

Philleo Nash Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 3/08/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Philleo Nash (1909-1987) was the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Department of the Interior from 1961 to 1966. This interview focuses on the 1960 presidential election in Wisconsin and the workings of the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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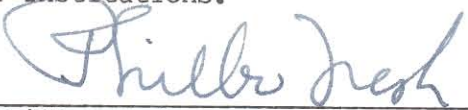
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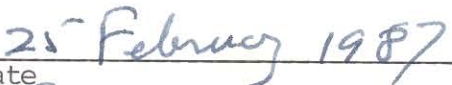
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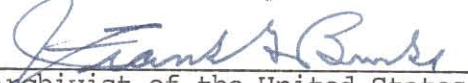
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Philleo Nash



Date



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Philleo Nash– JFK #2
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Second Oral History Interview

with

PHILLEO NASH

March 8, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: I can only think of one question that we might have missed on the primary, and this is a very minor one, but I have a vague recollection of seeing a picture of you and Senator John Kennedy drinking cranberry juice.

NASH: Oh, that is correct.

MORRISSEY: Somewhere during that campaign. What's the story on that?

NASH: Well, the story on that is that the business had just come out from the Food and Drug Administration about--it seems to me it was just before Thanksgiving in '59, yes.

MORRISSEY: Right.

NASH: So the primary, of course, was in March or April of '60, and Senator Kennedy and the entire Massachusetts delegation, with the entire Wisconsin delegation had been more active than any others in seeing to it that the ban was lifted and the blow was ameliorated. They were helpful in getting some decisions made over in the Department of Agriculture in that connection, for example.

It so happens that both political parties are represented in the cranberry industry. The then state senator from Port Edwards, Wisconsin was Jack [John M.] Potter. . . . He's an old friend and a leading Republican. We have plenty of Democrats among the cranberry growers, but only one lieutenant governor. Of course, it was incumbent upon each of us to see to it that his favorite candidate was on hand to partake of the delicious fruit safely and publicly.

It so happened that the then Senator Kennedy and the then Vice President [Richard M.] Nixon were in the central part of the state--in fact, in the same county on the same night: one at Wisconsin Rapids and the other one at Marshfield. Well, I had no doubt but what my Republican friend was going to see to it that Nixon ate some sauce. So I simply saw to it that there was a jug of Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice available when Senator Kennedy came for the big dinner, and he readily agreed to be photographed having some. The only thing he balked at was that the photographers wanted him to put the glass jug over one shoulder and drink out of it as though it were mountain dew, and he refused to do that. It offended his sense of dignity and propriety. Then, subsequently, of course, we had to get Humphrey to do the same thing, and that came about I think, at a Party convention in Milwaukee. So everybody was on the record on the cranberry issue.

MORRISSEY: Last time we stopped, as I said, with the returns coming in on that primary. Did you go into West Virginia after Wisconsin?

NASH: No, I did not. As a matter of fact weren't we talking just when the last tape ended about Teddy White?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

NASH: Did we get into that?

MORRISSEY: You said you were with him when the early returns came in.

NASH: Yes, and I was more optimistic than I had a right to be when the early returns came in.

The first returns did not favor Humphrey, but they didn't disfavor him as much as we thought they would. And Teddy asked me what I thought that meant. He was the only one that was down in the press room that early, so we had quite a good discussion about it.

Well, then of course, the next day the decision had to be made as to whether to go into West Virginia or not, and I quickly made up my mind that I would not go into West Virginia because I could not afford to. I wasn't at all sure of my ability to help Humphrey there. But in any case, I had taken a lot of time off from my own campaign for lieutenant governor to make public appearances with Humphrey, and it was time to get back in my own job. And, of course, it was fairly clear that there would be kind of a dirty fight in the sense that you couldn't keep religion out of it.

There had been some aspects of it that were most unpleasant in the Wisconsin primary and mostly not in connection with either of the principals, but with some rather dubious characters who came into the state and no one was ever quite sure whether they represented themselves or somebody else. But they didn't, of course, represent either Kennedy or Humphrey. But ads were taken out and paid for in cash, and people left town and so on that were of a very questionable character.

So I wasn't wrong. The West Virginia fight did have a very heavy religious overtone, and when it was all over, Humphrey retired and I came out for Jack. I was asked to be for Symington, and I'm quite sure that [Stanley R.] Stan Fike had rather assumed that I would be, I think on the basis of my association with Mr. Truman. But I couldn't very well lend political support to anybody who had not entered the Wisconsin primary. The Wisconsin voters are very proud of their primary, and I think a candidate would hurt himself quite a bit in Wisconsin if he were active on behalf of a candidate who had not chosen to expose himself to the Wisconsin voters. Now, of course, Jim. . . .

MORRISSEY: Loeb?

NASH: No . . .

MORRISSEY: Doyle?

NASH: Jim Doyle didn't find it necessary to offer any explanations for supporting Stevenson as a national manager even though Stevenson had not entered the Wisconsin primary. But, also, he was not a candidate, and the only time he was a candidate he was an unsuccessful candidate. I regard that as a mistake; you don't have to be a candidate, but if you are a candidate, then you've got to weigh the feelings that people have about other candidates and the way they behave.

MORRISSEY: At the Convention in Los Angeles some of the Humphrey delegates from Wisconsin stayed with Humphrey even though his own candidacy was dissipated by the defeat in West Virginia. Why didn't some of these people come along with you and endorse Kennedy?

NASH: Well, I think there are several different reasons for it. I persuaded some of them to come along with me, but we didn't all receive 100 percent welcome in the Kennedy caucus. They never invited me, for example, to join the Kennedy caucus. Apparently, I wasn't regarded as reliable enough. So I met with the Humphrey caucus just because there wasn't any other place to meet. They were the only ones that asked me in.

I did attempt to talk to a number of Wisconsin Humphrey delegates about the situation. For one thing, after Humphrey's withdrawal following the West Virginia defeat, he became less and less explicit about not being in the race as he got towards the Convention so that what had been a very emphatic dropout was a blurred kind of a thing by the time Los Angeles arrived. Then, for the other part, if you take a look at the Humphrey delegates, you'll see that they come from the part of the state where the Humphrey vote was strong and where they probably would have hurt themselves. Take Frank Nikolay who was the chairman of the

Humphrey group of the delegates. In the first place, I was not a delegate, I was only an alternate, as is our custom in Wisconsin. State officers are alternates, not delegates. Frank Nikolay had an assembly race of his own, and I think he thought he would have hurt himself had he deserted Humphrey just because Humphrey didn't carry Wisconsin or didn't carry West Virginia.

MORRISSEY: Was he running against someone who had endorsed Kennedy?

NASH: By the time of the Convention, the Wisconsin primary hadn't been held. That is, the preference primary had been held in the spring, but our partisan primaries come very late in the summer and the early fall. No, I think he just gauged the sentiment of his district and was worried about it, and I think he was right. His brother was also a politician; he's a district attorney. Then up in the northern part of the state, along the south shore of Lake Superior, you have a group of very fiercely partisan Humphrey delegates, and they just never quit trying. They got committed, and they believed, and they went on.

MORRISSEY: Did you ever hear any talk about Humphrey for vice president?

NASH: At that time? Oh, yes, I'm sure that there was talk in 1960 about the possibility of a Kennedy-Humphrey ticket. I think almost every conceivable combination was discussed at one time or another. The combination that finally emerged was discussed quite a number of times.

MORRISSEY: Oh, really?

NASH: A Kennedy-Johnson combination, yes.

MORRISSEY: As a practical matter that might actually develop?

NASH: Oh, yes, as the most likely combination. I think you'll find that a good many of Wisconsin's labor leaders, sharing what was then and is now again appearing to be a mild disaffection with LBJ, tended to support Humphrey in Wisconsin even when their national organizations were pretty well lined up with Kennedy, largely on a basis of apprehension over a Kennedy-Johnson ticket, which they felt would not necessarily be in their interests, and thinking maybe they might get Hubert a crack at the vice presidency.

MORRISSEY: Were you surprised by the news that the vice presidential choice was Lyndon Johnson?

NASH: Yes, I was. We had discussed this likelihood among ourselves. And I don't mean in the Humphrey forces, but I mean with some of the prominent labor leaders that were interested in politics. So that when I say that the labor leaders had discussed this as a possibility, I'm not guessing. I had these conversations with them myself. But I think by the time the Convention had arrived, it looked as though the fight was so--I won't say bitter--but it was so vigorous as between Johnson and Kennedy at the Convention that you tended to rule it out of your thinking. But I do not think the Humphrey people were anywhere near as surprised as the Kennedy people.

MORRISSEY: I understand there was some concern in the Wisconsin delegation about the choice of the vice presidential candidate.

NASH: Yes, although by this time I wasn't in quite as much confidence of some of those folks. I mean I don't really know.

MORRISSEY: Back in Wisconsin during the Kennedy campaign against Nixon did you find that some of the wounds of the primary campaign had not healed over?

NASH: Oh, yes. I think primaries leave quite a scar, and this was a very vigorously fought primary. It did a lot of good; it showed many of us how to campaign in a new way. It brought people into politics that had never been in before. It had a general invigorating effect on just the general level of political activity. But I'm not saying that there was any holdback, or some people that just said, "Well, I'm not going to play." There were a few of those, but these are not, as a rule, people that have statewide influence anyway. I would say that it was a good campaign, an effective and a vigorous campaign, that it was made more effective as far as the Democratic organization was concerned by the fact of the primary. But there were some feelings--there were a few withdrawals--and there were some feelings that were fairly close to the surface. I do not think it affected the outcome. I've analyzed the vote quite carefully; I don't know if we went over this the last time or not.

MORRISSEY: No, not the vote against Nixon.

NASH: You see, one of the questions I had to ask myself was why I was elected when I didn't expect to be in 1958, and was defeated when I didn't expect to be in 1960. And, of course, the first thing to come to mind is the pink sheet campaign. So I made a rather careful tabulation.

The first thing I did was to look for significant changes as between 1958 and 1960 in those areas where the pink sheets were circulated the most widely. This was a pretty active circulation; the sponsors claimed that they distributed a million handbills. I don't think it was a million, but it was several hundred thousand all right. They were most active on the South Side of Milwaukee and then on the West Side of Milwaukee to a lesser degree, somewhat on the North Side of Milwaukee--so far you're

talking about mainly the Milwaukee voting complex--and then up the lakeshore: Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Appleton, Green Bay--what used to be McCarthy territory. They made a few county fairs around the state and were very active around the state fairgrounds in West Allis where people came from all over the state. So to some degree you get a biased sample by looking at these districts where the distribution was made, but not enough, I think, to have a serious effect on my conclusion, which is that there's no pattern. In Milwaukee, I dropped strength relatively between 1958 and 1960. But I gained strength relatively between 1958 and 1960 in the very places, Green Bay and Appleton, where these folks had the most hope of having an effect.

So then I began to look for other places where I had significant changes in strength, and discovered that I was much stronger in LaCrosse and Prarie du Chien than I was before. And I was generally stronger out-state and relatively somewhat weaker in Milwaukee. Well, maybe you can attribute this to the pink sheet campaign, but it is also significant that these districts are strong Catholic centers; I was running with JFK. I gained four percentage points, for example, in Appleton, Joe McCarthy's old hometown. But I also gained several percentage points, I think not as much as four, in Prarie du Chien where I've never done well--and where I did not campaign--but which is a big Catholic Center. So I think these two effects tend to cancel each other out.

Now, for a Democrat to win in Wisconsin, you have to do very, very well in Milwaukee. You can't expect to do much better than 40 per cent out-state, so you've got to offset this one and a half to one with a big vote in Milwaukee County, and this has got to be especially big on the South Side. Anything that holds you back in the South Side hurts two or three to one.

But, you see, I got exactly the same vote as JFK. So this leads me to look for another cause--that is, to conclude that the handbill campaign was, in truth, not very effective; that we could probably point to areas where it hurt, you can point to areas where it didn't hurt. But, overall, I had the same distance in percentages of the two party total between myself and the head of the ticket in 1960, when I lost, as I did in 1958 when I won. It happens to be exact to the nearest single decimal. So then you start looking around for something that's not related to the handbill campaign at all, and then it's rather easy to find. This is why JFK didn't carry the state. Those counties which are both ethnically Norwegian and religiously Lutheran were as much as 25 percent more Republican in the election of 1960 than they had been in the average of all presidential elections starting with 1928.

MORRISSEY: Did you anticipate this when you were campaigning?

NASH: Yes, but not as much as I should have. I think I talked to you last time about my amateur poll. Every amateur poll is going to come a cropper someday; you can't flirt with probability with cheap polls and not miss. I did right well for five years, but I failed in 1960, and the reason why, of course, is that nobody is going to confess to a polltaker that he is harboring a disapproved attitude which is going to be the basis of his voting action. He will conceal it--maybe even from himself--until he gets right inside that voting booth. If he doesn't tell his wife and he doesn't tell his minister and he doesn't tell the banker and the postmaster and the deputy sheriff and his hired man or his boss, he is most certainly not going to tell a polltaker. Of course, my only point is that this is a mistake you can. . . . I made the mistake for about a hundred dollars. I could have made the same mistake for fifty thousand dollars because the big polls also did not disclose it.

MORRISSEY: Did you detect a feeling among other candidates for statewide office that they didn't want to be dragged down by a Catholic candidate for President?

NASH: Well, no, I really hadn't. In the first place, in 1958 our ticket won with the Governor leading, the Attorney General next, who is himself Catholic and one of the organizers of the Kennedy drive in Wisconsin.

MORRISSEY: Is that Pat Lucey?

NASH: No, no, that was John Reynolds, later Governor.

MORRISSEY: Oh, I didn't realize he was a Catholic.

NASH: Oh, yes, yes. You see, he made it when I didn't. But he put on a better campaign. He had more money to spend for one thing, and there really is a relationship between the amount of money you spend and how well you do. But Nelson dropped back, and Reynolds dropped back, and Nash dropped back just enough to get below the 50 percent mark, and we lost two of our state constitutional officers that same way, one a Catholic and one a Protestant. No, I detected no lack of enthusiasm among the statewide candidates. I'm sure among Assembly and Senate candidates running in the old Progressive counties that I'm talking about which are quite heavily Scandinavian and, therefore, quite heavily Lutheran, that there was plenty of that.

MORRISSEY: I'm interested in the relationship between the volunteers for Kennedy-Johnson and the regular Party organization in Wisconsin. Was this relationship a solid one?

NASH: Well, no relationships like that in Wisconsin were ever solid. Our election laws were bequeathed to us by the elder [Robert M.] Bob LaFollette. He was fighting the battle of party irregularity. The Progressive Republicans were a minority, and they had everything to gain from weak party structure and everything to lose by strong party structure. So, in Wisconsin we have voter registration but not party registration. Everybody votes in everybody else's primary--preference primary or any other kind. Our statutory organizations--party organizations recognized by law--are limited by law to ridiculous sums, ten thousand dollars. So in order to finance a campaign, you must find volunteers and create enough voluntary committees so that each one stays within the legal limit. Well, this tends to destroy party structure. Then we have less patronage, I suppose, than any other state in the Union. Patronage just doesn't exist with us.

MORRISSEY: Patronage from Madison.

NASH: Yes, from the . . . Well, there just isn't much anywhere. As lieutenant governor, I was able to hire my own secretary without reference to civil service. But as presiding officer of the Senate, and therefore it's chief administrative officer I had no patronage appointments. The college students who came in and swept the rugs of the Senate chamber at night and the regular cleaning people that came in and did the halls and so on--the elevator operators, the Assistant Sergeants at Arms--were all taken from merit lists and got the jobs by examination. The Great Lakes states, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, are examples of states that have been able to build effective political organizations without patronage and without crooked contractors, and that doesn't happen in many states.

MORRISSEY: Had you expected that Nixon would defeat Kennedy by a hundred thousand votes in Wisconsin?

NASH: By the time the election came along I really thought that we were going to carry the state. I was still monkeying around with my little poll and in interpreting it, as I'd done in previous elections in previous years, I was going more by the trend from week to week. Because the sample was small and spotty and irregular, it was very hard to interpret. But it did not show the hidden anti-Catholic bias, which was the decisive factor in Wisconsin, as it was in many states. Therefore, I expected Kennedy to carry the state, and I expected Nelson to get in, and then I knew that I had to have about a 4 percent. . . . He had to do about 54 percent for me to win. And it looked to me as though he would have that 54 percent as he did in '58. Actually, he dropped back about two percentage points, and so did I, and that brought me below the 50 percent mark--and JFK.

MORRISSEY: I'd be interested in knowing how your assignment to this job in Washington developed.

NASH: Well, having been defeated, of course, I then had to look for a job. I was anxious to get back to Washington. I'd gone out to Wisconsin to take care of my cranberry business, and I'd done what I went out there to do, but the Food and Drug Administration finding of 1959 knocked all that into a cocked hat. Therefore, the company couldn't really afford to have me on the payroll. In fact, I'd been off the payroll for a couple of years as far as the company was concerned. So I had good reason to need to look for a job, and we had a few days left in the Wisconsin Senate. I took care of that and then left straight for Washington, figuring that this was the only way to get a job.

I had talked to various people about Commissioner of Indian Affairs, but I had not been very much interested in it because my response to those who suggested it to me was that I'd been on the Humphrey bandwagon a little bit too hard to have really grade "A" Kennedy credentials; in other words, I was a "Johnny come lately." And second, my observation of the Interior Department over the years was that the Commissioner of Indian Affairs did not make Indian policy as far as the Department was concerned, and that the only job worth having was the Assistant Secretary that sat over him. So I came in, really, to shoot for that and quickly discovered the rumor that it was the first job to be fixed up.

The view around Washington at that time was that John Carver, assistant to Frank Church, had been promised it and that's the way it was going to be. I don't know whether the rumor was true or not, but he certainly did become Assistant Secretary. I talked to him--and I didn't know him--I talked to him at some length about the whole thing, and we hit it off very well. Of course, he wasn't in the position to make any commitments. It was rumored that Mr. [Stewart L.] Udall would be the first Cabinet officer to be selected. I went to see him, still talking in terms of Assistant Secretary or Under Secretary, following the old rule that if you are running for dogcatcher, it doesn't hurt to be mentioned for Senator. So we had some discussions. Four or five days after the Inaugural I hadn't heard from anybody, and I concluded that it was too late. I was about to turn around and go back home when a phone call came, "Why aren't you in your office?"

It was soon clear that there was going to be a study group and they wanted me to help set it up, so I came in then, forgetting about Assistant Secretary or anything else, or Commissioner, merely looking at everything we were doing in Indian Affairs. Well, then we had the study group. We talked about various people to be a portion of it and wound up with [William W.] Bill Keeler as chairman; [James E.] Jim Officer, a friend of the Secretary's, a young anthropologist from Tucson, [William, Jr.] Bill Zimmerman, former Assistant Commissioner, and myself as members. We completed our report and turned it in on the tenth of July.

MORRISSEY: Turned it in to whom?

NASH: The Secretary; this was a Secretarial task force. And that report is, you know, this Administration's policy on Indian affairs.

MORRISSEY: Did the Bureau carry out without any major exceptions the recommendations in that report?

NASH: Well, I think so. When you say, "Did we carry it out?" the process of carrying out the recommendations is by no means complete. I think the major things have been started. The report focused on economic development; we started our own war against Indian poverty before the Administration had anything like this in mind. Some of our findings, recommendations, have been cranked in to the big War on Poverty. There is an amazing convergence between our programs of pre-vocational training in our Indian schools and the pre-vocational training in the Job Corps Conservation centers, although they were arrived at by two different processes.

Oh, there are some things that have proved to just be impractical. One of the recommendations, for example, had to do with protecting Indian water rights by a much more rapid development of irrigation projects. We have found it very difficult to fund irrigation construction. On the other hand, the industrial development proposals have succeeded way beyond expectations. The improved grants for higher scholarships, summer programs to make use of our teaching facilities during the summer, et cetera, have all been carried out and now have been built into the war against poverty.

MORRISSEY: When the initial plans were being made by the War on Poverty, did they look with great interest on what you had already done here?

NASH: Yes, we had long discussions with [Charles L.] Charlie Schultze, who was then Assistant Director of the Budget, in which we were asked in some depth about our experience and our recommendations. I think it is true that one of our major recommendations was never adopted. We got more good in our war against poverty from accelerated public works than we did from any of the long-range educational or community development or personal development aspects of the program. Mr. Udall, with such assistance as I could give him, argued very strongly at the White House for a public works component in the Economic Opportunity Act. Eventually, the decision was made not to do it, and the Economic Opportunity Act was developed as a primarily educational enterprise directed at young men and young women at the high school dropout stage.

MORRISSEY: To what extent were you allowed to run your own Bureau?

NASH: Mixed, like anything else in this world in government and industry. The nature of the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] operation is such that it has to have a good deal of autonomy. We're running about two hundred and seventy-five schools. Some of them are very large; one of them has over two thousand students. Some of them are very small, only one room, but that one room is liable to be several hundred miles from the nearest supply point, a log cabin in the Arctic. You have to take care of your own people and your own students and the things that you're responsible for every hour of every day, no matter what the policy decisions may be in Congress or in the front office. So these things go on; they have a life of their own.

On the other hand, you cannot make the big decisions around a place like this without a lot of help. I, personally, have no desire to. Congress exercises very close oversight on Indian affairs, and a large part of the legislative business of the Congress is Interior Department matters, and a large portion of that consists of Indian affairs. This takes a lot of time and attention, and usually policy decisions which I like to take part in, but which I don't expect to win every time.

MORRISSEY: I was wondering if the point you made earlier about the shots had been called for the Bureau not by the Commissioner but by one of the assistant secretaries had proven to be true in your own experience.

NASH: Well, I've thoroughly enjoyed being Commissioner of Indian Affairs. When I said that the Commissioner did not make policy, I think I spoke truly. But I also found after getting into the Department that there's more than enough work for one man in this office, and that much of policy consists of operations anyway. Policy is sometimes made on a day to day basis just by the things you do. This is a highly operational bureau. We're into everything; we're very far-flung; we have a very wide variety of programs. I mean, when the phone rings in here, one minute you're talking irrigation, the next you're talking higher education, the next you're talking soil conservation, the next you're talking oil and gas exploration, the next thing you're talking is what to do about a blizzard and how to get some snow blowers from somewhere. It's like this all the time.

So I relied very heavily on John Carver as the Assistant Secretary for Public Land Management for advice, for support, for consultation. Sometimes we made policy together, and sometimes he made it by overruling me. But we worked very well together, and we continued to do so after he became Under Secretary. Now, of course, there is a new Assistant Secretary for Public Land Management, and it's not fair for him, on the basis of an old association with John, to bypass him. So I am now in the process of trying to develop a working relationship with Assistant Secretary [Harry R.] Anderson, but it's not the same thing because, you know, now I'm the old-timer, and he's the new-comer. I'm not very much of an old-timer, but the roles are somewhat reversed.

MORRISSEY: When this Bureau had legislative matters to deal with on the Hill, would you deal with them directly or the Department's liaison or the White House liaison?

NASH: Well, some of all three, pretty much on a case by case basis. In recent times we've always had an assistant commissioner for legislation. When Rex Lee was the Associate Commissioner he handled his own legislative liaison, did it his own way and in his own time and was very good at it. I wanted the position and title of Associate Commissioner for Jim Officer, a friend and confidant of the Secretary and a member of the task force; it was very important to have a suitable spot for him. At the same time I wanted the old-timers, the pros in the Bureau to be well represented. Therefore, I strongly urged the appointment of John Crow as Deputy Commissioner. Well, here we had, you see, the old and the new in a blend which was intended to combine the good things of both for the advancement of the program. It was a good concept, and it's been a very successful one. It's now in the process of being broken up. John Crow has gone over to the Bureau of Land Management and so on.

MORRISSEY: I was wondering how frequently [Lawrence F.] O'Brien's operation at the White House would get into your act.

NASH: Not very much, not very much. As I say, Rex Lee, as Associate Commissioner, had done his own legislative liaison. We had a very able man in the Bureau who had been acting Commissioner a couple times while John Crow was in Alaska, and we made him Assistant Commissioner for Legislation. In the beginning, John Carver or I or [Martin P.] Marty Mangan, the Assistant Commissioner I'm talking about, would go up only to testify on major bills, and then it would be the Commissioner, the Assistant Commissioner for Legislation, Mr. Siegler, Lou Siegler of the Legislative Counsel's office. Well, we made a testifying trio for awhile. But I kept out of the individual senators and congressmen's hair, primarily because of the time factor.

The first thing we had to do around here was to restore the confidence of the Indian people in the Department and in the Bureau. Eight years of termination had frightened them and alienated them to the point where they didn't have confidence in the integrity of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of the Interior. So I started on a series of extensive tours which were, in fact, extensions of the Task Force. Just as we'd met out in Indian country and listened to witnesses, I went out to the reservations and sat down in old fashioned councils and said, "Now, let's talk some more about these problems. I'm on your ground now, tell me what's going on and what we ought to be doing about it."

And in the course of a couple of years I did establish a working relationship and one that I'm very happy with and very proud of. I have no enemies today, as far as the reservation leaders are concerned. They may oppose us; they may fight us; we may have to wrestle an issue out, but it's done as between equals; it's done without bitterness or rancor. I was told when I came into this job that you couldn't keep it if you didn't have a backdoor, that you had to escape from the delegations every once in awhile. I have never had a cross word with a delegation in this office or in the field.

MORRISSEY: Did you have any indications that President Kennedy himself was interested in what you were doing?

NASH: Yes, yes I did. You bet I did.

MORRISSEY: Tell me about those.

NASH: One of the things that was done in the campaign--the same people that approached me about possibly becoming Commissioner of Indian Affairs were advising JFK. Oliver Lafarge wrote a letter asking about ten questions to both Nixon and Jack Kennedy. The answers to these were widely publicized and became campaign documents. As a result of this, President Kennedy entered office with more familiarity with the problem than any President, I suppose, than there's ever been. FDR learned about the problem from Harold Ickes. This was a problem Mr. Truman never really cotted to.

I worked with him on every kind of minority problem, but his view of Indian affairs, to the end of his Administration, remained that the problem of the Indians was the Indian Bureau; the quicker we got rid of it the better. I knew this was both untrue and unfair and highly impractical, but I never convinced him of it. And one of the reasons that I am Commissioner today is that I felt in the work that I did for him this remained unfinished business as far as the American minorities were concerned. We were able to make significant advances in the minority field in every area of American life except in Indian Affairs during the seven years I was with HST, but not in this one.

So JFK really did have some understanding of it. Early in the game I went over there. The first contact I had with him on Indian Affairs personally had to do with some graduation ceremonies for ten Eskimos and Athabaskan Indians from the RCA Institute in New York. This was part of our adult vocational training program, and they had such outstanding records and they were such fine young people that there was a desire to give some presidential recognition to the program. So I went over with these young men, and in getting ready to brief the President as to what it was all about, he called for me and asked about the program. So we had some interchange and he, you know, called me by my first name. I hadn't seen him for a long time, but it was a very heartwarming experience. And then, of course, he absorbed his material so fast that you never had to read anything to him or explain anything to him. You just handed him a couple sheets of paper, and he'd flip them like this and he had it all, and he had it to stay.

The second contact was when a group of Indian people came to Washington; we'd had this big conference in Chicago, and they had been promised some kind of participation-- departmental, secretarial. They wanted presidential, but we just couldn't do it. So I finally arranged for the members of the conference that could still make it to come from their homes and come to Washington and be received by the President. In this connection, I brought him, again, some documents so that he would have something to say to the group. He again read through a couple of pages of briefing material in about thirty seconds and went out and greeted the crowd and talked as though he'd just been reading a full book on the subject.

He gave very good support to all our programs. For example, the first Executive Order of his Administration provided for doubling the allowances of surplus commodities, especially on the reservation. And there were many other things like that that he did. We immediately went up on the Hill for a supplemental to raise the building program for the Indian schools from about fifteen million to about thirty-five million. And we've held it somewhere around that level, between twenty-five and fifty million, ever since, and we're gradually getting caught up.

MORRISSEY: Did he visit any reservations while he was President?

NASH: Not that I know of; I don't think he visited any reservations. He had sessions with a number of Indian leaders in his office at other times than the ones I am speaking of. No, I don't think so. Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy] had some of the Indian dancers in from our National Capital Conference on Indian Poverty come to the White House to entertain John-John and Caroline and the morning school, and they had a wonderful time, very exciting.

MORRISSEY: Did you get involved with either the President or the White House with the matter of this dam up in Pennsylvania and the Indians who were to be replaced?

NASH: Yes, indeed. The early discussions on Kinzua were held between John Carver and the Bureau of the Budget, and ultimately, I suspect, with Lee White. During the period that I was on the Task Force we had to have an orderly way of doing things, and therefore we adopted the rule that we would have nothing to do with day to day Indian affairs, that we would concentrate entirely on the long-range program implications of our study. I did not even go down the fourth floor of the Interior Building where the Indian Bureau was, at that time, until after it had been decided that my name was going to go up. I just stayed away. I think this is a very important thing for a study group to do.

I guess I was confirmed and sworn in in September, after a rather prolonged struggle, and made Kinzua one of my first pieces of business. Regardless of whether the decision had been made or was to be made to go ahead or not to go ahead, there was a tremendous job to do with the tribe. The tribe and the Corps of Engineers were at such odds that they couldn't plan together because they couldn't talk together. So it seemed to me that an intermediary was needed, and this was the right role for the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Therefore, I proposed to Secretary Carver that we convene a meeting of the Indians and the Engineers and the Bureau in my office and see what could be done. Well, it was at that point that I learned that there had been other discussions at the White House that I didn't know about. There was no reason for me to know about them, but it was concluded that we'd better have a full dress session with Lee White in the White House.

So we went over and the commanding general of the Corps came over accompanied by some of his aides; some of the people from the Bureau of the Budget were there, and John Carver and [Newton B.] Newt Edwards, his staff assistant, and myself. We laid down the general outlines right that afternoon of what was going to be done about Kinzua.

There had already been an interchange of letters between Basil Williams, then the President of the Seneca Nation, which is his title, and JFK as, you know, President of the country. In this, President Kennedy had explained to the Senecas why he thought it was necessary to go ahead, but that since he did think it was necessary he was directing the agencies of the government to do four things. The letter told what these four were. It was quite obvious that the Corps of Engineers, as the dam builder, couldn't do all that. So somebody else had to do that part of it, and I took that as a directive to us to do it. We discussed that memorandum that afternoon in the White House, and we agreed on a method of working between the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which has been very successful over the last three or four years.

MORRISSEY: I am so ignorant of the substance of matters handled by your Bureau that I don't think I can ask any more specific questions about it. Is there anything else you think that you would want to emphasize?

NASH: Especially in connection with JFK?

MORRISSEY: Yes, the relationship between the Bureau and Kennedy as President, broadly defined.

NASH: Well, I don't. . . . You touched on the area that most directly involved President Kennedy when you mentioned the Kinzua Dam because it had been hoped that it would be possible to reverse history at that point. I'm sure he would have liked to if he could. He didn't think he could and that they had to go ahead, but the way in which he faced up to the philosophical and moral issues, as well as the practical political issues and administrative issues was, I think, very characteristic of his firm intellectual grasp of things. While I never would have agreed to build that dam if I'd had a chance to agree or disagree--I think it was a big mistake to have built it--once that decision was made and was made by those who have competence and responsibility in the field, I think we did the right thing and did it in the best way that it could have been done in terms of the Indian interest.

No, I just think I have the same feeling that every other Kennedy appointee had. I'm now serving my fourth President and I've been in federal and state government now for about twenty-five years, and working for Jack Kennedy will always be the high point of my public life. And that even goes for the work I did for Mr. Truman, and the very exciting assignments I had with Mr. Roosevelt, and working for Mr. Johnson. Every president has his own style, and, you know, it's a great thing no matter what that style is. But for the career administrator--and I came in not as a politician, you see. . . . I came into government in research and then got interested in politics afterwards by being in government, by being at the White House. I reversed the usual path. I went from the White House to the precinct. But I regard myself primarily as a career civil servant who just happens to have some political coloration.

This was a President you worked for that you really felt prized excellence. This is the thing; you had a feeling that what you said was understood, that your philosophy was appreciated, that your ideas were grasped, were grasped quickly, that they were respected even though they came from far down in the organization. You had a feeling your memoranda were read--whether they were or not, I don't know, but they always seemed to be. You

could put in your time, you could put in your effort and feel rewarded every day and every week and every month. It will never be like that again. It was never like that before, and I don't think it will ever be like that again.

MORRISSEY: With your permission I'd like to include with the transcript of this tape a copy of that study report that you did.

NASH: Oh, sure, sure. Or anything else you want.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.