

**W. Stuart Symington Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 8/18/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** W. Stuart Symington  
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W. Stuart Symington (1901-1988) was a Senator from Missouri from 1953 to 1976, who ran as a presidential candidate in the 1960 election. This interview focuses on the personal and professional relationship between Symington and John F. Kennedy (JFK), JFK's extraordinary charisma, and the transformation of the Defense Department under Robert McNamara, among other issues.

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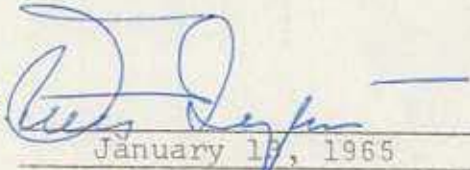
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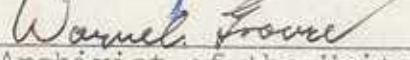
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Oral History Interview

with

W. STUART SYMINGTON

August 18, 1964  
Washington, D.C.

By Pat Holt

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HOLT: Senator, do you remember the first time you met John Kennedy, or the first time you became aware of him?

SYMINGTON: The first time that I met him was when he was a Congressman and I was in the Executive Branch of the Government. And then, of course, I met him when he came to the Senate. I don't particularly remember the very first time. He was quiet, somewhat reserved, and I didn't really get to know him until we both came to the Senate at the same time in January 1953.

HOLT: What were your associations with him in the Senate?

SYMINGTON: We never served on the same committees with the exception of one Government Operations Subcommittee. Actually, I'm not sure we were on that together because I left it about the time he came on it. But our relationships in the Senate were very fine from the

standpoint of friendship, and all the years we served together, I can't remember a single difference that we had. Most of the time we voted together and, of course, that always makes it easier to get along. I remember in the Spring of 1953 going up to Boston to make a Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner talk at his request, and being honored by his introducing me at that time.

HOLT: Do you remember any specific incidents or anecdotes that came out of that trip to Boston and his introduction of you?

SYMINGTON: Yes, I remember his telling me, "There's only one fellow up here that you can say anything good about to so many factions. Anything you want to say good about John McCormack, that's fine. Except for him, you'd better confine it to other people, because if you say something good about anybody, why, it'll get you in trouble

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with another group." And I can remember that some lady got up and blasted President Eisenhower and shortly thereafter former Mayor Curley got up and took her hair apart for having said it. So it was that kind of a dinner. And it gave me a fine insight into Boston. After it was over the late Governor Dever took up to a club and there we met one of his friends and, I understood, one of his greatest supporters. Governor Dever had just been beaten for the gubernatorial race, I believe, by Governor Herter, later Secretary of State. And this friend of his came up where he was waiting for us in this men's club and with tears in his eyes he said to the governor, "You were finer tonight than I've ever heard you in my life." And he went on, and then he turned and we all had a laugh because he said to me, "And who wrote your speech?"

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HOLT: During the time you were in the Senate together, is there anything else that occurs to you along this line, or any other particular associations with Senator Kennedy?

SYMINGTON: Well, we saw quite a little of each other. He was a good friend of Senator George Smathers who was very close to him; was one of his ushers in his wedding. Senator Smathers and I used to play a good deal of golf together. At that time, because of his back, the President was not playing golf. I remember one evening particularly, in about June of 1953, at a dinner dance he introduced me to a very lovely girl who, he told me, he was going to marry. I had known her mother and father for many years and, therefore, was delighted to hear that he was going to join us benedicts. That was in the spring or early part of 1953. And then he started out his marriage and we saw him... he'd

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come to our house; we'd go to his house. Actually, the last house he had before he moved to the White House was only four doors from us on the same street. His wife and my wife, although of different generations, were close friends and we always enjoyed seeing them.

HOLT: Anything in particular of these social contacts that you recall or that would be worthwhile recording for posterity?

SYMINGTON: I don't think so, Pat. Always when you were with the Kennedys, whether it was with him or in his office to discuss matters of government, or whether you were with him in his home (and I would include going out to his mother-in-law's where they had a pleasant pool and we would go out and swim), you always felt better after you left them. I think the most interesting characteristic of John Kennedy -- many of us have commented on this --

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whatever the problem was, or even if you just went to see him without a particular problem, you always felt better about that problem and the world in general after leaving him. He was essentially a person who imparted cheer to other people. I think much of that was due to the incredibly rough time he had with his back. I had had a lot of trouble with my shoulder which I broke when I was a little boy, at my elbow, and he was good enough to let me use Dr. Travell, who he swore by, as also did Senator Barry Goldwater for his back. Dr. Tavell helped me a great deal and she told me a lot.

HOLT: Was this after he became President?

SYMINGTON: Yes, and she told me a lot of problems that he had gone through with his back. And I think that one of the reasons that he had this essentially optimistic approach

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to life was that he had been through so much that every day he was grateful to still be living and working at the same time.

HOLT: Unless there is something else specifically about the time you were in the Senate together, can we move on now to the 1960 campaign, or do you still want to avoid that?

SYMINGTON: I don't want to avoid anything. I'm perfectly willing to discuss any situation. For the first years in the Senate, it was hard to find out from his actions just how much ability he had. He was very quiet at first. But when certain legislation came up, for example the legislation on labor, you immediately saw that he



had a trip hammer mind, that he was a thorough student of the subject. The way he conducted legislation

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through the Senate in which he was interested and which he sponsored was a revelation. It was at that time that I began to feel that his star was very definitely moving up with respect to his future. Although I must say that when he first began to show signs of running for the Presidency, just about all of us thought that he was starting a little young.

HOLT:               When did you first suspect that he took himself seriously as a Presidential candidate?

SYMINGTON:       I'd say right after the 1956 convention, when he came so close to being vice president. My delegation went against him at the end, unfortunately, because with Missouri he would have had the vice presidency. I had been talked of and put in nomination for the Presidency by my own delegation and I did not think that I, therefore, should argue with the Chairman of the

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delegation who was very strong for Senator Kefauver. I made a couple of comments but didn't push it. Often I wondered what would have happened if I had. After that convention, however, there was so much talk about the graceful way he handled that particular defeat. And certain people -- I believe Senator Abe Ribicoff was the... he wasn't a Senator then, he was Governor Ribicoff then, later Secretary of HEW -- it was rumored around that very shortly thereafter he had said to President Kennedy, "Next time we can go the whole way with *you*." And that was within a matter of weeks after the '56 convention. So I think it's fair to say that in '57 we knew that he was considering the Presidency.

HOLT:               Do you want to say anything about the 1960 period and your relations with him before the convention, during the convention, and during the campaign which followed the convention?

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SYMINGTON:       Well, as we all know, he put on a fantastic campaign to get the nomination. He went into all the primaries that he could go to. He became the logical candidate. He defeated all those who went in the primaries against him, and he defeated all those who stayed out of the primaries, including Stevenson and Lyndon Johnson and myself, at the convention. There was no question about it that he had a peculiar hold on people. During the convention it became obvious to me that he was steadily improving in his speaking, going from delegation to delegation. He had his extremely able brother, Bob, as his manager, and his brother, Ted, who also did yeoman work for him in

lining up delegates in the Middle West, the mountain states. He was well-organized, and seemed to mature, to me, very rapidly. Later on when I campaigned with him in those parts of the country where he

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thought I might be of service to him, I was impressed by the peculiar attraction that he had for men and women. I remember in one crowd a woman screaming to another one, "Touch him for me."

HOLT:               Where was this? Do you remember?

SYMINGTON:       I believe it was in Southern Illinois -- south or west Illinois. A shopping center, suburban shopping center. And everywhere he went he liked to go down and mix with the crowds. Several times he did it and I was with him and actually feared for his safety. In fact, when he first came to St. Louis, the first meeting after he had become the nominee and started to campaign, he came up from Texas and the crowd was so great at the airport that they put him back on the plane. They were afraid he would be hurt. And all of us noticed this tremendous crowd appeal that he had. Not excepting Franklin Roosevelt or anybody else that I have ever known. I

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think he had the most of anybody in any walk of life in my experience.

HOLT:               During the convention in 1960, did you have any personal contact with him?

SYMINGTON:       Well, as you know there were some of us that were interested in what his decision would be on the vice presidency. Neither I nor my family were particularly interested in it, to be frank. But we had a meeting in my office, rather in my suite, and we decided we knew we had some chance for it. Then he made his decision to choose Lyndon Johnson. When that was over, that was that. I spoke about it in introducing the now President Johnson to that tremendous meeting the next day -- that outdoor meeting -- and paid also my respects to President Kennedy.

Our relationship was always very pleasant. I don't think anybody ever knew of any time that I ever

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said anything against him in public or private. I admired him a great deal. I did not think that he was ready for the Presidency from the standpoint of his capacity to get it when he did. He did win, but, of course, he fooled me along with millions of other people.

HOLT: Can you say anything about the substance of conversations you had with him during the convention?

SYMINGTON: No. He knew what I wanted and I knew what he wanted and there wasn't any use in discussing it. We'd meet at various delegations and laugh. He, of course, was the number one favorite -- overwhelming favorite -- and we were hoping that he could not get the nomination on the first ballot. If that had turned out that way, certain states were giving me a lot of votes on the second ballot. They were pledged to him on the first ballot...

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HOLT: I see.

SYMINGTON: I don't think Kansas ever did vote. That state, plus others, was our hope. But it all went according to Hoyle as far as he was concerned, in a very smooth operation. And, frankly, I took away from Los Angeles the idea that I believe nearly all of us had; that any man who worked this hard and could accomplish this with the obvious handicaps that he had, rated it. And there was very, very little bitterness, to the best of my knowledge, among the other candidates.

HOLT: After the convention and during the campaign, did you ever discuss campaign strategy or tactics with him?

SYMINGTON: You mean strategy or tactics before the nomination?

HOLT: No, after the nomination and before the election.

SYMINGTON: Oh, yes. We discussed that in detail. I went up and stayed with him at Hyannisport and he told me about his plans and, of course, on everything but the Middle

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West, I listened. When he came to my part of the country, I thought I could give him some thoughts which might be of service to him. He was extremely... another characteristic of John Kennedy was, he was a tremendous listener. I think that picture that his wife put on his mass card at the time of his funeral was the greatest picture of him that I have ever seen. It shows him completely engrossed in what was being said to him. And he had a tremendous interest in what your thinking was -- which, of course, is a characteristic of many great men. He was very interested in how I thought the campaign should be handled; the key people in my state, for example -- we talked about it at some length. And the feeling that you got, when you discussed matters with him, was that although he knew a great deal more than you'd

think at first when he brought the matter up, he was always willing and anxious to refine his thinking

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provided he agreed with what you said. In my state we had a terrific problem because it's all cut up. It's very hard to represent a state like mine as against others. Southeast Missouri is just like Mississippi. And you have the Ozark Bible belt running all through the South. And then you have two great metropolises in St. Louis and Kansas City, and so you just can't make any casual kind of "this-will-go-for-Missouri." You have to take it apart. Which we did. And, as you know, much to the surprise of a lot of people, he carried Missouri.

HOLT:               What else can you remember about this period you stayed with him in Hyannisport after the convention? What did he say...?

SYMINGTON:       My wife and I went up there and I asked him how he was getting along, and he said, "fine." And I said, "Don't

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offer me anything -- you probably wouldn't -- but I don't want to leave the Senate. You're going to get the job that I wanted and I don't want to go back into the Executive Branch of the Government. I was in it for a good many years before coming to the Senate." And he said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yes, I'm sure." I doubt if he'd have offered me anything anyway, but when we got it cleared out of the way, it was much easier for him to talk, frankly, because I am sure that most of the people were hoping that he would offer them some position in the government. He asked me if I would chair a committee to look into the Pentagon building and he gave me a couple of names of people that he would like to have on that committee, both of which I would have wanted on any committee that I chaired. And we made that investigation -- Ros Gilpatric, Clark

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Clifford, Fowler Hamilton, Marx Leva, Tom Finletter, and myself, I believe, were the group. We made a detailed report to him which he published after he was elected, before he was inaugurated.

HOLT:               You started the study before the election?

SYMINGTON:       Oh, yes. Well before, and it was interesting that Ros Gilpatric was a member of that Committee and so was Clark Clifford who is chairman of the Security Committee... (not the National Security Council itself, but the Intelligence Council) -- and Gilpatric for years was the Deputy Secretary of Defense under McNamara.

HOLT: What else did Senator Kennedy raise at this Hyannisport meeting?

SYMINGTON: Well, the thing that surprised me the most was the way he raised a golf ball, because a lot of other Presidents -- Wilson and Harding and Eisenhower -- have

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gotten credit for their golfing ability. I'm certain that John Kennedy was a far better golfer than any other President. He had an extremely graceful swing, got his club head back well and hit the ball a country mile when he hit it. He had played on the freshman golf team at Harvard, I understand, which few people knew, and because of his back he hadn't played for years. But I've played a par four, 410 yard hole with him, and seen him home with a drive and a six iron. He liked the game but his back hurt. We played quite a few times after he was President. Then he was fixing some darned bush or something up in Canada, I think, and hurt his back again, and so he gave it up. But he liked it, and he always played with a relative disinterest as to what his score was. He wouldn't score too well but he hit magnificent shots.

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HOLT: What were his scores, in what ranges? 80's?

SYMINGTON: Oh, yes. He could play golf in the 80's without any trouble at all if he went at it. And if he'd kept at it and worked at it, he had a swing that could have gotten him down in the low 70's.

HOLT: Anything else about this stay in Hyannisport?

SYMINGTON: It was exciting. All the Kennedy children (and that's saying a lot of children) were there. And the family and everybody was you might say, getting their second wind to pull off the great victory in November. And at that time you had a feeling -- I did -- that he was going to win. I felt that he -- well, to put it across, anybody who had done what he did to get the nomination, was going on to the Presidency. There was a certain destiny about the man I felt more at Hyannisport than

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before. There was a great humor in Jack Kennedy. He had a wonderful sense of humor. I remember one night his brother-in-law, Prince Radziwill, was demonstrating a new golf swing, however, and he got the club handle a little back and put a hole in the ceiling. And I could tell that the President-to-be was no particularly anxious to have that discovered by his wife. His remarks at the time were terribly funny.

HOLT: At Hyannisport?

SYMINGTON: Yes.

HOLT: Well, unless there's something else about this visit to Hyannisport, let's move on to this study you did of the Pentagon -- the Defense Department -- for him. As I recall, the results of that study and your recommendation were released in December of 1960 by the President-elect.

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SYMINGTON: Yes, I stayed with him down at Palm Beach and he released it while I was down there. This was in December 1960.

HOLT: For the record I suppose we ought to note that the principal recommendations of that study were to eliminate the departmental structure of the Army, Navy and Air Force and the fifteen Service Secretaries, Under and Assistant Secretaries, to create joint staff and to make appropriations to the Secretary of Defense. Did you -- you must have -- discuss these, the course of this study and the recommendations, with him at various points?

SYMINGTON: I didn't discuss it with him. The Committee met many times, good meetings. The report was signed by everybody, with one minor reservation made by one member. I have

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known every Secretary of Defense fairly well; served under some -- served under the first two, and was in the executive side of the government for the next two -- and then was in the Senate when the others came up. None of them tried to establish true, civilian authority until Bob McNamara. When I would suggest changes in the law after I came to the Senate, seniors would say, "Why doesn't the Secretary of Defense use the power we've already given him?" Of course, the law was modified, as you know, three or four times. Each time the Secretary of Defense got more authority. But when McNamara came in, there was a master stroke by the President, in my opinion. He got a man who was willing to use every ounce of authority he had, and in the doing of that, without legislation, he accomplished most of the recommendations that we made in our report.

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I've discussed this many times with Secretary Gilpatric. He was the lawyer of the Pentagon team -- the midwestern industrialist and the eastern intellectual. There was a great deal of poetry in John Kennedy, as we all know. Gilpatric taught poetry at Yale before he went into law, and actually helped work his way through law school teaching poetry -- and he and the

President had a close relationship. It was that triumvirate -- the President, McNamara and Gilpatric -- which accomplished more for a maximum return on the defense dollar than any other group in the history of our modern Defense Department.

HOLT: This visit you made to Palm Beach in December of 1960 -- what else can you say about that and the President-elect and what was he thinking and saying at this period?

SYMINGTON: The first impression was that he knew he was going to be President in three or four weeks so he wanted to

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relax and was completely relaxed. I never saw a man more anxious to shed problems, knowing that pretty soon he'd have more problems than any other person in the world. We played a lot of golf. I remember one thing I'll never forget. We were in his car (a little red run-about, I believe it was a Pontiac -- a convertible, Pontiac convertible) and Secret Service men were there, and (this was before he was President) I said, "Jack, I went all through the problems of President Truman and he was pretty tough on the Secret Service until they killed two policemen... a couple of Puerto Ricans trying to get at Truman. After that he really tried to work with them and make their job easier. So I hope you don't get to gay about it, and give them any problem. They have a job to do which is to protect you." The reason I brought it up was that when we

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came out of his house -- he was President-elect -- down that beautiful street just off the ocean at Palm Beach, hundreds upon hundreds, if not a thousand people were waiting hoping to get sight of him. It would have been very easy for somebody to have attacked him. I well remember his answer. He said, "I know they have a job to do, and I intend to do everything I can to see they do it properly." I have often thought of that when people said he was careless about protection, because I have always felt he wasn't careless; and that anybody could be assassinated if a person went to the time and trouble and effort that Oswald did. I know he had no sense of moving in against the position of the Secret Service. He was perfectly willing to comply with their requests to him.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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