

Robert M. Curley Oral History Interview—12/7/1965
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Curley, Circuit court judge of Wisconsin, discusses John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign in Wisconsin and Curley's role in the formation of the Wisconsin group that backed Robert F. Kennedy for vice president in 1964, among other issues.

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Robert M. Curley
Robert M. Curley

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Oral History Interview

with

Judge Robert M. Curley

December 7, 1965
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

CURLEY: Well, I first became interested in the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] campaign in the presidential preference primary. In 1959, I was a member of the Wisconsin Legislature, having been elected as a Democrat from what was once a Republican stronghold on the east side of the city of Milwaukee—the first Democrat elected from that district in modern history. I became the Democratic majority whip in the Assembly, and I was quite busy with that job and trying to practice law in Milwaukee at the same time. Then I was asked by Pat Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey] and several other people to become interested in the Kennedy campaign in Wisconsin. I immediately said that I would.

I think I was a member of the original Kennedy Committee in the state of Wisconsin; I went to several organizational meetings in the south side of Milwaukee and other places in Milwaukee. I was given certain speaking assignments to do to help arouse interest in the John Kennedy candidacy in Wisconsin because everybody, including myself, figured that, because of the history of Wisconsin politics, an Irish Catholic from Boston

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was going to have more than his usual share of trouble in winning a presidential preference primary in the state. I have often felt, and still do, that in the rural agricultural areas of Wisconsin, when you get out of the concentration of industrial areas—the cities, the lower

southeast corner of the state in particular as Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha and those areas—there is still a strong anti-Catholic feeling in this state. It was for this reason that I was most concerned about Kennedy winning, particularly since he was up against Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], and since later he would have to face, obviously, Richard Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] in the election.

The Democrats in this state, I think, were pretty well split on the Kennedy-Humphrey thing. It must be remembered that Humphrey had a pretty good hold on the state of Wisconsin, having originated from a neighbor state, Minnesota. He was on a first name basis with many of the key political people in Wisconsin including most of the top labor leaders, including our then governor [Gaylord Nelson], who is a good friend of mine and who twice appointed me to the bench. I'm not saying anything derogatory about the man, but he was more friendly with Humphrey, certainly, than he was with the Kennedy people. I think he made a rather wise decision. Gaylord Nelson, for all practical purposes, and as far as I've ever been able to determine, on the surface kept himself out of the Kennedy-Humphrey situation. What he did underground, I don't know, and I have no means of knowing, if he did anything.

I started to work in the Kennedy campaign. I had many contacts with Pat Lucey and later with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], the former President's brother, who I think is a most dynamic, hard-working, intelligent young man who I think, further, has remarkable ability to see through a phony when he meets one. And I think he did this on many occasions with certain people in Wisconsin who wanted to come forward and be a part of the Kennedy campaign, but whose very name attached to the campaign would have been not only no help but might have been injurious to the overall objective. And to Robert's credit, he had an almost uncanny ability to single these people out and dispose of them so that they wouldn't be connected to the campaign. It's true a few did get in, but you can't bat a thousand.

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I was getting most active in this situation when, in the spring of 1960, there were some judicial appointments available in Milwaukee County and Governor Nelson asked me to take one of them. I personally wasn't too excited about it—but my wife thought it would be a nice thing—because I felt I would and was doing better financially practicing law than the then salary as a judge. But I took the appointment and for this reason had to somewhat retreat from any active participation in the campaign although, in all honesty, I did remain most active but in a different fashion. I arranged for speaking engagements for Robert Kennedy who was coming in here in this state and doing an awful lot of work at the time. I arranged for him to be the principal speaker at the Exchange Club's Annual Crime Prevention Week Luncheon, which is a big event, and which he suited quite well because he had been counsel for the Senate committee [Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field] investigating crime. I arranged for him to speak at the Milwaukee Downer College and various other places where he spoke on behalf of his brother's candidacy.

I would like to go back for a moment and tell about the first time I had the pleasure of meeting John Kennedy. It was at the Schroeder Hotel in Milwaukee. It was at a Democratic dinner at which Senator John Kennedy from Massachusetts was the main speaker. Prior to

the dinner, as they usually do on these occasions, a cocktail party was held for some people who had been selected to attend. A reception line was formed in which you would proceed in the reception line and you would be introduced in the end to Senator Kennedy and his wife, Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. Everybody received a rather perfunctory introduction because the line was big and they had to keep it moving. I was introduced at the time—myself and Mrs. Curley who was with me, to President Kennedy, who was then Senator Kennedy—by Pat Lucey. I was introduced as Assemblyman Curley and Mrs. Curley, and with that introduction, the President stopped me and said, and I quote, “Curley. This is a name I shall not soon forget.” And we laughed about it and shook hands. Then we proceeded through the line. Of course, I think that it should be explained for those who may not know and may some day listen to this recording that there

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was a Curley [James Michael Curley] in Boston by the name of James Michael, who was at one time mayor of Boston and a member of Congress, and who had been indicted for mail fraud. In the old days of ward politics and hard politics in Boston, it was James Michael Curley, my namesake, who had defeated in an election the President’s grandfather, Honey Fitz Fitzgerald [John Francis Fitzgerald]. This is why, when I was first introduced to the President, the name had some significance for him.

Later—I want to tell about another introduction I had with him—after he had become president, after the election, he was brought back to Wisconsin for, I suppose, sentimental reasons and other reasons—because he had worked so hard in this state and had spent so much time here. He was the featured speaker at a Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner at the arena. And again, the usual cocktail party, only on this occasion, if you were invited, you had to be cleared by, I think, the Secret Service and the F.B.I. [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and I don’t know who else. But anyhow, Mrs. Curley and I were invited. I was then Judge Curley. We readily accepted and went to the cocktail affair. Everybody was brought into the room and, of course, the President wasn’t there yet. At the appropriate time he came in amidst much cheering, and yelling and screaming and handclapping. Again, the proverbial reception line was formed, and we were seated at a table. I didn’t get in the line because, in truth, I felt sorry for the man that he had not only to go through all this, but then had to shake everybody’s hand and smile. I thought in my own small way I would spare him at least a small part of this predicament. But upon watching the line get smaller, I thought to myself, “Well, how many times in your life do you have the chance to shake hands with the president of the United States?” And I thought I would go back, get in the line, and meet him again. And just as I came to be introduced again by Pat Lucey.... Pat Lucey started to introduce me and did not even get so far as telling the President my name. He stopped him and he stuck out his hand and said, “Why, I know Judge Curley. How are you?” I think I walked out of the room and I don’t think my feet ever touched the floor because it was rather thrilling to me personally, to think that the President knew me, knew my name, and acknowledge that he knew it. I don’t think he had been tipped off. I think that, upon reflecting on this,

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that our earlier meeting, when he advised me that mine was a name he would not soon forget, I think more than anything, helped him to remember who I was. I just wanted to tell about these two introductions in particular.

The campaign in Wisconsin, it's often been asked: When the presidential election did come, what accounted for Nixon's winning Wisconsin and Kennedy's not? I couldn't say for sure. I've lived in the state all my life. I've studied at first hand its politics; I've been in the state legislature. I think I know something about the state politics. I think I know something about how people in this state think politically. I'm ever hopeful that their thinking will change, and I think it will eventually. But the history of Wisconsin is simply such that there was for many, many years a very strong anti-Catholic feeling. This is one factor that I think helped Nixon beat Kennedy in Wisconsin. Another factor would be that for twenty-five years, Wisconsin politics were controlled with almost a stranglehold by the Republican Party. Gaylord Nelson, who was elected in 1958 to start serving as governor in 1959, was the first Democratic governor that this state has had in some twenty-six years.

So with a background of many years of a strong Republican hold on the political scene, no Democratic officeholders to amount to anything, except at one time, in 1954, I think it was—or '52—a Democrat with a very good political name in Wisconsin, Fairchild [Thomas E. Fairchild], ran for attorney general and beat the incumbent. He is now associate justice on our Supreme Court, and will, in two years, become the chief justice. But with this one exception of a Democrat breaking the Republican grip on the state house, the Republicans had it pretty much to themselves. Added to the strong, very strong, up north anti-Catholic feeling, I think that these are the two factors, more than anything else, that led to Kennedy's not winning. I was gratified that he got as many votes as he did.

I think that his campaigning in Wisconsin helped him immeasurably. Who am I to say, but I think that if the truth will ever be known, all the effort and work that went into Wisconsin certainly stood him well in other areas. I think that the mistakes that were made here were corrected in other

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places. I think a lot was learned by the Kennedys and their political machine, if you can call it that, by campaigning in Wisconsin. I think they learned how to campaign nationwide in this state. I think this was more or less a proving ground. Or as we do in the navy, a shake down cruise for a ship. I think in that respect it was worth every dollar that was spent and every hour and bit of effort that was put into it. I don't think that Kennedy could have been elected president of the United States without having gone through the very painstaking, of course, but yet valuable Wisconsin experience.

Further than that, I can't say any more about the election, except to say, personally, I was thrilled for two reasons. I was thrilled to think that my dear candidate was elected president of the United States, but I was thrilled for another reason, which is probably much more important. I was thrilled to see it happen that a Catholic could become elected president of the United States. I think that this is a turning point in American political history. It's now very possible for a Jew or an Indian or anybody else of any other religious faith or denomination or creed to become elected president. I think that Kennedy, if nothing else, put to rest the white Protestant requirement for being a president of this nation. I think if nothing

else he will be remembered for burying that very disgusting requirement in American politics.

The day he was assassinated was, of course, a dark day for the country and a dark day for many people. It was a particularly painful day for me. I learned of the shooting while at lunch and came back to my courtroom and put the radio on. Upon learning of his death, I immediately cancelled the calendar for the day and sent the attorneys and the parties home because I was in no mood to hold court. Ten minutes later our chief judge came around and said that the courts would be closed in deference and memory to the assassination of the President. I said, "Well, that's fine, but mine's been closed for ten minutes. You could have saved the trip." What else do you want?

MORRISSEY: When you first became involved with the Kennedy organization, did you sense that they were very concerned that this did not appear to be a bunch of Irish Catholics working for an Irish Catholic?

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CURLEY: Yes, I think that this was a concern of theirs. But let me stop for a minute. I think that the thing—I know one of the things—that impressed me so much was the family loyalty that this man was able to generate. That is, not only his brother Robert, who I think is probably the most tremendous individual in America today, but his sisters and brothers-in-law and everybody else. Yes, I think that they did have a fear. You're speaking, I think, of the Irish Mafia complex that's been kicked around and mentioned. Yes, because in Wisconsin we don't have a very high Irish population—if there is anymore an Irish or German or Norwegian or Spanish population in America. I think that most citizens are native-born. I think they were concerned about this, and I think they attempted to bring into the campaign, and did, people of—which any smart politician would do.... In areas where there was a strong Italian population, they brought in fellows like Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno]. In areas of strong concentration of people with a Polish background, for example, the south side of Milwaukee, they brought in people like Congressman Zablocki [Clement J. Zablocki] and people who had a very strong Polish image and strong connection with the Polish population. I think that up in the northern areas of the state where you have a concentration of Germans and Norwegians, they attempted to—and did to a great degree of success—bring in people into the campaign with nationality backgrounds that would be suitable to the area. Of course, any smart politician would do this. Even in a ward race, if you had a couple blocks that were a concentration of Italian people, you'd have an Italian working in there. But I think they had an overall fear of having people become suspect of this group: What are these outsiders doing in our state of Wisconsin, these Irish Catholics from Massachusetts? For whatever it's worth, I suppose there is still within the minds of some people in the Midwest a distrust for people in the East. And I suppose there is a distrust of people in the Far West for people in the Midwest and the East. I think these little things still exist to a certain extent. They're all little things that have to be considered in any major political campaign, and I think they were concerned about it. Yes.

MORRISSEY: I've read somewhere that some Wisconsin newspaper men were

constantly counting the number of Catholics who would turn out at some of the political rallies, and identifying certain communities as

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Catholic communities. In other words, emphasizing completely beyond reason, the Catholic, quote, aspect of the campaign.

CURLEY: Well, that's true. This was done in Milwaukee; it was done in other parts of the state that I know about personally. I, personally, don't think this is anything to get too excited about because I think that the newspaperman will do anything that he thinks his editor will print that's going to be newsworthy. They couldn't find any skeleton in John Kennedy's closet. Here was a genuine American war hero, an outstanding young man, a man of some literary accomplishments, a man above all men, somebody that stood out. Of course, let's face it, it's an old axiom with the press that the public isn't interested in learning anything good about anybody, but they will buy news that tells something bad about somebody. So I think to create an image—and to create a controversy which would be a better word because my experience with the press has been that they're not above creating news themselves if there's a lull in it—they tried to create a situation whereby it would appear, at least upon reading their articles, that only the Catholics were for Kennedy, and that the Protestants were avoiding him. From personal contact in the campaign and contact with people, this certainly was not true. Many, many non-Catholics that I talked to, including many people of the Jewish faith and many Protestants were sold on John Kennedy, and they didn't know a damned thing about his political philosophy; they didn't know what he stood for; they didn't know if he was going to burn down the White House if he got elected or try and disband Congress; they were just sold on him as an individual. They were really hot for the man—if I can use that expression. They thought he was really something special, and they wanted Kennedy. I don't think that a lot of them even knew that Kennedy was Catholic. I don't think the thought ever entered their mind. I think that in this respect the Jewish people that I talked to were much more tolerable of Kennedy's faith, and of course they should be, being a minority group. Oh, I heard some anti-Catholic talk in connection with the Kennedy campaign, but I've been hearing that all my life in Milwaukee and Wisconsin politics, so it really didn't affect me too much.

MORRISSEY: Since Hubert Humphrey had for so many years, as some people put it, served at Wisconsin's senator, did you find that most of your colleagues who were holding office or active in Democratic Party affairs were backing Humphrey rather than Kennedy?

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CURLEY: Well, I would say it was about an even split. And I would say that the ones that were for Humphrey had the most longevity in office. It was the newer, younger, more recently elected group of people in the legislature and state offices that were for Kennedy. Humphrey did have a pretty good hold on the people who had

been around for quite a while. I think I mentioned—and if I didn't I'll mention again—that Humphrey had a real hold on the labor people in Wisconsin. He really did. He had them right where he wanted them. But if he couldn't win with having the Protestants for him, and if he couldn't win with having half of the Democratic politicians for him, and if he couldn't win with having—I would say—90 percent of the labor people for him, against a Catholic from New England who probably had never been in Wisconsin prior to that time, well then I didn't think he was much of a candidate, and I predicted that he would lose in West Virginia. Not that I'm a soothsayer or a prognosticator, but I didn't see how he could beat this dynamic young man. Even though I was aware of the fact that West Virginia's Catholic population was only 5 percent of the total population, I thought that Kennedy could go in there and bring in some pros—which he did—some of whom were from Wisconsin, and with that dynamic personality and with the lessons that he learned in Wisconsin on campaigning, I felt he could win. I think that was borne out by what happened in West Virginia.

MORRISSEY: Did you schedule anybody else in addition to Robert Kennedy?

CURLEY: Well, I didn't schedule anybody else, but there were times when Robert Kennedy couldn't make them, and we would piece them out. At that time I personally couldn't handle any more of them because I was on the bench, and we have in Wisconsin a non-partisan judiciary, which, theoretically at least, means that we are not to take part in partisan politics of any other non-partisan politics except for the election of a judge. Yes, there were times when we had to recruit members of the legislature. I remember Senator Jim Brennan [James B. Brennan; later became, by election, city attorney for the City of Milwaukee] had to take some. He's now the United States district attorney for this district. He was then a state senator. And a few other members of the legislature

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had to fill in on different speaking things. We tried to put Robert into as many as we could because he was such a good speaker. He was so much in demand, and people wanted to hear what he had to say because he had, as I said before, all this experience with the crime committee hearings, and this was a very topical thing at the time.

MORRISSEY: Who did the scheduling for the Senator's sisters and his mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] when they came in?

CURLEY: Who did it, I'm not sure. It was handled through the headquarters that they had down on Wisconsin Avenue. I think that Marge Benson [Marguerite R. Benson] was coordinating most of the women's activities. But let me say this, the Kennedy girls really don't need anybody to help them too much. I think some of the things that were arranged they did themselves. I know that I had Robert at one meeting one day—a dinner meeting—and during the dinner, an usher or waiter or somebody came and tapped me on the shoulder and said there was a very important phone call, would I please take it. So I left in the middle of Robert Kennedy's speech and went out and took the phone call. It was a phone call from the headquarters on Wisconsin Avenue. It was his sister, Pat

[Patricia Kennedy Lawford]. She advised me that they had scheduled another appearance for him that afternoon but had forgotten to tell him that. I had met him that morning. He had come in from Iowa in a private plane, and I went out to the airport and picked him up. I didn't know anything about it so when he was finished with his speech and was coming off the podium, and many people were trying to see him and ask for autographs and ask questions and so forth, he spotted me and he called me over and said, "What was that phone call?" He was giving a speech, but he was mindful of the fact that I was called out of the room to answer the phone. Confidentially and privately, I said to him, "It was your sister Pat, and we have to go to such-and-such a place. They're waiting for us." And his retort was, in two words, quote, "Oh, shit," close quote. I knew then, that he too was a human being. I have used the same retort or response myself. This was kind of.... These were hectic days, and things were done on a moment's notice. He was totally unprepared to go to this other place, which, as I remember, was a women's college. The head of the

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college had the student body assembled. They were waiting for Robert Kennedy to come and talk to them.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me if you had any forewarning of John Gronouski's [John A. Gronouski, Jr.] appointment to the Cabinet?

CURLEY: Well, yes I can answer that question. I know that many people were surprised by his cabinet appointment. Without revealing my sources of information, I had been forewarned, I think it was a week or ten days or two weeks prior to the time, that something of that nature was going to happen—and that most likely it would be what it turned out to be. So I wasn't really surprised. I was very happy for the appointment because I know John. I'm happy that today, 1965, December, that he's ambassador to Poland because I think that he is an extremely intelligent man. He meets people well, and I think he'll do a good job wherever he's sent. If he's sent back to Wisconsin, he'll do a good job. I think he's that kind of a man.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me if you knew anything about the movement to recommend Robert Kennedy as Lyndon Johnson's [Lyndon B. Johnson] vice presidential candidate in 1964?

CURLEY: Well, I can tell you the whole story since I originated the whole idea. Yes, the idea came to me and another gentleman by the name of "Spike" Kallas [Spiros Kallas], who's in the financial business in Milwaukee. We were returning from Chicago. Because of bad train connections we took a Greyhound bus, and we were sitting in the back of the bus and lamenting the fact that John Kennedy had been killed, and that it was a tragedy not to be able to have his brother get into the political swim. We came upon the idea of starting.... What we finally developed was the grassroots, groundswell, draft Robert Kennedy. And it was for president at that time. The original idea was not to be a running mate, but we figured if we started some commotion to have him

drafted as a candidate for president and throw the convention in an uproar, so that the least they would offer him would be the second place on the ticket. Of course we would have accomplished our purpose.

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Like many things that are started, we did it with an idea of trying to help Bob. I can say in all honesty for posterity that Robert Kennedy knew nothing about it. We started it. We let out some press releases.

I never had my name associated with it. In fact when I'm giving this on the tape for the Kennedy Library, it is the first time that I have divulged to anybody that I had anything to do with it at all. It's never been known by the press. I think that if some of the press people are alive who were involved in it, when they hear this, they're going to be awfully surprised that the whole thing was started by a circuit judge in Milwaukee, and they weren't able to ferret out that information. We obtained some names; we formed a club in Wisconsin, a political club; we filed articles of incorporation with the secretary of state. This gave it all the appearances of being a legitimate enterprise. Of course, it must be remembered that his brother got a start in Wisconsin. It was the logical place for him to kick up his heels.

I know that 99 percent of the newspaper people suspected that Robert Kennedy had something to do with it. They were watching Pat Lucey; they were watching who he was talking to. Pat talked to me while this was going on, but I'm sure nobody except Pat Lucey's wife [Jean Lucey] and my wife knew that he was talking to me about it. He talked to Mr. Kallas. We had an advantage because Mr. Kallas is of Greek extraction, and Pat Lucey's wife is a Greek girl. They could discuss the problems concerning the "Draft Robert Kennedy" movement over the telephone in Greek, and anybody who was listening would be hard pressed to find out what they were talking about. The thing hit *Time* magazine. We had newspapermen in from the *New York Times*. Mr. Kallas was interviewed on television. Some of the other stooges that we used on this thing—Mr. Kallas wasn't a stooge but we did have some people who were fronting for us or, saying that it was, stooging for us—were interviewed, and they'd get a call from a newspaperman who wanted to interview them. And cripes, they'd call me at my home and say, "What should I tell them?" I had to tell these people what to say to the press when they came. Of course, I was in an enviable position. I wasn't getting any heat because nobody knew I was involved, and these people who had allowed us to use their

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names were getting so much steam that one fellow had his telephone disconnected and just made himself unavailable because he didn't know what answers to give. In fact, he didn't know anything about it. His name was on the incorporation papers as treasurer or something, and he didn't even know that he was getting involved. When the thing became national in scope, he ran for the bushes. And I don't blame him because he had absolutely no answers to give, and he was being bombarded with questions from newspapermen, not only locally but from all over the country.

An interesting sidelight to this thing is that while we were doing this Kennedy grassroots groundswell committee, Mr. Kallas had to go to the Madison General Hospital in Madison. It really wasn't anything serious, as we knew. He was going in for a check-up. We tried to avoid exposing him to the press too much on the guise that he was hospitalized, but some newspapermen from the East who came in here to check on this groundswell thing wouldn't take no for an answer. They went up to the hospital in Madison, got in his room, and interviewed him there. I will say that several of them told Mr. Kallas, who in turn related this to me, that if there was anything they could do in the way they wrote their stories, they would present this thing in the most favorable light. And I think it was presented in a most favorable light in most news media. They secretly were for Bob Kennedy. They couldn't show this outwardly. They would run the risk of losing their jobs, and they didn't want to incur the wrath of the incumbent president. If there was anything they could do to help this thing along, why, they were willing to do it. And from what I saw in writing, some of them certainly did.

MORRISSEY: How does Mr. Kallas spell his name?

CURLEY: K-a-l-l-a-s.

MORRISEY: His first name is?

CURLEY: Spiros. S-p-i-r-o-s.

MORRISSEY: Anything else that you'd like to put on the record?

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CURLEY: Nothing else except the prediction that I don't think we've heard the end of the Kennedys in American politics, and I personally think that it will be Robert—and this is off the cuff and off the record—I think that from what I've been able to observe and what I've heard, they're going to be very astute about presenting Bob to the American public. They're going to do it when the time is most opportune. They're not going to get into a wrestling match with Lyndon Johnson if they can help it and they can avoid it. But I don't think they are going to stand idly by and let Hubert Humphrey, more or less be handed the reins of government by Lyndon Johnson. I think what's when the fight will come. I predict that they'll win the fight.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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