was Senator Kennedy's wedding. That's how I happened to be at the wedding.

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So naturally that brought on certain interest in Kennedy.

Then in 1954, which was only one year later, I, myself, ran for Congress in Long Island as a Democrat. I was sort of a young hopeful at that time. The young people around me were all urging me to take a leaf out of Kennedy's book. They said that was the way to campaign. So I was conscious of him again. Then, in 1956, I heard this Freedom House speech and was rather turned off by it. I thought: "My God, this man expects to be President?" The same sort of thing they're saying now about McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] that he leaves an audience and nothing happens.

Then, within the next two years or so, I heard him on one of those talk shows on television. I was very, very impressed with the way he answered questions.

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His kind of mind, I learned, strongly attracted me. From then on I was very pro-Kennedy. Only then did I start thinking about the religious question. So I never thought of "Can a Catholic be president," except in terms of John Kennedy. By that time I was already committed emotionally to John Kennedy, and so I never thought of it as an abstract question; I was always dealing with him when I was thinking about it. So that's the answer to that one. I can't say that I gave a great deal of purely theoretical thought to it.

Once he was in the race, I started writing about it. I think I wrote three columns called "A Catholic for President?" I think if you'd check those columns you might find some of the same sentences that appear in the Houston speech.

STEWART: These were in *Commonweal*?

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COGLEY: Yes.

STEWART: Were you concerned in, say, '58 or '59 that there conceivably could be some harm to the Church in this country or to the ecumenical movement....

COGLEY: There was very little ecumenical movement at the time, if you'll remember. No. I was never concerned about that. I never took that view at all. I always took the view—I took *his* view—that he had a perfect right to run for President. The question was whether a Catholic could be elected President. We had discussions here at the Center. I think I was alone in this group here, but I remember arguing at the time that for every vote Kennedy would lose there'd be another vote he'd pick up—the sectarians and the bigots would cancel each other out. I felt that it wasn't a great issue except symbolically. But I felt that if he got the nomination, he wouldn't

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be defeated on that score only. I think I was wrong now because I believe if it hadn't been for the Houston thing he wouldn't have been elected. But at that time I felt that way.

STEWART: Were you fearful that the whole issue couldn't be handled, or did you feel that it might degenerate into a very emotional thing and get completely out of hand?

COGLEY: You mean throughout the country?

STEWART: Yes.

COGLEY: Well, I had had some experience with the suspicion of Catholicism, which was around at that time, so I wasn't exactly optimistic. But I felt that his particular style and his particular background made him a kind of ideal first candidate.

STEWART: I was going to ask you about that.

COGLEY: At the time, I remember going back and reading about Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith], whom I don't remember, and at the time I

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asked Senator Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman], who was then on our board at the Center here, about the Smith campaign. I remember Senator Lehman's saying that he worked harder for Al Smith than he had ever worked for any of his own campaigns, but that

he was now rather glad that Smith hadn't been elected, looking back thirty years, because he didn't feel Smith was ready for the presidency and that he would have killed any later possibility of a Catholic being president, because his failure would have been blamed on his Catholicism whereas actually what would have been responsible, according to Senator Lehman, would be the limitations of his background and his education. He wouldn't have been a match for the problems that were going to have faced him if he did become president. I was pleased that Kennedy, who had a broad education, was the first Catholic candidate. I felt rather happy about that fact.

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STEWART: In terms of a Kennedy type of Catholic versus another type of Catholic, a more theologically sophisticated Catholic—for example, Eugene McCarthy—do you still think Kennedy was the type that was most appropriate for 1960?

COGLEY: I really don't think the question is a valid one in the sense that I think once you're in a political office, it doesn't make any difference what type of Catholic you are. The question is really a campaign problem. It's not an office holding problem. I don't think that Gene McCarthy would have acted any differently in office—I mean, he would have acted the way Gene McCarthy would act as opposed to the way Jack Kennedy acted, but their particular versions of Catholicism would have little or nothing to do with the way they acted. The office makes this demand. So my own view is that it doesn't make a great deal

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of difference whether a man is Presbyterian, or a Catholic, or a Quaker, or whatever, once he is in office.

However, I do feel that there is a kind of cultural overflow of Catholicism which was very deeply reflected in Kennedy; namely, a coming to terms with power. I once wrote a piece about this. I suggested that Kennedy probably didn't even know where it came from, but nevertheless it was there: He was free of the burden in the Protestant notion that somehow power is evil or close to it. Not that Protestant politicians haven't exercised power, but always in the background the notion has lurked that somehow they were doing evil when they were exercising power. My impression is that Kennedy just never had that problem. He never worried too much about power's being evil. His notion was: how power is exercised determines whether it's good or evil.

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STEWART: Let me ask you a few questions based on your contacts with him, primarily in Houston, about his own understanding of the real issues involved. Were you always convinced, for example, that he did have a good, solid understanding of the problems involved in a Catholic in American political life?

COGLEY: Well, I think it would take someone who knew him better than I to come to this conclusion. First of all, I dispute the notion that he wasn't a "good Catholic." He was as good a Catholic as most.

I don't think, however, he was a theologically sophisticated Catholic. However, by the time of the campaign, the idea that he didn't know what the issues were was not so because obviously he had read everything going on this subject that had appeared in the religious magazines and various other places. So, he wasn't quite as naïve as was thought. He was

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very aware of the issues involved and the problems he was going to face. But I think he had what we now call a pre-Vatican II notion of Catholicism, with great emphasis on fish every Friday, Mass on Sunday, that kind of thing. So, by today's standards, he was a very old-fashioned Catholic. I don't think that he would have remained an old-fashioned Catholic given the changes in the Church. But I think his was a very Boston kind of Catholicism. It's complicated. He's been portrayed sometimes as having been theologically or religiously illiterate. I just don't think that was true. I don't think he was a theologian by any means, but I think he was at least as religiously literate as most Catholic politicians. He probably didn't know as much theology as, say, Gene McCarthy, but he knew as much as the average Catholic in the Congress.

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STEWART: Did you get any indication from your contact during the campaign or at any other time as to the people that both President Kennedy and people around him especially relied on for their basic understanding of the issues; for example, Bishop Wright [John Joseph Wright], John Courtney Murray, Monsignor Lally [Francis J. Lally], Cardinal Cushing [Richard James Cushing]. All of these people have been mentioned at one time or another as being close as advisors but...

COGLEY: I don't know anything about Bishop Wright, but in the case of John Courtney Murray, I know that there was not a great deal of advice given. Father Murray, who was a good friend of mine, a close friend, was very opposed to Kennedy at that time. He didn't approve of his candidacy—not because he was Catholic that had nothing to do with it—he thought he was a lightweight. He, Murray, was more or less

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pledged to the Dulles [John Foster Dulles] foreign policy. He voted for Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], I know, in 1952 and in 1956. He took a dim view of Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] and probably an even dimmer view of John Kennedy. What I think happened was that when the Houston speech was prepared, Sorensen called up Father Murray and asked him if there was anything here which would be contradictory to Catholic teaching, was it a fair position to hold. There might have been more than I know about, but I think that was

about it as far as Father Murray went because Father Murray, to say the least, was not eager to see John Kennedy elected President.

STEWART: Merely in terms as his capabilities as a...

COGLEY: Well, for two reasons: Murray leaned toward the Republicans in the first place; and secondly, he took a rather dim view of JFK. Later, after Kennedy was President, Murray told me that he was

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more impressed with him than he had expected to be and that he thought he had style, which in Murray's book was about the highest quality one could have. As a matter of fact, Father Murray strongly advised me against going to Washington or having any part in the campaign whatsoever, after I had showed him the telegram from Bobby Kennedy inviting me to come. He happened to be here at that time and he strongly urged me not to accept, to have nothing to do with "those people," as he called them.

STEWART: Really?

COGLEY: Yes. And so there is, I think, a little myth making about Father Murray in this case. As far as Bishop Wright goes, I know nothing about it. Who else did you name?

STEWART: Monsignor Lally in Boston and Bishop Hannan [Jerome D. Hannan], who was formerly in Washington.

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COGLEY: I don't know anything about Hannan at all.

STEWART: And Cardinal Cushing. I wouldn't assume.... Cardinal Cushing, of course, has always been a close friend, but just how much they would rely on his advice in these things, I just don't know.

COGLEY: I don't know much about Lally's part in it. I know Lally very well; he's a director of this Center. He's never told me anything about any great part he played in all this, that I know of, but you'll have to ask him.

STEWART: Again, this is a thing that would be very interesting because organizing a campaign and running a candidate as the first Catholic candidate, one would assume that there was someone or some two or three people who would be in the forefront as far as giving basic advice on these questions, conceivably. What I'm saying is that it was more than Ralph Dungan and Ted Sorensen, who I'm sure are quite knowledgeable but....

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COGLEY: Well, I would doubt it. For instance, you'll have to inquire further about Bishop Wright, but I don't think Bishop Wright was any great Kennedy fancier, either, and I would like to bet that Bishop Wright did not vote for John Kennedy. He might have in a moment of Boston fever or something, but I don't think he was very sympathetic to the whole Kennedy approach to politics. I saw this same list the other day someplace—I don't know where I saw it—but I found it a rather odd list. Now maybe there were things that I didn't know about, but at the time that I was around there, it seemed to be pretty much of a lay, rather than a clerical, operation and there was much more attention paid to Protestant thought than there was to Catholic thinkers about this. There was much more emphasis on what the Protestants were going to say than on any Catholic advisors. I don't doubt for a minute that Sorensen might have checked

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a speech over with one or all of these people as he might with anybody. But that didn't mean that they were committed to the candidacy at all.

STEWART: Are there any other people other than the ones I've mentioned?

COGLEY: Not that I know of. First of all, it wasn't that huge an issue. It was poked over in the corner of the campaign as being just one thing that had to be handled among many things, but it wasn't considered nearly so big an issue until it blew up. It was just supposed to be one little thing. It was called "Community Relations," as I said.

STEWART: You mentioned their relationship with certain Protestant leaders. Do you recall, again, any specific people, Billy Graham or Paul Blanshard or any of these people?

COGLEY: I don't think Blanshard was involved, but Reinhold Niebuhr, you remember, gave the speech at the Liberal Party dinner for JFK. Niebuhr spent the summer in

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which Kennedy was nominated out here at Santa Barbara at this place. He was a close friend of Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] and used to get a letter from Schlesinger almost everyday. At that time Schlesinger was not a Kennedy-ite. Niebuhr and I used to have daily arguments about Kennedy—friendly fights, but nevertheless daily arguments. I kept trying to convince Niebuhr that Kennedy wasn't the lightweight that he thought he was. Niebuhr, of course, was for Adlai Stevenson, as was Schlesinger. Then later, after Kennedy was nominated, Niebuhr, I think, was still connected with the Liberal Party in New York and

gave the speech at the Liberal Party dinner. He became increasingly impressed with Kennedy as the campaign progressed. He had such minimal expectations at the beginning, like other people, that almost anything Kennedy did looked good to him.

He was also impressed with Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. I went

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to this Liberal Party dinner in New York. I sat with Mrs. Niebuhr [Ursula Keppel-Compton Niebuhr], and Reinhold sat on the dais beside Mrs. Kennedy and he talked, talked, talked, talked, talked. Mrs. Niebuhr of course was fascinated as to what they were talking about. As soon as the dinner was over, she asked him. “What did she say to you, darling?” Niebuhr said, “She read every damn book I ever wrote.” He was amazed by this. I don’t think she literally read every book he ever wrote, but nevertheless, he was amazed that Mrs. Kennedy could talk so intelligently to him about what he had written. From then on Niebuhr was, I’d say, committed to Kennedy.

I should add something that dawned on me, too, that maybe is worthwhile for the record. That is that during this famous month it was decided—I decided, as a matter of fact, with Ralph Dungan—to get a group of Catholics together to make a statement, which

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was later published in *The New York Times* and elsewhere. Now that statement was written on the back of an envelope by Bill Clancy [Reverend William Clancy, the Pittsburgh Oratory], who has since become a priest but who was not a priest at the time, and by me in a Washington restaurant. We gathered a group together in Washington who took out some things and put in some other things, but issued basically the same statement. Then we sent it around to a list of about a hundred prominent Catholics. That had a big effect on the Catholic community itself. It came out of the “Community Relations” office, too. At the same time there was another statement, I think, prepared by a group of Protestants, which Niebuhr and John Bennett [John Coleman Bennett] were involved in. So there were two significant publicized statements that came out around that time.

STEWART: Again, the second one was initiated by you people?

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COGLEY: Yes, it was. By the “Community Relations” section.

STEWART: Just let me... [interruption] It’s often been said—in fact, Ted Sorensen, I believe, says this specifically in his book—that Kennedy had the feeling that the Catholic bishops were really out to get him. Did you feel this? Was this your impression from your association with the campaign organization?

COGLEY: My feelings were that he felt that some members of the hierarchy were not adverse to embarrassing him. Yes, I think that’s true; I think he did feel that. I

don't say all the Catholic bishops, but I think that there were, here and there, bishops he felt were out to get him, to embarrass him—not to get him but to embarrass him—mainly because they were Republicans or because they didn't like what they thought was the liberal tenor of his thinking. Also, there was, among not only bishops but among priests, as we could tell by the mail that came in, a kind of

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a resentment sometimes that here he was, a Harvard man, the boy who didn't go to Catholic schools, being the nation's number one representative of Catholicism—I think there was a little of that there, too—and also a fear that his style was altogether too secularized for their tastes.

Here in Santa Barbara we have a Franciscan mission, a seminary, and also a convent of Immaculate Heart nuns, and a woman here who worked in the polls was telling me about how the priests registered as Republicans and the nuns registered as Democrats. I told this to Ralph Dungan. Later in a speech President Kennedy used the fact that he went over big with the nuns, and I think it came out of that comment. It was quite true. I think he got the vote of practically every nun in the country, but I'm not at all sure he got the priests' vote.

STEWART: I think the statement he made when he was president was that most monsignori voted Republican and also

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parish priests.

COGLEY: Yes. I think that's where it came from.

STEWART: What did you consider to be legitimate questions about a Catholic president in 1960? And can you give an example or examples of people you considered to be reasonable critics?

COGLEY: I'll put it this way: I didn't consider any question to be, per se, legitimate, in the sense that it was actually meaningful; I did consider certain questions to be legitimately asked, if I can make that distinction. My notion was that the President was going to behave precisely as he did behave, and, if anything, he would bend over backwards—as, for instance, on aid to parochial schools—against the material interests of the Church. As far as getting orders from the Vatican went, I knew that was nonsense. However, in view of the fact that there were statements on the records—for instance, on religious liberty

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and the famous thesis in Catholicism “Error has no rights”—I felt that there were many questions which could legitimately be asked. My own political sophistication, I hope, and my

knowledge of Catholicism was such that I thought no question in itself was meaningful, that we were going through a kind of dance that had to be gone through. And I think that was the President's own view. I think it was the view of anybody who was connected with this whole business. There was no real question. What we were going through was one of those rhetorical problems that any candidate has to face. I could not see, for instance, that the President was going to be sitting there getting orders from Rome. I didn't think any of it was real, but, if I were a Protestant and I had read some of the old stuff in papal documents, I would think that it would be quite legitimate for me to demand a reply on the subject. So from the beginning, the problem

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was more rhetorical, I think, than genuine.

STEWART: But there were these types of questions that in this context you felt had to be answered or had to be given some consideration?

COGLEY: Right. You know the famous story of Al Smith, who said when they brought up a devastating Pius IX [Pope Pius IX] statement to him, he didn't know what anybody was talking about. Well, Kennedy did know what people were talking about, because he had read about it, but it was no more real to him than it was to Al Smith. I was quite sure nothing was going to happen: there would be no orders from Rome. If anything, it would work the opposite; there would be fewer concessions to the Church than there would be with a non-Catholic President.

STEWART: Did you ever feel during the campaign that people in the Kennedy organization were willing to take advantage of the religious issue politically? For example, there was a charge that the polls showed definitely

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in late September that any further discussion of the issue could only benefit Kennedy but at the same time the decision was made that he would keep talking about it to a certain extent. Was ever your feeling that they were trying to take advantage of it?

COGLEY: If the Houston speech hadn't turned out as well as it did from his point of view, there wouldn't have been such an effort to see that it was put on television in cities like Chicago or New York, overwhelmingly Catholic cities where there was no need to assure the voters. So I would say yes, there was the normal amount of making lemonade when you find yourself with a lemon.

STEWART: Was there any opposition to this that you know of or that you encountered?

COGLEY: My feeling was that nobody came right out and said this, you know. It wasn't even an issue. It was, "We've got this problem. Let's do what we can as well

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as we can to counteract it on the one hand and, at the same time, get everything we can out of it.” So I don’t think it was a calculated thing; it was something that happened. But, as an example, if you had this film of the Houston speech around and you knew that it had aroused some kind of pride, and maybe even identification, with large numbers of Catholic voters who had left the Democratic Party during the Stevenson campaign, you wouldn’t be averse to showing it on television where they could see it. I’m not suggesting any plots; it’s just the way things were.

STEWART: One further question on this Houston speech. I’ve heard it said that Kennedy himself was reluctant to use this basic idea that he would resign rather than go against his conscience. Do you recall this?

COGLEY: I did not discuss this question. The way that Houston speech was put together, as I recall—it was put together by Ted Sorensen, but there were

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notes written by me and there were notes written by Jim Wine sent to Sorensen, and I had it in my notes. I had earlier had it in a *Commonweal* column. I was rather surprised, though, when the idea appeared in the speech, but I didn’t know that he was adverse to it.

STEWART: Why? You were surprised because you felt it was a fairly radical thing to be saying?

COGLEY: I thought it was radical, yes. I thought it was a radical thing to say. I didn’t anticipate any resignation. But I felt that rhetorically it was important to say this in order to unscramble the mess he got into in the *Look* article. The reactions to the *Look* article had suggested to lots of people that if he were a good Catholic, he would bypass the Constitution and do what his “Catholic” conscience dictated. I would be most unhappy with a man who told me that he was not going to live up to the

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Constitution if his conscience told him otherwise. So I thought it was very important to unscramble that issue and for him to say flatly that if his conscience and the Constitution were in conflict, there was only one thing for him to do, which was to resign and not carry on in the office. The dilemma, as it was posited, was: Shall I act constitutionally or shall I act morally? Well, the only way to get out of that dilemma is to get out of office. You can’t choose in favor of your own conscience over the Constitution: that was my feeling. I probably never would have suggested that be in the speech except for the fact that there had been such a reaction to the *Look* piece, which I knew, from my own experience with a lot of

people, had suggested to them that if he were really living up to his religion, he would bypass the Constitution if it ever were in conflict with his religion but still carry on as

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President. Again, I must emphasize, I didn't think it was a real issue, I didn't think that such a situation would happen, but I felt it was important that it be said.

STEWART: So, again, it was aimed primarily at Catholics.

COGLEY: No, it wasn't aimed primarily at Catholics so much as it was aimed at the impression that was given by the Catholic reaction to the *Look* article. I don't think you can exaggerate the reaction to that *Look* article, in the Catholic press, particularly, because it was the first public reaction to Kennedy and it was a very negative and a very naive reaction and, I thought, a very politically unsophisticated reaction. It indicated to me at the time that they hadn't thought through this whole question very seriously. That's what possessed me to write this piece. Then, I guess, I was so pleased with the idea that I wanted to keep at it.

STEWART: Just one final question that maybe can serve as a

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bit of summary of the whole thing. What overall impact do you think Kennedy's candidacy and his Administration had on the course of the Catholic Church in America? Do you think it really contributed to the more progressive Church that we see in the 1960's, or is it a minor factor, or just how much of a factor was it?

COGLEY: Well, I think that the timing was perfect, not by anybody's plan but as it worked out. The Catholic community in America just around this time, I think, was reaching a certain social and educational level, whatever you want to call it, which the Kennedys had reached a generation or two earlier. The Kennedys—I say the Kennedys in a broad, general way—had not gone through the Catholic trauma, they had bypassed it, if you want to put it that way. Certainly, the grandfather probably didn't, but the next two generations bypassed most of the American Catholic experience. I'm theorizing now, but it seems to me that they had

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earlier the experiences that present day Catholics whose grandfathers weren't so successful are having. This added up to both a strength and a weakness. It was a strength insofar as it gave them a certain amount of poise and sophistication, a lack of defensiveness, and it was a weakness insofar as they missed the central experience of their group. I think that missing this had a great deal to do with the original suspicion on the part of other Catholics of

co-religionists who didn't participate in all the confusions and ambiguities of that historic experience, and still were, so to speak, the leading Catholic family of America. That, I'd say, would explain the early antagonism to the Kennedys. I think it still does explain a certain antagonism which I find, especially from people from Boston, Catholics from Boston who vaguely resent the Kennedys. As you probably know, there are many who still resent the Kennedys.

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At the same time, I think that not having been scarred by that experience gave President Kennedy a certain poise, a certain style, which later led to a great deal of pride in him in the Catholic community. The ironies are there. Here, the symbol of modernity turns out to be an Irish Catholic from Boston. A great deal of pride arose from that. It's a mixed picture, then.

Now, you put this together with two or three other factors: one is the particular point at which the Catholic community in the United States had come to at the time of John Kennedy's ascending; secondly, the pontificate of Pope John, which was a liberating experience for the whole Church, but particularly for the Catholics in this country; and thirdly, the Ecumenical Council. Put all three of them together, and then add to that the assassination and all the drama of the assassination and the tragedy and symbolism of it. Result: the symbolic importance of

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John Kennedy for American Catholic life is tremendous. It's something that I think that he couldn't possibly have anticipated himself. And it also had another liberating effect, that is, kind of an acceptance of the contemporary world, an acceptance of modernity on the part of Catholics. This is being reflected in Catholic life even today.

There's another minor point, and that is that American Catholics now have their very own hero. When I was going to a parochial school, the closest we could come to a bona fide American Catholic hero was the Father of the Navy, Barry [John Barry], but he was very remote and we really didn't know much about him. He didn't leave as strong an impression as, say, Abraham Lincoln. Now American Catholics have their own 100 percent tragic American hero representing their group in the pantheon of American heroes. I think that has a tremendous symbolic value as far as making

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Catholics feel at home in this country goes.

There's an element of poetry in it, and then the fact that the element of tragedy enters into it, that the hero is slain and becomes almost a kind of Christ figure, all this is important. So it's part sociological, part psychological, and part mythical. Put it all together and you can see the tremendous influence JFK has had on American Catholicism.

STEWART: There's one thing I just came across. This idea that other candidates should be

questioned about their religious beliefs—for example, the whole matter of Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and his Quakerism—was this a subject that was discussed at all during the campaign? Was this at all a factor?

COGLEY: I don't recall it as a factor, no. I once wrote a critical piece about Kennedy's going before Bishop Oxnam [Garfield Bromley Oxnam] and the Methodist bishops in Washington, which annoyed me no end because it seemed

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to me that in doing so he had put himself in the position of going before an ecclesiastical inquisition to explain himself. This is not exactly the same point, but thinking back on those days I remember my own annoyance at the fact that Kennedy put himself in this position, first of all, and annoyance that the Methodist bishops put him in this position and at the same time everybody thought it was perfectly all right for him to go in behind closed doors to explain himself to a group of bishops. I remember suggesting in the article criticizing this that if Mr. Nixon had gone before a group of Roman Catholic bishops in Washington to explain his position on pacifism what a fuss there would be about it.

I think that everybody on the campaign staff took exactly the attitude that I've explained to you: we were not dealing with realities (there was nobody at all who suggested that if he ever got

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elected that Kennedy was ever going to have a problem, that his Catholicism was going to make any difference whatsoever, and that he was going to have any problem with Rome); that the problem was strictly a rhetorical problem and it was strictly a campaign problem; and that once elected, it would finish. And I think we were right about that.

STEWART: Okay. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

COGLEY: No. If you want to ask anything, go ahead.

STEWART: No, I've run out of questions.

COGLEY: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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