

**Harry G. Hoffmann Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 08/07/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Harry G. Hoffmann  
**Interviewer:** William L. Young  
**Date of Interview:** August 7, 1964  
**Place of Interview:** Charleston, West Virginia  
**Length:** 20 pages

**Biographical Note**

Hoffmann was a journalist and the Editor of the *Charleston Gazette* of Charleston, West Virginia. In this interview Hoffmann discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] campaign for the 1960 West Virginia [WV] presidential primary; JFK's religion as a campaign issue in WV; WV press on JFK versus Hubert H. Humphrey; Hoffmann's interactions with JFK during the WV campaign; President JFK's continued interest in WV; reaction to the Kennedy Administration in WV; the national press' treatment of WV during the 1960 primary; news reports on the results of the WV primary; and JFK's lasting impact on WV, among other issues.

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**Suggested Citation**

Harry G. Hoffmann, recorded interview by William L. Young, August 7, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

HARRY G. HOFFMANN

August 7, 1964  
Charleston, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This interview is with Mr. Harry G. Hoffmann, editor of the Charleston Gazette. In 1960, Mr. Hoffmann was also the editor of the Charleston Gazette. His special field has always been political reporting, and today he still carries the title political editor of the Charleston Gazette.

Mr. Hoffmann, would you tell me about your first contacts with the Kennedy candidacy in West Virginia in the primary of 1960?

HOFFMANN: This came sometime in the spring of 1959, when Ted Sorensen /Theodore C. Sorensen/ and some other people came to Charleston for the purpose--well, I suppose you would say getting guidance on the advisability of Senator Kennedy entering a primary campaign in West Virginia. Charles M. Love, Jr., who at that time was the Democratic city chairman, held a luncheon in the Daniel Boone Hotel, a private luncheon to which he invited, I would say, probably eighteen or twenty Democrats in this area. Ted Sorensen seemed particularly to want to get opinion on just how much Senator Kennedy's Catholic religion would be a factor in any primary campaign.

As I recall it, there was no firm decision made at that time, but he got the viewpoints of the various people there. Some of them thought that Kennedy, a Catholic, never would be able to win a primary in West Virginia, which has a Catholic population of around 5 percent. But there were others who thought that this very definitely would be a good territory for him to test this issue, so to speak.



YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, what were your own personal feelings at the time about the president's religion and the effect that it might have in West Virginia politics?

HOFFMANN: I'll have to say that I had my doubts about it, although I felt that if there was a danger of this being an issue, Senator Kennedy probably had more to gain than to lose. I've always found the West Virginia people to be very fair. I don't recall that religion ever played a great part in any political campaign in this state. I would say that I was cautiously in favor of him making the test.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, did your newspaper, the Charleston Gazette, actively support any one of the Democratic candidates in the primary?

HOFFMANN: No, our paper simply gave full coverage to both candidates. We had one or more reporters with them on all of their travels in the state, but we took no editorial position so far as the 1960 primary was concerned. I will say this: Perhaps my answer is a little misleading because our paper was very strong for Adlai Stevenson for the Democratic nomination in 1960; but of course, Adlai Stevenson was not running in the West Virginia primary, it was a race between Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey /Hubert H. Humphrey/. And we took no editorial position in that.

YOUNG: Since you've mentioned the issue of religion in the campaign, I wonder if you would go ahead now and give me some of your personal observations of religion as an issue in the primary.

HOFFMANN: I think it very definitely was an issue to a degree. There may have also been a certain backlash, so to speak, in that I feel that some West Virginia people wanted to impress on other people that they were fair, that perhaps some of them who had serious doubts about the nomination or the election of a Catholic president may have voted for Senator Kennedy just to make sure that people did not think they were prejudiced. However, I saw a number of incidents which indicated that there was a degree of prejudice, a degree of bigotry, and perhaps a larger degree of sincere doubts in the minds of some people as to what harm might come of having a Catholic in the White House.

I remember the day Senator Kennedy came to Charleston after the Wisconsin primary. He was scheduled to speak in the auditorium of Morris Harvey College, a private nonsectarian college, but which originated as a college supported by the Methodist church. I was waiting outside the college for Senator Kennedy's arrival,

and there happened to be two students meet just a short distance from me. And the boy said to the girl, "Aren't you going to hear Senator Kennedy?" She replied very emphatically, "I am not!" He wanted to know why, and she said, "Well, I'm not a Catholic; does that answer your question?" However, in the auditorium itself when Senator Kennedy made his talk and then made himself available to answer any questions, one man got up and asked a very long and involved question that had to do with the religious issue. Senator Kennedy gave an answer without any hesitation, and he got his biggest hand of the day on the basis of his response to that question dealing with the religious issue.

YOUNG: How would you evaluate the clergy in Charleston or Kanawha County? Were there any sermons against the senator because of his religion?

HOFFMANN: Yes, there were. I recall one in particular. I did not hear it, but it so happened that one of our reporters had been to church that day, and reported the sermon. This was a very bitter attack on the Catholic church primarily. I would say the attack on Senator Kennedy was secondary, but the gist of it was that Protestants should not vote for a Catholic president. This was in the general election campaign. And I would say that this sermon did Senator Kennedy no harm. In fact, it seemed to arouse the minister's own parishioners. The Democrats among them became more determined to work harder for Senator Kennedy.

Just in the last three months I was talking with a man who was a member of that church and who was very active in the men's Bible class. He told me that this Bible class filled this particular meeting room where they met every Sunday, and that after the minister's sermon attacking the Catholic church and Kennedy, the attendance at this Bible class started to fall off. And he said it gradually got down to where there were only five men showing up for a meeting. He said he was convinced that this was because the parishioners were incensed by what the minister had to say.

YOUNG: Do you remember the denomination of the church?

HOFFMANN: It was a Baptist church.

YOUNG: A Baptist church. Would you review for me the nature of the objections to the president's religion? In other words, what specific issues were brought up as possible dangers if a Catholic would occupy the White House?

HOFFMANN: Well, I think that this was something that went back more or less into history and the apparent tradition that if a Catholic were in the White House, he would be under the control of the pope, and that it would be in violation of the United States Constitution. And I think most people



who opposed Kennedy because of his religion, rather than being bigoted, simply had some honest and sincere doubts as to what would happen to this country if a Catholic were elected. I think some of them really felt that the country would no longer be run by the president, but would be run by the pope. And as I said, I think in a great majority of cases this was an honest and sincere doubt. I think bogotry as such had very little to do with it.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, do you think that Kennedy's victory in the primary buried the issue of religion, or did religion continue to be an issue even through the general election of 1960?

HOFFMANN: No, I don't think it was buried in the primary. And I think the West Virginia election returns for November 1960 bear this out. In that campaign there were two very attractive candidates running for United States senator. Cecil H. Underwood, who at the time was governor of West Virginia, was the Republican nominee, and the Democratic nominee was Jennings Randolph, who had long been a favorite among West Virginia voters. Both of these men were able vote-getters, attractive candidates, the kind who would bring out a maximum number of voters. And yet there were four thousand more votes cast for president in that general election, than for United States senator. And Senator Jennings Randolph, the Democratic nominee, won by a majority of about eighty-nine thousand, whereas Senator Kennedy's margin of victory was only forty-five thousand. In between there was the Democratic nominee for governor, W. W. Barron, who had a majority of about sixty-nine thousand. And incidentally there were about six thousand fewer votes cast for governor than for president.

Now it seems to me that it is logical to believe that inasmuch as there were so many more people that voted for president than for either United States senator or governor, and that the Catholic nominee for president got a majority of only forty-five thousand as against the majority of sixty-nine thousand for the candidate for governor and eighty-nine thousand for the candidate for United States senator, that a good number of these people had gone out simply to vote for president. I can see no other logical conclusion except they wanted to vote against a Catholic. And again, I don't say they were bigoted; they probably had some genuine fears about the results of having a Catholic in the White House.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, this is probably awfully hard to analyze from the hindsight of four years, but would you compare the Republican voter that might normally have voted for Mr. Nixon / Richard M. Nixon / and who switched because he was a Catholic and voted for Senator Kennedy, and in turn contrast that with the anti-Catholic vote which you've discussed?



HOFFMANN: Well, I think very definitely there were some Catholic Republicans who voted for John Kennedy because he was A Catholic. I think this was indicated somewhat by the fact that Senator Kennedy got a very good vote in the northern panhandle, particularly Ohio County, where the bulk of the Catholic population is, in West Virginia. However, I don't think that this type vote was as great as the vote against Kennedy because of his religion. And I think the results bear that out, the fact that more people voted for president and that Senator Kennedy had a smaller majority than the Democratic nominees for both governor and United States senator.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, we've gotten on the subject of religion through the general election; let's go back to the primary for a few minutes. What factors do you think were most important in the Kennedy victory in May 1960 in the West Virginia primary?

HOFFMANN: I really think it was Senator Kennedy himself. He was a very attractive candidate. He was a man of intelligence, wit, and knowledge who knew how to communicate his thoughts. And I think he developed a particular attraction among the people of West Virginia. I would say that Senator Humphrey, his primary opponent in that campaign, is also popular in West Virginia. However, at the very start of the campaign, just after the Wisconsin primary, Senator Kennedy seemed to have the confidence and to be able to project that confidence to the people.

Senator Humphrey seemed to have a defeatist attitude about it. I remember the day he came in. He hired a bus to do his campaigning and he went out to Cabin Creek area. I had an opportunity to sit with him awhile and talk. And the thing he talked most about was complaining about the press coverage of the Wisconsin primary. He resented the fact that there were so many Kennedys in the state, and when any one of them said anything, the headline writers had "Kennedy" in the headline and all of this drew attention to John Kennedy the candidate. But it was more Humphrey's attitude than what he really said, because he--well, he was almost whining about it.

Of course, I think that another big factor was that no one in West Virginia at that time believed that Hubert Humphrey had a chance of winning the Democratic nomination. They felt this was between Senator Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson/Lyndon B. Johnson/ or perhaps Adlai Stevenson/Adlai E. Stevenson/. But Hubert Humphrey just didn't seem strongly enough established on the national scene to win the nomination for president. And I think it boiled down to the fact that a lot of people felt like they would rather vote for a winner than for one who they did not feel could win the nomination.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, members of the working press are sometimes said to be overly cynical about politics and very sensitive to the political climate; could you say a word about the attitude of the working members of the press not only in your paper but in the state, as you observed them, with respect to Kennedy versus Humphrey?

HOFFMANN: I got the impression that they were more attracted to Kennedy than to Humphrey. And perhaps again the reason behind this was the feeling that Kennedy had a chance to win at the Democratic National Convention, and that Hubert Humphrey did not. Now this may have been a little different attitude if the primary campaign had involved, say Adlai Stevenson or Lyndon Johnson. From the personal viewpoint I found, at least on our paper, the reporters somewhat divided between Kennedy and Humphrey. I know some of them were very strong for Humphrey, and perhaps, I would say, on our own paper there were more reporters who favored Humphrey for one reason or another than favored Kennedy. I did not at any time see any of that feeling injected into their news stories.

We tried to cover this campaign as impartially as possible, not only from a matter of that being the right thing to do, but we thought it was particularly important in this campaign, because it was one that involved an emotional issue such as religion, and that a great deal of damage might be done by any leanings in news stories. And of course, as I've said, our paper did not give editorial support to either candidate, either Humphrey or Kennedy in the primary. I felt, on the reporters as a whole covering this primary, I got the impression that there were more of them leaning to Kennedy in their personal views than to Humphrey. Again, I think this was a case of Kennedy's personality, his attractiveness, his knowledge, and possibly because he seemed more to be one of them, having worked as a newspaperman himself.

YOUNG: Could you suggest any reason, then, that some of the reporters were attracted to Senator Humphrey?

HOFFMANN: I think primarily because of his liberal viewpoints. And of course, Senator Humphrey is a very excellent speaker and a very knowledgeable man. I think primarily it was because of his liberal viewpoints. They look upon him as a real champion of the people, so to speak.

YOUNG: Well, newspapermen may read their own papers more often than the general public; if you were taking the West Virginia Democrats as a group, do you feel that issues, ideology, possible future programs and platforms played any real role in this primary battle, or was it again more or less a matter of personality and individual loyalty?



HOFFMANN: I think it was a matter of personality and individual loyalty, because there really weren't any real issues in the primary campaign between Kennedy and Humphrey. They were both telling West Virginia that they were going to do something to help West Virginia get out of its economic difficulties, and the two candidates were together on almost everything.

YOUNG: Well, were you aware of the fact that Senator Kennedy pitched his program or his campaign to the particular section of the state that he might have been in at the moment, or did he campaign on a rather general platform through the entire state?

HOFFMANN: I think it was pretty much a general platform. Naturally, when he was in the southern coal fields, he was talking more about the human misery that existed there, the fact that so many people were out of work because of mechanization in the coal mines, and about doing something to help those people. The same was true with Senator Humphrey. But they didn't speak in McDowell County in the center of the coal fields--neither one of the candidates--in one vein, and in a different vein in the Kanawha valley--Charleston--which, with its chemical plants and good employment, had relative prosperity. I would say generally that both candidates carried the same theme in all sections of the state.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, there was a great deal of interest on the part of the outside press, the reporters that came into West Virginia, on the nature in which the political game is played in its somewhat old-fashioned way in Lincoln County, Logan County, McDowell County, and part of Mercer County. Would you comment on the relationship of the Kennedy candidacy and organization to these counties which, I believe, all lie south of the Kanawha River?

HOFFMANN: Well, I think probably it's best to start with McDowell County. That's the county where Senator Kennedy got his biggest single majority in the primary campaign, and the county involved most in the postprimary rumors about the Kennedy money buying the primary. I think the support that Senator Kennedy got in McDowell County was based almost totally on practical politics.

Judge Sidney Christie, who is a very honorable man and for many years was secretary of the McDowell County Democratic executive committee and often was referred to as the boss of McDowell County, is a very practical man when it comes to politics. His chief interest in McDowell County in a primary campaign is getting nominated those candidates on his ticket, so to speak, in other words, the courthouse faction. And in almost every election the candidate running state-wide who is most likely to get the support of the McDowell County organization in the primary, is the candidate who is considered to be the strongest from the standpoint of helping the local ticket.

Senator Kennedy spoke in McDowell County before he ever made a public decision to be a candidate for president. He was down there in the fall of 1959, and to my recollection on a previous occasion he spoke there. He proved to be very attractive to McDowell County voters, and I'm convinced that the support given Senator Kennedy by the McDowell County organization was given because the organization felt that he was the strongest candidate.

Logan County always has two factions, but you never can tell from one day to the next what way the wind is going to blow. Senator Kennedy had the support of one faction and it's my recollection that Senator Humphrey had the support of another faction there. From the standpoint of money, I became convinced that the Kennedy people, by the very fact that the Kennedy family was wealthy and thereby subject to charges of buying an election, was very meticulous about not doing so. But, of course, there is a practical aspect to this. If you have two factions in a county and each is trying to beat the other, there are certain legitimate campaign expenses. If one faction is supporting candidate A for governor or for president or for United States senator, candidate A is expected to contribute his share to the cost of the campaign. The same holds true for candidate B who has the support of the other faction.

YOUNG: Well, West Virginia voters in some of these southern counties were pictured as people whose votes were for sale for two dollars and a pint of whiskey. Would you comment on this?

HOFFMANN: I think there is a certain amount of vote buying. But I've always been inclined to the viewpoint of Judge Partlow /Ira Judson Partlow/, former state attorney general and likewise a former circuit judge in McDowell County, who was a man of very high character and very high principles and a man who was also very wise. Judge Partlow always said that the bought votes were inconsequential because both sides were buying them, and when you got right down to it, the election was decided by the honest unbought vote. And I'm inclined to that viewpoint.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, during the primary campaign you had a chance to spend some time with Senator Kennedy. Do you have any stories of your trips with him, any human interest stories that might be of interest to someone in the future?

HOFFMANN: I think one thing about Senator Kennedy, he had a terrific way with people. I remember out in Cabin Creek, which is a coal mining region where there's a heavy amount of unemployment, Senator Kennedy was walking down the railroad tracks and saw a group of coal miners there and sat down on the rail and talked with them, and he talked their language. There may have been some of them who had doubts about him to start with, but they went away with a good feeling about him.



I recall a friend of mine who is editor of a newspaper in Buffalo. He came into this state--this was during the primary campaign--he came into the state of Bluefield and drove across to Charleston and stopped in a number of mining communities and talked with people. And he was convinced that Kennedy was going to carry West Virginia in the primary, because, he said, he found those people to feel very close to Senator Kennedy. I think in many respects they saw in him some of the same qualities that they saw in Franklin D. Roosevelt, who to the coal miners was a public idol. They credited him with delivering them from slavery, so to speak. And Senator Kennedy was able to project some of that same image.

When Senator Kennedy was in McDowell County in the fall of 1959, he'd planned to fly to Charleston late that night and was going to stay at the Daniel Boone Hotel. Larry Tierney Lawrence Tierney, who was with him, asked me if I could suggest a convenient mass to attend on the following Sunday morning. They had some conferences set up at the Daniel Boone to start about eleven o'clock Sunday morning, and Senator Kennedy wanted to get to an earlier mass.

So I suggested that I would pick them up at the Daniel Boone Sunday morning and take them to Blessed Sacrament Church in South Charleston, which is the church I attend. I don't mind saying I think I was kind of looking forward to walking in with a celebrity such as Senator Kennedy. I'm not sure that all the people attending that mass got as much out of it, because I noticed a little flutter, particularly among young girls, when Senator Kennedy walked in. And after mass there were quite a few people that came up and shook hands with him. My teenage daughter got a big kick out of meeting him. Her name is Kathleen, and Senator Kennedy commented that he had a sister Kathleen.

I think another thing about him, he had a good faculty for remembering people. I remember at the Democratic National Convention at Los Angeles, I was in a hotel in the Hollywood section. And one morning at breakfast I noticed a woman at the table in front of me who had a view of the lobby, say something rather excitedly to her husband, to the effect, "There he goes now!" And when I looked, whoever it was that passed had passed out of view. I asked her who it was and she said it was Senator Kennedy. He was there to make an appearance before one of the state delegations, which was housed in that hotel.

I waited around the lobby for awhile until he came down, and he had the usual crowd of supporters and newspaper photographers and reporters around him. I stood off to the sidelines. I had nothing in particular to ask him at that time. But outside he had already gotten into his car and he spotted me through the crowds. I was standing on the fringe of the crowds, I suppose about twenty yards from his car, and he got out of the car, came over through the crowd, shook hands with me, and asked me how

everything was in Charleston. Now, there may have been a certain amount of politics in that, but I also feel that he was a man who had a genuine interest in people. And he certainly had an interest in the people of West Virginia.

There's no doubt in my mind that the West Virginia primary, by blunting the religious issue, so to speak, was a big factor in Senator Kennedy's nomination for the presidency. I know that he was convinced of that. I heard him say on more than one occasion that West Virginia won him the nomination, and Senator Kennedy maintained this interest in West Virginia after his election to the presidency. Even before he was inaugurated, he appointed a task force on depressed areas. I happened to be included in the membership of that task force, and this provided the basis for the subsequent enactment of the Area Redevelopment bill.

The very first act of President Kennedy was to increase the size, the variety, and the nutritional value of the surplus food commodities being sent into this state and other states with pockets of unemployment. This was, I think, an indication of the man's humanitarianism. He had been in the West Virginia primary, he saw some of these people who were in abject poverty. They had used up all their unemployment compensation. Since the breadwinners of the house were able to work, they were not eligible for relief; therefore, the only thing they had to exist on was the food they received from surplus commodities.

Congress, during the Eisenhower /Dwight D. Eisenhower/ administration, had authorized an increase in these packages, but the Eisenhower administration never saw fit to carry that out. And, as I said, the very first act of John Kennedy as president was to increase these packages. This, of course, was not a solution to the state's economic problems, but it certainly meant a lot to those people who had nothing else to eat. Then, of course, he instituted the food stamp plan. McDowell County was one of the pilot counties in inaugurating that plan, and I think it proved to be very successful.

There were other examples of President Kennedy's continued interest in West Virginia. One of the state's problems is roads. Because of its rough terrain, road building is a very expensive matter in West Virginia, perhaps more expensive than in any other state, because the whole state ranges from hilly to mountainous. The streams meander, so that it's not feasible to follow streams in building roads; you have to go over or through mountains. One of the big needs was a modern highway north-south through the center of the state. I'm sure that it was only because of President Kennedy's interest in the state that the Bureau of Public Roads finally approved additional interstate mileage for Interstate 79, which was a continuation of an interstate highway originating on Lake Erie and going to Washington, Pennsylvania, where it was to connect with east-west Interstate 70. Well, mileage was approved for the extension of that Interstate 79 from Washington, Pennsyl-



vania, to Morgantown, West Virginia, and on to Charleston, where it will intersect with east-west Interstate 64 and north-south Interstate 77.

Also, for years efforts have been made to get the navy to make some decision on the disposal of the United States Naval Ordnance Plant in South Charleston, West Virginia. The navy had said it had no further need for the plant; it was being used only for storage. And I know that President Kennedy's interest had a part in getting this plant offered to public sale and in getting the General Services Administration to accept the high bid of FMC Corporation, which is now using it in construction of military personnel carriers.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Hoffmann, did you have any more personal contact with the president after the election, or did your membership on this depressed areas council lead to any contact at all?

HOFFMANN: No, the few times that I got to Washington I was unfortunate enough to be there when the president was out of the city. I don't know whether I would have gotten to see him if he had been there, but we had no further personal contact.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Hoffmann, what criticism, if any, did you hear of the Kennedy administration in West Virginia?

HOFFMANN: Well, most of the criticism came from the Republicans, and this was a case in which the president could do no right. Republicans often raised the question, "Where is all this help Senator Kennedy promised West Virginia?" claiming that he had done nothing toward relieving the state's economic stress. And then when he did something, they would criticize him contending that he was using the White House to pay off a political debt. I know when Interstate 79 was approved, there was a great amount of criticism raised by some Republican congressmen contending this was a payoff of the political debt. This wasn't a simple matter of President Kennedy saying, "Give West Virginia a couple hundred additional miles of interstate highway." This was something that had to be justified under the interstate act.

The West Virginia state road commissioner, Burl Sawyers, came up with three or four different plans before he had something that was justified in the minds of the people of the United States Bureau of Public Roads. This was a matter of convincing the technical people in the United States Bureau of Public Roads, who were there whether it was a Democrat or a Republican in the White House. And if it had not been for Sawyers's ability to provide that justification, I'm sure that the state never would have gotten that additional road mileage. It was justified; but the point of it is, I don't think that Sawyers would have been able to

have gotten the consideration, the attention to consider his various plans in the Bureau of Public Roads if it had not been made clear that the president was interested in getting something done along these lines for West Virginia--it it were legal and feasible.

From the standpoint of President Kennedy making milk and honey flow in West Virginia, so to speak, I think the people generally were reasonable enough to know that no president could completely correct a condition such as we had, namely, large unemployment as a result of mechanization in the coal fields, overnight or in a matter of a few years. But President Kennedy demonstrated time and again that he was interested in West Virginia, and interested in helping the state correct its economic conditions. And this is where he received a lot of credit. And I think he was very sincere in wanting to help the state.

YOUNG: Well, did you hear any other criticism from sources that would nominally be in support of the president, in other words, Democratic criticism of the president?

HOFFMANN: No, I can't say that I did.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, we discussed in some detail the fact that you felt that religion remained an issue in that general election in the fall of 1960. I want to go back to that for just a minute. Did you notice that senatorial or gubernatorial candidates shied away, to any degree, from the presidential ticket? Were they afraid, perhaps, that some of the anti-Catholic feeling might rub off on them even though they were both Protestants?

HOFFMANN: I think early in the campaign this was very definitely the case. Both the candidates for governor and for United States senator seemed inclined to go their own way. However, somewhere along midway in the general election campaign there was a very definite change in this respect. And I'm convinced that it was because they recongnized that Senator Kennedy was very popular in West Virginia. They considered that popularity to be more an asset than any prejudice or doubts on the religious issue to be a detriment.

I remember one occasion. Senator Randolph Jennings Randolph was in Morgantown and happened to stop in the Democratic headquarters there, and there was quite a crowd of people. He made a little talk before this group, and he did not talk about Jennings Randolph; he talked about John Kennedy and how the Democrats should unite behind him as a very capable candidate for president. Then I don't say this in criticism of Senator Randolph. He was a candidate himself. I just think he felt that it was better for his own candidacy to talk up President Kennedy.



YOUNG: What, then, would be your reaction to the president's popularity had he lived and been the candidate in 1964?

HOFFMANN: I think he would have carried West Virginia in a landslide. Very definitely. I think the short time he was allowed to serve in the White House removed the fears of what might happen in case a Catholic were elected president. In fact, I think some people felt he was leaning over backwards to make sure that he did not give any special attention to Catholics. There may have been some little resentment among some Catholics on that point, but I think, generally speaking, President Kennedy convinced the people that religion was not an issue in a political campaign. And if he had lived to be the nominee in 1964, I'm sure that he would have led the ticket in West Virginia and carried every other Democrat along with him.

YOUNG: Well, this then, Mr. Hoffmann, leads to another question. We know, of course, that when Senator Kennedy entered the West Virginia primary, it wasn't always possible to work with the existing organizations, and that therefore separate Kennedy organizations, in some instances, were set up. Is there any indication that the president's interest in West Virginia, which you've already mentioned, extended to the point that the original Kennedy organization might have continued to exert political influence and that the president himself would have taken more interest in internal West Virginia political life?

HOFFMANN: I think so. I think one of the great things that president Kennedy's campaign did in West Virginia was to interest a lot of people in politics who prior to that showed little or no interest. Again, I think it was the man's personality primarily that attracted them, and this was a very devoted following. One thing, Senator Kennedy never had any problem of getting volunteers. There were many people who turned out to make phone calls and work mimeograph machines, or anything else, just for the sake of doing something for John Kennedy. I think it developed into a considerable organization and that it was an organization devoted to primarily to John Kennedy. And in this year's election, had he been the nominee, those same people would have been out working their heads off for him.

YOUNG: Just from a very superficial observation--or perhaps your observation isn't superficial--have any of these people continued their interest in politics?

HOFFMANN: They have. As a matter of fact, I don't think there would have been any difficulty this year mounting a real campaign for Robert Kennedy for vice president, just because of this devotion to the Kennedys as people of character and principle and with the courage to tell the

American people what they ought to be doing, and getting the best out of people. There's no doubt in my mind that Robert Kennedy could have gotten the major support of the West Virginia people for vice president, if President Johnson had not closed the convention to him, so to speak.

YOUNG: Well, Mr. Hoffmann, many commentators on the West Virginia political scene have indicated that a number of the volunteers were, of course, attracted to the president because of his religion. What would be your reaction to this? And also, volunteers from any other so-called minority groups.

HOFFMANN: There may have been some people attracted to him because of his religion, but I think the great majority were attracted to him for other reasons: his character, his personality. For one thing, in the southern part of the state there are not many Catholics to be attracted. The great bulk of the Catholic population is concentrated in the northern part of the state. And here in Kanawha County, offhand I can't think right now of a single Catholic that was in the Kennedy organization. I know there were some among those volunteers. But those who were most active--Charlie Love /Charles Love/, Charlie Peters /Charles G. Peters, Jr./, Mrs. /Esther/ Charlie Peters, Sr. /Mrs. Charles G. Peters, Sr./, Ward Wylie, Robert McDonough /Robert P. McDonough/--these people were all non-Catholics. And I suppose there were probably quite a few volunteers making phone calls and doing other jobs, who were Catholic and may have been attracted to Kennedy because of his religion, but the great bulk of the workers, particularly in the southern part of the state, were non-Catholics.

YOUNG: How would you assess the West Virginia Negro community in terms of its support of Kennedy?

HOFFMANN: I think the Negroes were very strong for Kennedy. I know there were some who had some doubts about him. I was talking just the other day with Eddy James /Edward James/, who has been very active in Democratic politics and who has been a delegate to several national conventions. He was telling me that he had some serious doubts about Senator Kennedy in 1960, and that these doubts were based on the fact that in 1956, when Senator Kennedy made such a strong bid for the vice presidential nomination, much of his support came from southern states. Of course, Eddy told me he realized later that this support was based mainly on the fact that some of these southern states apparently wanted to teach a lesson or serve a warning on Senator Kefauver /C. Estes Kefauver/ of Tennessee, whom many of them considered somewhat a traitor to the southern cause. And that was why these southern states were voting for Senator Kennedy in the 1956 convention, rather than Senator Kefauver.



I think the theory that they wanted to serve warning on Kefauver is borne out by the fact that when the switch came, it came from southern states. Apparently they just wanted to lead up to the point to show Senator Kefauver what they could do to him if he got out of line, but then they reverted and went for Kefauver for vice president. I don't think there's any doubt but what a lot of Negroes were attracted to Senator Kennedy, because they felt that he was in a minority group, too, since the matter of his religion was raised so often in the primary campaign. And I think this more or less brought about a natural closeness there. I feel sure that he got a very heavy Negro vote in West Virginia.

REEL 1 of 2 REELS - AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. HARRY G. HOFFMANN

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, as a working journalist, what were your impressions of the way the outside press, the national press reporters that came into West Virginia during the primary, treated West Virginia in their coverage in the Kennedy primary in West Virginia?

HOFFMANN: In the first place, they came in upon us like swarms. Suddenly, West Virginia, which got so little attention that few people knew there was a separate state called West Virginia and that it was not a part of the state of Virginia, was brought very forcefully into the national political picture--not only political but economic. There were a lot of people who criticized the outside press for stressing West Virginia's economic situation. However, I think a lot of good came of that, simply because it drew attention to the fact that West Virginia did have a problem. And it was not the fault of the people of West Virginia, it was a condition of the times in which we were living. West Virginia was one of the first states to feel the impact of so-called automation. The mechanization of the coal mines was a matter of necessity. Either the coal mines mechanized in order to keep competitive with other fuels, or the coal industry closed completely.

In the course of this, a lot of people were put out of work. The coal mine employment dropped from a hundred and twenty-five thousand in 1948, down to the sixties or upper fifties by 1960, and by now into the low forties or upper thirties. The fact that the outside press gave so much attention to West Virginia difficulties distressed a lot of business people, feeling that West Virginia was being pictured as a poverty-stricken state, and therefore, existing business would be hurt. However, the other side of it was that it drew attention to real distress among people who were really powerless to help themselves. I know our own newspaper pointed this up even before the Kennedy campaign, and when we did so, we were

roundly criticized by many of our advertisers. I remember an automobile dealer calling me one morning and saying, "How do you expect me to sell cars with my ad on the last page when you've got the front page filled with stories about how poverty-stricken West Virginia is?"

In the Kennedy campaign I don't think the outside press acted any differently than the West Virginia press, or at least portions of the West Virginia press. This was a problem and it had to be recognized. It wouldn't go away just by being ignored. Perhaps there were times when this was overstressed. But of course, both candidates in the 1960 primary, Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey, were stressing this. They were criticized by Republican candidates in that campaign year, who contended they were giving a black eye to West Virginia. But I think overall the outside press gave an accurate picture. There probably were times when there were distortions or exaggerations, but generally I think the reporting was accurate. I think the most accurate piece that I saw in West Virginia was an overall article on the state's economic and political situation done by Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times. There was no exaggeration in this but at the same time there was no hesitation in pointing up the conditions as they existed.

From the political standpoint, I'm inclined to think that Senator Kennedy probably got the better news break from the outside press in its coverage. This may have been--and I feel that it was not an intentional effort to distort the campaign or to show particular favor to Senator Kennedy--but perhaps just because these newspapermen felt a natural closeness to John Kennedy. However, I saw no indication that anyone deliberately falsified the situation in an effort to give an advantage to Kennedy. For example, the New York Times sent in a team of reporters to do an in-depth survey on how West Virginia was leaning in the 1960 primary. Their findings told them that Senator Kennedy was running ahead. However, they were so impressed by the talk of religious prejudice that they were afraid to report it exactly as they found it and wound up trying to balance it off, and in doing so made no clear prediction that Kennedy would carry the West Virginia primary. In fact, most of the outside newspapermen in West Virginia at the time felt that Humphrey was sure to win it on the basis of the religious issue alone.

During the primary campaign the Charleston Press Club was a gathering place for the national press, and I don't think they ever did get over finding such a relatively lavish place in poverty-stricken West Virginia. At the end of each day, it seemed, regardless of where the reporters were during that day, they would wind up at the Press Club that evening to talk over their findings and express their doubts about their findings. And I remember on one occasion we had Senator Kennedy at one end of the room and Senator Humphrey at the other end of the room. It's my recollection that they never did meet there but both of



them were in the Press Club at the same time, and I would say that the fifty or so people in between them in the dining room were all outside newspapermen.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, I believe on the night of the primary, which would be the night of May tenth, you participated in a series of NBC /National Broadcasting Company/ news television programs which covered the West Virginia primaries. Would you say a word about those programs?

HOFFMANN: Yes, NBC had planned--I think they started out planning two fifteen-minute programs from Charleston, then went to three. Herb Kaplow /Herbert E. Kaplow/ of NBC was conducting them; I was more or less the local man on the panel; and Sam Lubell /Samuel Lubell/ was the expert. The first one came rather early in the evening. I remember for my part of it I cited the significance of Moorefield precinct in Hardy County, which traditionally is the first precinct to report in a West Virginia election and traditionally gives a very accurate indication of how the wind is blowing. Senator Kennedy carried that precinct by a rather healthy majority. Really, it did not mean anything except that it was a straw in the wind.

What was more important were some later reports shortly after that from McDowell County, a very populous county, which showed Senator Kennedy running far ahead. And it did not take long to realize that despite Senator Kennedy's pessimism about carrying the West Virginia primary, he was going to do so handily. Senator Kennedy was in Washington the night of the West Virginia primary, but when things were going so well, he decided to fly into Charleston. He arrived here somewhere close to midnight, and NBC decided to put on a fourth fifteen-minute program from Charleston and have Senator Kennedy on it, too. The program was pretty much sizing up the results and impact of the West Virginia primary.

Of course, Senator Kennedy was very delighted, and there was some discussion about the size of his majority at least percentagewise. And I remember when the program was over, Senator Kennedy, who was sitting next to me, turned to me and said half to me and half to himself, "That Sid Christie, he's fantastic, utterly fantastic!" He was speaking of Judge Sidney Christie, who was secretary of the McDowell County executive committee and generally called the political boss of McDowell County. Senator Kennedy just could not get over the size of the vote he got in that county. This created a very soft spot in the president's heart for Sid Christie. As I said before, I think Sid Christie's support was based on his

ability to recognize that Senator Kennedy was the most popular candidate in McDowell County, but nevertheless the size of the majority that he got in McDowell County impressed Senator Kennedy very much.

YOUNG: By this time, Mr. Hoffmann, Sam Lubell had built something of a reputation as a political predictor, a one man pollster; do you remember what his predictions had been?

HOFFMANN: I don't remember his advance predictions, but on that particular night on these programs, he talked at a very high altitude and at times it was difficult for me to figure out just what he was trying to get across. Except I do recall. . . . I think he must have predicted that Senator Kennedy was going to lose West Virginia, because I remember he was laying great stress on the impact of the Negro vote for Senator Kennedy. And I may be doing him an injustice in saying this, but my impression from this distance was that he was perhaps trying to justify how the primary election went. For that reason I feel that he must have had Senator Kennedy on the short end prior to the primary. But there weren't many newspapermen willing to predict that Senator Kennedy would win.

I remember one day two reporters from London newspapers came in to see me, and they wanted to know who was going to win the primary. This was a few days before the primary. And I said, "Well, I think Senator Kennedy is going to win." I could tell from the surprise and the expressions on their faces that they considered me somewhat of an idiot for making such a prediction. However, that was based somewhat on reports that I'd received, particularly from mining communities. One of our reporters, Don Marsh, is from Logan County, and his father worked in the mines down there. And he was down there and talked with his father, and the report that he brought back was that these people were simply going to vote for Senator Kennedy. There were other straws in the wind that indicated Senator Kennedy was very popular in West Virginia regardless of the so-called religious issue, and perhaps largely because of the feeling that Senator Humphrey could not get the presidential nomination even if he did carry West Virginia.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, you mentioned the reluctance on the part of the press to predict a Kennedy victory; have you also answered that question in these last few statements, or could you elaborate a little on the reluctance of the press to predict a Kennedy victory?

HOFFMANN: Well, I think the reluctance was based largely on a feeling that there was more religious prejudice than really existed, and perhaps also on the failure to recognize that some people who may have had doubts about John Kennedy or a Catholic in the White House, were inclined to vote for him just to prove they were not bigots.



YOUNG: Well, you've mentioned that you felt that Senator Kennedy had a chance. Do you remember any of the other members of the press that were willing to give Senator Kennedy the edge before May tenth, 1960?

HOFFMANN: Yes. I can't recall his name, but there was a reporter from Ohio. I can't recall whether it was a Canton paper or an Akron paper, but it runs in my mind that it was the Akron Beacon Journal. He wrote the prediction that Kennedy would carry West Virginia, and I think he was one of the very few who did. It may be that this reluctance was caused somewhat by the pessimism in the Kennedy camp. I think it was just two or three days before the primary that Senator Kennedy said he felt he would be fortunate if he got 42 percent of the vote. Now I think that was a little bit of political strategy on the part of Senator Kennedy. I think he was placing himself in position to still have a star to cling to even if he lost West Virginia. In other words, when he was predicting that he would be lucky to get 42 percent of the vote, if he got 45 percent or 48 percent even though he did not get a majority, he perhaps still could claim a moral victory. However, I don't think he ever had any notion that his victory would be as strong as it was.

YOUNG: Mr. Hoffmann, as we bring our interview to a close: Do you have any final comments on the long-range significance on the Kennedy years in West Virginia or the impact of the Kennedy primary, and then the Kennedy years in the White House, which you have not yet covered?

HOFFMANN: Well, I think by and large the Kennedy years in West Virginia were good for West Virginia. As I mentioned, it stimulated a new interest on the part of a lot of people in politics, and there's every indication that these people will continue to be active. I don't think there's any doubt but what President Kennedy brought a recognition of problems that existed in West Virginia and that now exist in some other states, the problems brought on by automation. I think it gave the people of West Virginia a feeling that perhaps at long last they are being recognized as residents of a state of their own. West Virginians long had what might be called an inferiority complex because the state was so often confused with Virginia. I think this has given a lot of people certain uplift, and I think the Kennedy years definitely started West Virginia on the road to economic recovery.

West Virginia's problems were such that they could not be solved in a matter of months or even years. This is going to be a long hard pull. But I think President Kennedy, the man who called upon Americans to ask "not what America can do for you, but what can you do for America," has also caused a lot

of West Virginians to take the attitude not of what West Virginia can do for them, but what they can do for West Virginia. I think some of this is indicated by the fact that during these years West Virginia's tax structure has been strengthened to provide revenues for some of the state's needs. There's been improvement in the revenues for highways and for schools, and the legislature enacted tax measures to provide for work relief. I think all these things are beneficial.

For one thing this was the first state that adopted the policy of applying the Aid to Dependent Children money to the form of work relief. And this was not a matter of bleeding work out of the unfortunate but rather a matter of helping those people to find some dignity in earning a livelihood. I think the success of it is indicated by the fact that Congress has extended that to all states having economic problems. I think overall that President Kennedy did something for West Virginians by making them realize that they first have to do something for themselves.