

William F. Connors Oral History Interview—4/15/1964
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Biographical Note

Connors, the New England Regional Manager of the Veterans Administration in Boston (1961-1980), discusses John F. Kennedy's (JFK) continuing influence on the American people, JFK's 1961 meeting with Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, and JFK's assassination, among other issues.

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William F. Connors

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1, 4	First meeting with John F. Kennedy (JFK)
2	JFK's personality
3	JFK's decision to run for the Senate in 1952
4	Motivations for working for JFK
5	JFK's political maturity
6, 20	JFK's continuing influence on the American people
7	The Kennedy family
9	JFK's closet associates
13	JFK's plaque from the Veterans Administration
14	JFK's weaknesses
16	Choosing Lyndon B. Johnson as running mate
17	JFK's response to his 1961 meeting with Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev
18	JFK's assassination
20	JFK's impact on Connors
21	JFK's sense of humor

Oral History Interview

with

William F. Connors

April 15, 1964
Boston, Massachusetts

By Joseph McLaughlin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, I know you go way back with Jack Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] both from a personal standpoint, political, business, if you want to call it, with the Veterans Administration [V.A.]. What are your thoughts on Jack Kennedy right at this very moment?

CONNORS: Well, Joe, it was a pleasure to have known him. I think in my lifetime and in my occupation as a public servant, I'm a better manager of the Veterans Administration having known him and knowing what his ideals were. It's a nice feeling, having known him, Joe, very frankly, quite sincerely.

McLAUGHLIN: Ideals, Bill? Ideals are something we think of in terms of words. What do you mean actually?

CONNORS: Well, I probably think of this. I first met him around the summer of '46. He was then a candidate for Congress. He was a tired looking, thin individual. In fact, I met him behind City Hall Annex, in the street. I was introduced to him. He said that as a candidate running for Congress many veterans were asking questions about VA benefits and would it be possible for him to send any of his constituents or people that had merit—had merit, he clearly defined this—could he send them

into me and would I help them. I now, in retrospect, think back to his statement in '61 when he was President.

[-1-]

He spoke to the combined House and Senate in Massachusetts. In fact, it was January 9, 1961, when he talked about dedication, when he talked about honor mortgaged to no single individual or group and compromised by no private obligation but devoted solely to serving the public good in the national interest. I think there then he gave me the message on dedication in the street, Court Street in front of the V.A.

McLAUGHLIN: Well, Bill, you knew him as very few people did know him. You had, as we mentioned before, no ulterior motives in regard to his ambitions or anything of that sort. What kind of a man was he apart from politics? Apart from the public life?

CONNORS: I really didn't know him socially. I was never invited to his house. I was never invited to any parties at the White House, although I probably saw him about twenty or twenty-five times while in the White House as President. But I could visualize the type of man he was. I could feel what he wanted, how he loved his country, and what he wanted to do for his country and how he wanted to lead this country. I could feel all this, Joe. I don't say I could feel this when he was a congressman or when he was first senator. I think I felt this around 1956 and '57 or '58. I think then he had an idea of where he was motivated and where he was going to. I don't think initially this showed. I think he was running for Congress because maybe this was his duty. I think in '52 or '51 the natural Kennedy personality started to show itself. They are champions. They are competitors. They do drive for perfection. They do drive for excellence. I think that I first noticed it in '51. In fact, it's strange enough. You were in his apartment in 1951 when he was debating whether he should run for governor or senator, with several other gentlemen. Strangely enough, probably 80 percent of this group were advocating that he should run for governor. Naturally, they had a reasons: they were all lawyers.

[-2-]

McLAUGHLIN: Who actually, you think, Bill, made up his mind, or did Jack make up his own mind at that time?

CONNORS: He made up his own mind in all these decisions. It's one of these individuals, a lawyer, now a lawyer in Massachusetts, was talking about what a great honor it would be to be governor and then what a great honor to be senator. Naturally, in 1951 they didn't talk about the presidency. When could an Irish Catholic Democrat from Boston be president, in '51, you know?

McLAUGHLIN: At that time did Jack give any indication of eventually running for president?

CONNORS: No, no. He sat very quietly in the room in the characteristic pose which you've probably seen in the rocking chair, the hand on the chin and listening. He was a good listener. His questions were pointed and hit the subject very sharply, but he was a listener. He tried to steer the conversation, but he was listening to the room. And one of these individuals, a lawyer, was talking about the fact that the then ex-Senator Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge] could be defeated as senator based on the fact that Congressman Jack Kennedy's war record was much more exemplary than Senator Lodge's. And it was at this point that I interjected myself and said that actually ex-Senator Lodge had resigned from the Senate and joined the armed forces in North Africa in 1942, probably long before Jack Kennedy hit the Southwest Pacific in 1942. And then the quick look. They were sort of blue eyes and yet they weren't blue. The long eyelashes and yet taking everything in, an almost acquiescence in the sense that I agree with you, and yet he hadn't said anything. I think around that point he wanted to be senator, he didn't want to be governor, and yet he hadn't said this. It was demonstrated by the way he reacted to it.

McLAUGHLIN: When you first met him, Bill, down at City Hall Annex, you described him as a thin, tired man. That was the very, very beginning of his political career. Did he show anything to you then or in his future campaign of any inward greatness, if you want to

[-3-]

call it that that gave you to think that he was really going places? When did you really think that he would go beyond congressman or senator?

CONNORS: I think the first time I felt that this man could be President was in the campaign for vice president against Senator Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] in 1956, when—in fact, I think it was Lyndon B. Johnson who was representing the delegation from Texas, stood up on the floor and said, "Texas delivers its X number of votes for the fighting sailor from Massachusetts." And then the vote narrowed down and then very fortunately for John F. Kennedy he was defeated for vice president, and Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] went on to defeat. No doubt if John F. Kennedy had gone along with him, he would have gone down to defeat before a popular president, Dwight D. Eisenhower. But this was part of the overall picture—that he had to be defeated there, create an image before the delegates, and then in 1960 come back, this time not run for vice president but run for the presidency. I think this gained him many, many delegates—the way he lost in 1956.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, when you first met Jack Kennedy—I think this was in 1948?

CONNORS: '46.

McLAUGHLIN: '46. He came to you looking for help. What motivated you to work with Jack Kennedy beyond that—his political campaigns and so forth? You had

no interest prior to that; so far as I know, you had never had any interest in politics beyond the city level and so forth. But nevertheless over the years you became a close associate in the political campaigns. What motivated all that?

CONNORS: I suppose it was an interview I had with him after he was congressman. This must have been November 1946 or sometime in the latter part of '46 or '47. I dropped into his office and there was Dr. Quigley [Thomas Quigley] and Grace Burke [Grace M. Burke] and myself...

McLAUGHLIN: Excuse me, that's Dr. Thomas Quigley?

[-4-]

CONNORS: Thomas Quigley, the director of the Outpatient Clinic in the V.A. I think we were on lunch hour. We just dropped over—and I really can't say, I can't remember why we dropped over there—and he asked me a question about what I thought was unfair in the Veterans Administration and their parceling out of benefits. This was an amazing question from a congressman to me. In fact, I had never met a congressman—they were sort of in a world beyond me. But he wanted to know what was unfair in the Veterans Administration as they passed out benefits. Strangely enough, I told him that I didn't quite agree with the fact that a retired officer receive three-quarters compensation of his base pay while an enlisted man with the same disability receive \$30 a month. It was many years before I realized that Congressman John F. Kennedy was a retired lieutenant junior grade with a back injury. He didn't indicate that to me at that time. But he wanted to know what was unfair. He wanted equal opportunity to any veteran at that time in 1946. This later was demonstrated in equal opportunity for minority groups in 1960 and 1961.

McLAUGHLIN: Now in the Senate campaign, Bill, had he changed much from when you first met him, when he first ran for Congress? Had he matured politically or otherwise? Or was he still the same Jack Kennedy?

CONNORS: I don't think he was as impulsive. I remember back to a speech he made about the American Legion in '48 on the floor of the Congress, when he talked about the fact that there hadn't been an original idea out of the American Legion in twenty years, something that was constructive. In other words, the forerunner of his speech at the Inaugural when he said, "What can you do for your country, never mind what you can take from your country." And, amazingly, I heard this—I don't know how true it is—but as he walked back to his seat a couple of congressmen, brother congressmen, ran up to him and said, "Look, you can strike that from the record." And he turned around and headed up to the platform and read it back into the record, and, in fact, I understand it's still part of the record, although later in 1960 at the American Legion convention he qualified this with maturity by saying

[-5-]

that, in retrospect, he probably didn't have the same views in 1960 that he had in 1948.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, why were people so eager to work for Jack Kennedy? I'm talking now not about the professional politicians, if you want to call them that, but the average person, people who are still associated with Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] and Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]? The majority of them, I don't think, are looking for something. Of course, you always find that group.

CONNORS: Well, I think that the average person follows a governor or a senator or a congressman personally for what he gets out of it, frankly. He gets a better job or her gets recognition. He gets something out of it. I've watched Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], and Dave Powers [David F. Powers], Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] and all these people, Billy Sutton [William J. Sutton]. They seemed to thrill in being just part of him. What makes a leader? It's something. He sets a goal. It's sort of a dedication, a duty, a destiny or what-have-you. It's still here. It's still an undercurrent in the American society. It's still a big factor in the '64 and '68 and '72 elections in this country. I think this will be borne out.

McLAUGHLIN: You think the Kennedy influence will remain?

CONNORS: Definitely, definitely, yes. This is a big factor. Now, I've been raising money here for the Kennedy Memorial Library last week, and I had about 300 people come up and give donations. And they came to this office, people who had never been to this office before, low grade people; and they walked over to the autographed picture of the President, they walked over to the picture to the left of the President—women, particularly, who obey an impulse and intuition they like. Without being critical of our president, my wife says, "I slept sounder when Mr. Kennedy was president than when Mr. Johnson is president." They have a feeling of sincerity; they have a feeling of dedication; they have a feeling of integrity; they have a feeling of courage. They liked this. This is

[-6-]

the Kennedy image. This is no longer in Massachusetts; it's part of the country. In fact, strangely enough, it's part of the world. This same image and this same feeling was demonstrated in Germany the night, November 22, when he was assassinated—250,000 Germans reached for their guns. This was it.

McLAUGHLIN: What about that night, Bill, now, of November 22? You had the privilege of knowing him a lot better than most of us did.

CONNORS: I don't know. I suppose we all can't live forever.

McLAUGHLIN: Do you feel that it was destined to happen that way?

CONNORS: I often wonder, and maybe history will document it this 50 years from now or 100 years from now, but you wonder what supernatural being or what reached in that made him do what he wanted to do. And then you go back two thousand years ago and you talk about Christ. What was he up to; what was the mission; what was the message? It's probably too early. It's not for me to say. That same feeling came through; the same message came through.

McLAUGHLIN: In other words, not necessarily a total feeling or sadness but the fact that a work had been accomplished? Is that what you mean?

CONNORS: Yes.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, how much of the Kennedy family did you get to see or to know?

CONNORS: I met Bobby Kennedy the day I was called down to the White House to be assigned to this job for the first time. I met Senator Ted Kennedy for the first time a year later in Dorgan's Grill in South Boston. I think it was March 17, 19—would that be '62? Yes, March 17, 1962. In fact, I met Eddie Martin [Edward T. Martin] over there. He was in the booth next to me.

[-7-]

McLAUGHLIN: Did you know Jackie Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] or the children?

CONNORS: I had dinner with Senator Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy in 1954, the summer of '54. We had journeyed down to the Y.D. [Yankee Democratic Division] Convention in New York and we, Dick Sullivan [Richard Sullivan], the former commanding officer of the Fifth Ranger Battalion and I, had jumped over to Washington for a day. I called the then-Senator Kennedy about half-past eleven and he arranged to meet us for lunch in the Senate dining room with Congressman Torbert Macdonald [Torbert H. Macdonald]. That was the first time I met Jackie, the only time I met Jackie Kennedy.

McLAUGHLIN: Did you ever meet the children?

CONNORS: Yes, October 25, 1963. I spent a half-hour with John-John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.], the boy. You know an amazing thing about this, Joe. The boy came in at half-past eight and Dave Powers and Kenny O'Donnell and John Driscoll and Mrs. Driscoll and myself, Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue], Larry O'Brien and apparently they had some little formality every morning. The President was busy in his office. We were in the Fish Room which was adjacent to his office; and Dave was very close to the family. He was more or less like the father talking to this boy. He brought

the boy in and there was a model of a Gemini rocket. This was a twin astronaut rocket that was going to journey to the moon or out into space somehow and this rocket, or the top of the rocket, was on the top of the table. And every morning the boy would come in and he'd climb up on a chair. He climbed up on the table and he reached and he got these two dolls out that represented the two astronauts. And Dave would throw them up to the ceiling and the boy would try to catch them. I was amazed to think that a three-year-old boy had such an understanding and such balance, physical ability, in the sense that he caught one of these rockets or one of these astronauts. And I said to Dave, "Gee, if he falls off that table and cuts his head open, the President will kill us." And when we finished the boy put the two astronauts back in the rocket and closed the doors and got down off the table. And then Dave said to him, "What do you do when you see the soldiers?"

[-8-]

And the boy whipped up his arm in a right hand salute, October 25, 1963. November 25, I saw this boy on television make the same salute outside the Cathedral in Washington.

McLAUGHLIN: I can recall that picture myself.

CONMMRS: I often wondered if she leaned down and said, "What do you do when you see the soldiers?" and he saluted.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, coming back again now to 1948 when you first met Jack. I think it was only a short time after that that I became involved too. That was, I think, when we started out to make Jack the number one expert in the United States on Veterans Affairs. I was at the *Post* then. Remember how we used to jump the releases and have Jack Kennedy issue them from Boston rather than Washington? In regard to that, Bill, I don't recall them too well now because you stayed close to Jack. I didn't have that opportunity. Who were the men in your memory who were closest to Jack in the very beginning? Who were they and what are they doing now?

CONNORS: I think originally the number one man, the fellow that brought him around, was Billy Sutton. Billy Sutton took him up to...

McLAUGHLIN: Who was Billy Sutton?

CONNORS: Billy Sutton was in Charlestown, a nice young fellow. In fact, he was Jack's first secretary in Washington. And Jack needed the Charlestown district. He also needed the Brighton district. And Billy Sutton took him up, strangely enough, to Dave Powers' apartment, who was a very likable fellow in Charlestown and who, strangely enough, was supporting another candidate.

McLAUGHLIN: Was Dave in political life then?

[-9-]

CONNORS: No. We were all just out of the service. Dave was working for the Park Commission, probably making \$1800 per year as a playground instructor.

McLAUGHLIN: Here in Boston?

CONNORS: Here or Charlestown or East Boston or Dorchester. I forget which playground. Dave liked what he saw, stayed with Jack. Jack won. The candidate was a fellow by the name of Cotter [John F. Cotter], was it?

McLAUGHLIN: Oh, the former fire commissioner?

CONNORS: John Cotter? And at that time the then elected Congressman took Billy Sutton to Washington with him and selected Judge Frank Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey], then Frank Morrissey, former secretary to Governor Tobin [Maurice J. Tobin], as his Boston secretary. This puzzled—I think this puzzled the people that were close to Jack in the sense that, who was Frank Morrissey? Well, Frank Morrissey, of course, was a friend of the father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], and he ran the Boston office from '47 up until, oh, I suppose up until 1959. We thought at that time that Eddie McLaughlin [Edward F. McLaughlin, Jr.] might have been the secretary.

McLAUGHLIN: Had Eddie been involved in the campaign?

CONNORS: Eddie had been involved.

McLAUGHLIN: Eddie was the City Councilor then?

CONNORS: No, this was—Eddie worked for the Veterans Administration in special services in '46. It wasn't being critical of Frank Morrissey in any sense. He didn't seem to be that close to Jack and yet he wound up as his secretary. Billy Sutton went with him to Washington. And Dave Powers went back to his job on the playground commission. And later on when Congressman Kennedy had the back operation, it was Dave Powers who was called by the father to go down to Florida and stay with Jack and to read him books and magazines after the operation while he was convalescing. You know it's an amazing thing. I was thinking back to a night in the early '50's. It must

[-10-]

have been after he was Senator. We went over to the hospital on the hill, Parker Hill Hospital. Actually, we went over to see Mrs. Logan, Edward L. Logan, the widow of General Logan, the famous general of the Y.D. [Yankee Division, 26th Infantry] in World War I whom the airport was named after. And when we finished, Al MacPhee, Distinguished Service Cross winner of the 101st Division, Colonel Dick Sullivan, whom I mentioned earlier, and myself, when we finished visiting with Mrs. Logan, she said, "You know...." No,

he was Congressman. This must have been '51 or '50. She said, "You know, Congressman John F. Kennedy is next door." This was a Saturday evening. We were out on the town; we were enjoying ourselves. We were going over to the Y.D. club to have a few drinks. So I knocked on the door and went in. This was Saturday evening. This man must have been in his very early thirties, thirty-one or thirty-two. He was sitting in bed; he had an orderly there who was watching television. Television was of age at that time. He had many books and pamphlets spread around on the bed and papers, and he was busy writing *Profiles in Courage*, doing the research work, and he was thrilled that someone would drop in at 8 or 9 o'clock on a Saturday evening to say hello. We didn't stay long. But I was impressed then that a man of thirty-one or thirty-two years of age could be busy doing research, writing a book. I know I couldn't.

McLAUGHLIN: Well, Bill, you and I are from the same age group, the World War II crowd and so forth, that Jack came from. It's a known fact, I think now, that he represented a new breed, type, whatever you want to call it of politician, representing the World War II group, the younger element for a change; whereas in the past, the national politician, the congressmen, the senators, the President represented the elderly or the middle-aged or the moneyed groups. Did this—do you think this feeling of representing the young automatically tie the younger veteran of World War II and so forth to Jack throughout his entire career? Make them sympathetic?

CONNORS: No, I don't think the veteran of World War II recognized what John F. Kennedy was like. I don't think he was that close to them. I do think—I know what I felt that he was—what he represented in '46 and '48 and '52 and all his life was equal opportunity.

[-11-]

He believed in fairness; he believed in loyalty; he believed in dedication; he believed in honesty; he believed in courage. And this manifested itself in the way he functioned, the way he thought. If you were one of his friends, he never forgot this. Too often in the game politics, you're a part of a service. You're utilized and then because you no longer have any value or the candidate has moved higher, you're dropped by the wayside. This is a thing a Kennedy never did. I've never seen Senator Kennedy.... This was indicated by the election yesterday of Beryl Cohen [Beryl W. Cohen]. Bobby Kennedy, although people say that he's hardboiled and he's hard-nosed and he's very righteous, I understand he's got a very big heart.

John F. Kennedy never forgot those who had befriended him. whether it be '46, '48, or '52. In fact, this is cause for a story, too. In about 1961, the summer, that phone over there rang and it was Dave Powers calling from the White House. He'd been swimming with the President and the President asked him, "Dave, who have we forgotten?" And I don't know why Dave picked on me to call but anyway, he called me and said, "Bill, the President asked me to call you and say, 'Who have we forgotten?'" I didn't know what he meant. And he said, "Who has befriended me that I have forgotten?" I frankly couldn't think of it. There weren't that many people around him that he hadn't—I suppose to put it crudely, you'd say

taken care of. It wasn't quite that. It was the fact that if you were his friend, you were his friend. And the fact that he was President and you were still Joe Snow out in the parkground, you were still his friend. He meant it; he believed it. And this is part of the Kennedy organization. This is why the organization is as powerful as it is because people know the Kennedys mean what they say. They all do this. This is the way they were brought up.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, while we are on the subject, there is one thing that bothered me for about ten years now. The day that you and I went into his apartment up at 122 Bowdoin Street. I forget what the reason was. We knocked on the door and got that yell to come on in and when we walked in we found him in a condition that no clothing salesman would like. He was talking on the telephone. It was a very, very important call, and he was on

[-12-]

there for quite some time. As a reporter, it always bothered me. Who was talking to and why was it so important?

CONNORS: Joe, this was 1958. This was following '56 when he had lost out on the vice presidency. About this time the germ of the idea that he could be vice president or president was being generated in his mind. And he had many friends in Chicago, California, and Texas and throughout the country as a result of the run in '56. He was sitting, as I remember, with a towel wrapped around him, and he was talking to Chicago. Somebody in Chicago was advising him not to be near a certain individual in the state of Illinois. Actually at that time we were presenting a plaque from the 101st Infantry Veterans Association to him. In fact, off the record or on the record, it was the—I think it was a day or two later that the *Traveler* endorsed him, a Republican newspaper endorsed him as Senator.

McLAUGHLIN: That's true.

CONNORS: But we presented him the plaque that day. It was a bronze plaque. And he had sort of a shy appearance. He wasn't really shy.

McLAUGHLIN: He wasn't shy of the condition he was in.

CONNORS: No, this didn't bother him. He quickly said, "The Army seems to be in time all the time and the Navy seems to be late." But we presented the plaque and I can even recollect the words that were written that day. And this again goes with a story. The words on the plaque were, "Combat Veteran. Patriot. Congressman and Senator. To one who typifies the highest in American ideals and who stands on the threshold of the future of the United States of America and the world." Dick Conroy [Richard Conroy], now deceased, who used to sort of mind the apartment for him, tells me many stories about this plaque. It was hung between the two bedrooms in the apartment as you turn off the living room, and many's the time Senator Kennedy would come

in to the apartment late and had taken off his coat and hat, when he wore a hat, and he'd stop in front of this plaque and read this statement. In fact, he

[-13-]

asked me later who wrote the words for this plaque. I think the thing that bothered him, made him realize how important he was, what his future was, was "the future of the United States of America and the world." This was in October 1962. He really felt this. This was, of course four years previous to that.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, going back once more to that telephone conversation when we walked into that room, who was the individual who was advising him to stay away from that person?

CONNORS: I have no idea. The call was from Chicago. No doubt this was part of the organization of politics where a close friendly advisor of his was advising him not to be affiliated with this particular group because they didn't represent the highest ideals of America. And I think this is the point that he always expressed in politics, that he wouldn't be part and parcel of anything that was the low part of politics. He always carried it at a very high level. Yes, he was a high class politician and he understood a favor, but at the same time he always kept it at a very high level.

McLAUGHLIN: Well, Bill, now you set the theme there perfectly. Despite his greatness and the fact that he'll live in history for years to come, he was a human being with feet of clay like all of us. But he had his failings, no doubt. What do you think was his most serious failing?

CONNORS: I think his weakness, if anything, was his courage and probably his loyalty.

McLAUGHLIN: Why do you say that?

CONNORS: I think you could anticipate what he was going to do. The enemy would always be able to interpret what John F. Kennedy was like. I don't think, myself, Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev] understood this because he wasn't an American. I think he found out this later on. He had the good part of the Irish. The trouble with the Irish is this heritage is there, but at the same time they

[-14-]

get half drinking and they go out drinking and they run their own down. Not with the Kennedys.

McLAUGHLIN: Jack wasn't a drinker, though, as such.

CONNORS: No, I never saw him. I know he'd take a daiquiri or he'd take a Heineken's beer, but there was no weakness in that sense. He was able to analyze a problem coldly; he'd look at it from all sides; he'd listen to anybody.

During the solution of the problem, he'd talk to taxicab drivers or guardsmen or grounds keepers, anybody at all. He would get their views on the problem and all the time machinery would be going around, "What's the solution?" And the best part of it was that once he reached a solution, it was all over. He never looked back. He never had to look back and say, "Well, I was wrong or I was right." I think in the campaign he'd lay down and go to sleep on the plane when all his companions would be up all night worrying about how he did. He would be sound asleep. He would be charging his batteries. The rest of the people were worried about the election. No, he made his decision.

Well, let me tell you something that ties in with the election. He had won the nine primaries. He started in Wisconsin and so on down the line. New Hampshire, I think, he started and then out to Wisconsin, which was a big issue but not big enough. Then West Virginia and, of course, the situation was ideal. Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], a guy who was draft deferred, elected to go in with him and Lyndon Johnson, who didn't have the courage of his convictions at the time, just kept out of it because he thought Kennedy would stumble. It became an issue between an Irish Catholic combat veteran against a very capable Senator who had been draft deferred. The state of West Virginia who had the highest enlistment rate and the highest casualty rate in the Armed Forces had a choice of voting for this veteran or this fellow who didn't want to be a veteran. They made their selection and here was where Jack Kennedy came into national prominence, in West Virginia. So then, he came into the fight out in California with the Johnson forces, which were very formidable. Rayburn [Sam Rayburn] was a big man in the House and Johnson was a big man in the Senate. They controlled certainly most of the senators and most of the congressman and

[-15-]

they felt that Jack Kennedy might have stumbled along the way. Unfortunately, he didn't stumble.

McLAUGHLIN: You mean fortunately?

CONNORS: Fortunately, yes, he didn't stumble, and he beat Lyndon Johnson at his own game of arm-twisting delegates. And he was big enough at that time to realize that he needed Lyndon Johnson to be president. And no doubt in that room as they were selecting the candidate for vice president, he was the man that selected Johnson. Nobody else in that room, I don't think, was interested, whether it be Governor Lawrence [David Leo Lawrence] or Governor Pat Brown [Edmund G. Brown] or Symington [Stuart Symington, II] or Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther] or the powers-to-be. In fact, he came to Washington, if you remember; the Senate and the House were still in session. They had a break on the primaries and they went back into session and there was a labor bill which I think Senator Kennedy got defeated on. Anyway, I felt at that time that I ought to go down and visit him, and I got hold of my wife and my daughter, Sheila [Sheila Connors], and Kevin and we grabbed a plane out of East Boston airport around 6 o'clock one

morning. We went down unannounced to Washington and I dropped up to the Senator's office. We went in and we saw the desk and the coconut where he sat. We talked to Mary Boylan and Evelyn Lincoln and Ted Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.]. The Senator wasn't in.

McLAUGHLIN: This was after Wisconsin?

CONNORS: This was after Wisconsin but before the November election. The issue was clear-cut then. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] versus Kennedy. So we were standing outside his office and my wife exclaimed—and, believe me, she's not impressed with people, she doesn't get excited—suddenly in this same tone that these teenagers seem to use when they see him, she said, "Here he comes." With this, I looked up and out of the corner of my left eye, I realized that he was walking hurriedly past us. Then the gleam of the teeth and the friendly smile, and, "Hi, Bill, what are you doing here?" He came over and I introduced him to my wife, Dorothy, and my daughter, Sheila,

[-16-]

and to Kevin. The first words were, "Is everything all right?" meaning, I suppose, obviously, that I was down there and I was looking for something, which I was not. But he anticipated a question such as this by saying, "Is everything all right?" With that Ted Reardon stepped out and said, "You brother, Bobby, is on the phone from California." And he stepped in. Now, my wife and I had agreed that we had gone down to see him to wish him luck. We weren't down looking for anything. He came back out, and with this my daughter, Sheila, produced an autograph book. I didn't even know she had it. And he opened up the book and wrote "To Sheila with best regards. Senator John F Kennedy." I was amazed at the fact that he had caught Sheila's name although the introduction was very brief. With that my wife said to him, "You know, Senator, we'd love to dance at your Inauguration." He said, "You will, Dorothy." And we did. We received our invitations later on when he had won the election in January, and we danced at his Inauguration. These are things I remember.

McLAUGHLIN: You were there at the Inaugural itself when he delivered the speech that we won't forget for a long, long while?

CONNORS: No, I watched the speech like the rest of the nation on television. It was an extremely cold day. Tickets were at a real premium, and I was at the Sheraton Park. I watched in on T.V. although it was only a mile down the road. You just couldn't get seats to go on to the Inaugural itself.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, what about his reaction now when he came back from Europe in 1962 after meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna? That was the first time, I think, that he was being a statesman on the international level. As I recall, he was the type of man that once he was exposed to something, he profited by it. This was his first meeting with someone of that sort. What was his reaction when he came back home?

[-17-]

CONNORS: In talking with various people who were around him and who were with him, he was impressed, I guess, with how tough and how—I don't know how you would describe it, not being there—but I suppose as to how tough Mr. Khrushchev was. He was not startled, but he didn't realize that he was dealing with a man who was just as cold in his dealings—tough—well, I guess tough is the word, yes.

McLAUGHLIN: Was there any indication of fear?

CONNORS: No, no. I don't think Jack feared anybody. It was just that he was dealing with an individual that he probably had read about many, many times and suddenly he was face to face with him and he realized his own responsibilities and he realized that this individual.... This was power against power, and what will I do as President of the United States? What is my responsibility? The button that is close to my fingertips represents four hundred million people in this world. And this man is as cold as ice. I mean Mr. Khrushchev. These, no doubt, were running through his mind. He probably—the way he functioned, he hadn't quite made up his mind. I think he made his mind up later when he got home. I think he sweated blood until he made up his mind. He made up his mind before Cuba in '62. And I think this policy was that he would face up to responsibility; he would be accountable; he would give the man room to maneuver to get off the hook, yet at the same time, he drew a line and said, "Don't cross over that." That line was Cuba and those were the seven days in October '62.

McLAUGHLIN: You said, Bill, that he had no fear of anybody. Did he have any fear of death? He was not a well man.

CONNORS: I don't think so. Dave Powers was kidding me about the fact that when they went to South America in '61 he kiddingly said to Dave, "You know, they'll shoot at me and probably hit you." He had a sense of humor. This was demonstrated many times. No, I don't think he feared death. He had seen death many times. His brother, Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], was killed in action; his sister [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish] was killed in a plane crash. This man had seen much sorrow and

[-18-]

sadness; he had suffered. I don't think he felt anything that day. I think probably he died instantly, and probably this was for the best too.

McLAUGHLIN: The fact that he didn't suffer, you mean?

CONNORS: In that he didn't suffer or probably live with part of his brain damaged and the brilliance and the intellectualism that he had would be.... You could

best remember as he was, as he was in Berlin when he gave that famous speech in the Plaza, "Ich bin ein Berliner." —I am a Berliner. These are the things that I remember.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, why did he take so many chances when he was advised and warned against it? Was it because he had the feeling that the time was coming anyway?

CONNORS: No, I think he liked people and he trusted people. I think probably he felt all people were like himself. They aren't, as we know. But he liked people; he trusted people. He was fair and honest with all people. This is why you have his policy on equal opportunity for minority groups or for women or for older people or for the mentally retarded. It was a question of being fair; he believed in treating people the way he wanted to be treated himself.

McLAUGHLIN: Yet he had been warned by Adlai Stevenson and by other people of the sort of feeling that was rampant in Texas right at that time, and he insisted on going.

CONNORS: No, he knew that these feelings are generated by extremists and that most people are nice people. Actually, if you look at the reception he got from Dallas until one man was fortunate enough to be a sharpshooter, he got a real good reception in Dallas and Waco and where he was going. Actually, the reception in Dallas in the words of Mrs. Connally [Idanell Brill Connally] before his death, "Well, Mr. President, you did get a good reception. Dallas was friendly." It is friendly. You can't judge a community by what one man does or two men do or a very, very

[-19-]

small minority. No, he trusted people. He would demonstrate this by walking from the plane over to people. He wanted to be near them. He knew that these people wanted to touch him, to feel him, and he would do this no matter where he was, whether it would be in an armory or in a City Hall or when he was walking on the street. He liked people and this liking showed and people liked him.

McLAUGHLIN: Do you think that when he was killed that was the absolute end of the Kennedy era?

CONNORS: Oh, no. This is probably just the beginning, Joe, this is a.... Had he gone on with civil rights, the South probably would have—well, I suppose in all possibility it could have been against him in the '64 election. I still think he would have won by a large majority. He had picked up tremendous strength in states that he barely won or even didn't win in the 1960 election. He would have won; he would have been reelected as president. But because he died a martyred death, there are many, many people who are not politicians. They are not speaking for newspaper; they are not speaking

for publishers. Their feeling is there. The other day when the women were coming in giving me a dollar or five dollars to ten dollars to twenty-five dollars for the Kennedy Memorial Library, their words and what they believed and what he demonstrated his impact on the youth of America. You won't be able to measure this for ten, fifteen, or twenty years.

McLAUGHLIN: What mark has he left on you, Bill?

CONNORS: Well, he's made me a better manager. He also made me manager. I'm trying to, I suppose, portray his faith in me. I try to be better because he picked me.

McLAUGHLIN: Well, I mean beyond that, Bill, his personal traits, his habits, his ideals, and so forth. Are those the things that are brushing off on people that were in contact with him?

CONNORS: I would think so, yes. People copy or imitate or.... We see the beatniks and we watch

[-20-]

the younger generation copy them and we then look back at our political life. In my short stay of approximately two years I can't really say I see a politician I'd like to imitate, and yet I'd like to imitate Kennedy. I don't think that's just my opinion. I feel that there are many people. He elevated the word 'politician' to a very high level. Intellectualism. People that say that I slept sounder when Kennedy was president—I believed him; I believed in what he said, you can't say the same thing right now, with all due respect to President Johnson. He's a very capable man, a man of good judgment and well qualified. People have to have faith in him. They had faith in Kennedy and Mr. Johnson will have to earn this faith.

McLAUGHLIN: Bill, he is very well known for his sense of humor, particularly in the press conferences and so forth. What instances do you recall any time during his campaigns and so forth of examples of that humor?

CONNORS: I think the last time I remember was on October 25, the last time I saw him, a month before he died.

McLAUGHLIN: That was down in the White House.

CONNORS: In the White House. The baby, John-John, had come in. And this is amazing. He came to work every morning with his baby. Too bad all fathers can't go to work with their son, a three-year-old son, love of family. And then the work started and the complicated problems poured in. Yet he had certain functions to perform and the baby had to go back to that part of the White House where the family lived which was approximately about 100 or 200 feet away. He stood at the door and watched the baby go down by himself, placing responsibility on the baby, at that

young years. The two dogs were running around the lawn in the new rose garden that he had constructed and he was yelling at the dogs trying to get them out of the roses and the bushes and, of course, like most dogs they paid no attention. So I said to him, "One word from you and nothing happens." He laughed and he walked down to the end of the platform, then he turned and said to

[-21-]

me, "Do you think Dave Powers is getting enough disability?" This, of course, I knew; I knew what was going to happen. Dave started talking about how before the Service he couldn't lift his arm at all, now he could only get it half way up, and he mustn't be being paid enough money. This was his little joke, ribbing Dave Powers who responded naturally with a story that caused us all to laugh. An old story. It goes way back.

McLAUGHLIN: This has been an interview with William F. Connors, Regional Manager of the Veterans Administration in Boston. The interview was by Joseph McLaughlin of the *Boston Herald Traveler*.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-22-]

William F. Connors Oral History Transcript
Name Index

B

Boylan, Mary, 16
Brown, Edmund G., 16
Burke, Grace M., 4

C

Cavendish, Kathleen Kennedy, 18
Cohen Beryl W., 11
Connally, Idanell Brill,
Connors, Dorothy, 6, 16, 17
Connors, Sheila, 16, 17
Conroy, Richard, 13
Cotter, John F., 10

D

Donahue, Richard K., 8
Driscoll, John, 8
Driscoll, Mrs., 8

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 4

H

Humphrey, Hubert H., 15

J

Johnson, Lyndon B., 4, 6, 15, 16, 21

K

Kefauver, Estes, 4
Kennedy, Edward M., 6, 7
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 8
Kennedy, John F., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11,
12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21
Kennedy, John F., Jr., 8, 9, 21
Kennedy, Joseph P., Jr., 18
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 10
Kennedy, Robert F., 6, 7, 11, 17
Kevin, 16, 17
Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeevich, 14, 17, 18

L

Lawrence, David Leo, 16
Lincoln, Evelyn N., 6, 16
Lodge, Henry Cabot, 3
Logan, Edward L., 11
Logan, Mrs., 11

M

Macdonald, Torbert H., 8
MacPhee, Al, 11
Martin, Edward T., 7
McLaughlin, Edward F., Jr., 10
Morrissey, Francis X., 10

N

Nixon, Richard M., 16

O

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 6, 8
O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 6, 8

P

Powers, David F., 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, 22

Q

Quigley, Thomas, 4, 5

R

Rayburn, Sam, 15
Reardon, Timothy J., Jr., 16, 17
Reuther, Walter P., 16

S

Sorensen, Theodore C., 6
Stevenson, Adlai E., 4, 19
Sullivan, Richard, 8, 11
Sutton, William J., 6, 9, 10
Symington, Stuart, II, 16

T

Tobin, Maurice J., 10