

Walter Spolar Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 6/9/1966
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Biographical Note

Walter Spolar (1918-2010) worked as a campaign organizer in western states for John F. Kennedy (JFK)'s Presidential campaign in 1960 and as congressional relations official for the Post Office Department. This interview focuses on Spolar's work on the campaign trail, JFK's success at mobilizing the youth vote, and obstacles encountered during the campaign and early days of JFK's presidency, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Walter Spolar

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Oral History Interview

with

WALTER SPOLAR

June 9, 1966
Los Angeles, California

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mr. Spolar, do you recall when you first became involved in the Kennedy organization?

SPOLAR: Yes, I do, very well. It was early in 1960, and I was in Arizona working on a fund raising project. Having concluded that, I was contacted by some local Kennedy people, or people that were then interested in Kennedy, and asked if I might, on a publicity basis, arrange for a visit that was anticipated by the Senator. This was to be his first visit to Arizona.

GRELE: Was that Congressman Udall [Stewart L. Udall]?

SPOLAR: Well, Congressman Udall accompanied him on that trip. But during the course of the arrangements that I was making, which was a four-stop tour which was to become so significant later on, this hedgehopping.... we had a breakfast meeting in Flagstaff and then a luncheon in Tucson and kind of a tea-cocktail session in Yuma, Arizona, at the Stardust Hotel -- where I just recently spoke and had twitches of memories -- and then it ended up in kind of a giant rally in Phoenix.

GRELE: What were your impressions of Senator Kennedy at the time?

SPOLAR: Well, my impressions then were mostly by hearsay. I had heard of him, of course, and I had already had kind of lots of enthusiasm as far as people were concerned, particularly the younger people. But the memories I had, or my fixed ideas about him, actually went back to the Convention when I saw him on the television screen narrowly missing out for the vice presidential nomination.

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Then there was the usual talk about in circles, be they political or otherwise, that this was a man to be watched, that he was going to come up. It seemed that every place I went his name became more prominent in conversation and more prominent with the young people. I like to identify myself with young people because the projects that he was working on were closely at times allied with young folks.

GRELE: When did you first meet the Senator on this trip?

SPOLAR: I first met the Senator when he got off the plane for the meeting in Flagstaff. As a matter of fact, I had quite an experience. By coincidence I had lived at the San Francisco Press Club, oh, possibly two or three years before this, and had known Pierre Salinger there -- just a casual acquaintance. I had a kind of a musical early life and so did Pierre, so at times we talked about this at the Press Club. I didn't know him too well, but strangely enough when I waited, this very early morning in Flagstaff, for the Senator's plane that had arrived and there was no stirring about -- finally, after waiting some half hour, I saw this pudgy little figure go down the staircase. He greeted me in the same way that I did he. "What are you doing here?" He, of course, mentioned the fact that he had just joined the Senator on his press staff, or was his secretary then, and I told him that I had been assigned by some of the local people in Arizona merely, to use a belabored word, to coordinate the publicity arrangements for the Senator's first tour of Arizona.

GRELE: After the first tour, how did you get into continuing your work?

SPOLAR: This is where my emotions really got into play because after seeing the enthusiasm of the people and just actually being connected with -- even on a high school basis of mock conventions and rallies -- almost everything that came about during this first visit, I had this wonderful call from Washington from Pierre who said that they were quite pleased with the activity or the arrangements in Arizona and would I consider going to Oregon to do almost the same thing. Namely, to be there for four or five weeks in advance of the Senator's visit there for the primary and to go about in all the areas and talk to the people, the young people, tell them about the anticipated visits and set up the shopping centers and the speaking rallies and all the other arrangements that went with sort of thing. So it was a great joy for me with a little knowledge behind me in Arizona to pursue this and to find, if anything, even more enthusiasm.

GRELE: What were some of the problems in Oregon?

SPOLAR: The problems in Oregon -- the number one problem was, of course, the fact that Senator Wayne L. Morse was the favorite son and had just finished a... Or, actually, the primary was going on in Maryland then if I recall. But the number one problem was actually meeting with the good people of Oregon and telling them in detail actually the fact that it was not the Senator that we were running

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against because he was held in such high esteem by the people of Oregon and so was he by the Kennedy family and the Senator. But the fact was that we concentrated on just telling the people that we did not really believe that he was a serious candidate. By constant repetition of this, going from hamlet to hamlet, merely telling the people this, they became so convinced that it was an overwhelming victory. As a matter of fact, the most enthusiastic people for Senator Morse became the most enthusiastic for the Senator because they faced this realistically and with glee when they met him later.

GRELE: During that primary did you have problems in publicizing John Kennedy and the primary effort because of the U-2 incident which took place right in the middle of the primary?

SPOLAR: Not too much although the first... This is extraordinary that you bring this situation up because the first time that I really felt that I had a personal type conversation with the Senator was again by accident. It was by long distance phone. He had already visited Oregon and made his dynamic sweep, hedgehopping and meeting all the people, great enthusiasm, crowds, and everything that came about with all the rallies and he had been on the Senate floor. Hugh Scott from Pennsylvania brought up the incident. And it seemed that in a high school auditorium some, I believe, sixteen year old youth was asking him some questions. It was either in an auditorium or, now that I think back a little, it was actually in a lunchroom, and he asked him about this business. I believe the Senator said something out of context which was taken -- something about him being soft on this issue. So I got a call in the Portland, Oregon headquarters, and it was the Senator. I just kind of straightened up when I answered the phone. He said, "Who are you?" And I gave him my name and he said, "Oh. I know you. Now what did I say in this auditorium? Can you find a tape recording of it because Senator Scott is sort of blasting me on the floor?" So I quickly... I happened to be the only one in headquarters at the time. We had this regular switchboard with a Washington connection that had not yet been taken out, so I conversed with him and said I would start right on it. I made calls all over the state, and strangely enough the only one that tape recorded the incident was the high school principal there. We got a hold of this and sent it back. When I called back, again for a first in my life, Mrs. Kennedy, Jacqueline, answered the phone, and I had some conversation with her.

GRELE: Was this at the Senate office?

SPOLAR: No, this was -- actually the call was transferred to the home in Georgetown. SO we chatted about this, and I said I thought I had discovered who had the tape and was either sending it on or would get in touch with them immediately. So that became my initial contact with the resident as such.

GRELE: How effective was Congresswoman Green [Edith Green] in the primary?

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SPOLAR: Very. She's a much respected woman and through these last almost six years had become a very close friend of mine in discussing the Kennedy period. This was always our basis of conversation. I have been a postal appointee, and in my lurkings about on the Hill and talking with Mrs. Green in these last five and a half years, always within the framework of our business, postal business. We always reflect back to Oregon and the receptions and the Kennedy family. Well, we always work along the same line when I see her. It's a very warm and cordial relationship that I enjoy.

GRELE: Did you have any problems with people in Oregon who were suspicious of his religion?

SPOLAR: Yes, I would say we had problems but the kind of problems that I came in contact with were kind of brusque statements that were made during meetings. I did not get in any of the, you know, factual data or the printing of the literature which I saw that was put out and some of which I'm sure wasn't even put out in Oregon. It came from other places. But I overheard the comments that were being made.

GRELE: I was wondering if it was as bitter as in West Virginia where in some towns it was impossible to set up engagements.

SPOLAR: No, I don't think so. No, I wouldn't say it was this way in Oregon. I mean, we felt.... There was an undercurrent of this in places. And this was kind of highlighted at times by the opposition when we first came in there, but I don't think anybody was really that conscious of it up until the time that the general election took place when the results came out of various districts.

GRELE: Was there an attempt especially to get the Senator into contact with organized labor during the primary?

SPOLAR: No, I don't think so. No. I think Mrs. Green did a tremendous job in her knowledge of OREGON and the way that she managed to, I'm sure, give her good advice in this particular state of hers.

GRELE: What was your impression of the Kennedy supporters? The same as Arizona?

SPOLAR: Yes. I find Kennedy supporters to really be much the same everywhere. I think this rapport that he had with the young people.... I constantly mention young people because this was my kind of initial contact, and I felt attuned to them because of their complete enthusiasm because they felt as though they, for the first time, had been permitted to enter this arena and responsibly so. They were made aware of the fact that they were part of the organization.

GRELE: You were telling me earlier that your involvement came at a particular time in your own life that made it more significant?

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SPOLAR: Yes, yes, because through some incidents, I had kind of been floundering a bit, and I actually came to Arizona to stay with my immediate family -- mother, dad, and sister over there. Then I kind of pulled myself together and got a hold of this fundraising campaign for the state which I mentioned. So this was most timely and it kind of charged me up and gave me new attitudes.

GRELE: Where did you go from Oregon?

SPOLAR: From Oregon I went to New Mexico, again almost in the same way. I was asked to go to New Mexico since things appeared to be rolling along pretty well. I met Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] in Eugene one day, and we seemed to hit it off. I just gave him a run-through on the activity I had encountered in Oregon, and we compared notes and went on several little junkets together. I mean, this again was a situation where the power of attraction was almost infinitely greater than promotion because everybody swarmed around him and there was great enthusiasm. The message is so easy to give when everybody else is giving it for you actually. It's tremendous.

GRELE: How effective was Edward Kennedy in mobilizing pre-Convention support in the West?

SPOLAR: I think for the most part he was very effective because of his personality, his manner, his approach. There were areas, particularly in California.... And I can almost say from the experiences of the last few years now that almost traditionally so this has such complexities here. Everyone is always fighting. There's a kind of a peculiar power struggle that develops right in the statewide organization here in California, and sometimes it almost seems as though the committees are the ones that are vying for office rather than the candidates.

GRELE: I was wondering if maybe we can go through a couple of states for the problems and the sides and the issues, if you can recall them.

SPOLAR: Well, I'll try.

GRELE: In Montana how deep was the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] support?

SPOLAR: In Montana the Johnson support came much too late. As a matter of fact, through the admission of one of Johnson's closest not only supporters but an old ally of his, Jim Rowe [James H. Rowe] he arrived there to look over the scene and Senator Mansfield [Mike Mansfield] was sitting in the lobby of the Placer Hotel in Helena there. I overheard him say, "It's too late, Mike. They've already did it, did the job." And again this was just a matter of work, of doorbell ringing, going from area to area and meeting with the people, getting the enthusiasm of the young people, and kind of feeling your way in that regard, going to meetings, county meetings. Everything was covered in Montana on this. By the time the Johnson people got there

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the job was done. As a matter of fact, I think it was up in Missoula one day at a county meeting several days before the state convention, we actually had to take a Kennedy delegate off the rostrum or the agenda. And he did it gracefully so. In fact two or three Kennedy people that were on there volunteered because Senator Mansfield wanted to be put on.

GRELE: In Wyoming how effective was Teno Roncalio?

SPOLAR: I think Teno was a very effective spokesman in Wyoming, but the old conservative ranch oil element there -- it was just too tough. The attitude there was, I mean, you might get some enthusiasm and smiles from them for your efforts or they saw the way you were working there or were even enthusiastic about certain aspects of the situation, but I think their convictions, if I might say, were much too deep seated in that area, it seemed to me.

GRELE: I have been told that Byron White organized in Colorado. Is that true?

SPOLAR: Yes.

GRELE: How effective was he?

SPOLAR: Oh, very, very. Of course, he's such an outstanding human being. He enjoys a great deal of hero worship himself, and having him in the Kennedy fold at that time was a marvelous thing because people admire him and they respect him in every possible way. I think he was the mainstay there as far as the organization was concerned. Most of this I actually heard after coming to Colorado to advance trips there made by the President and other members and also working with the youth, and I was told about the convention that had already happened there, that it was kind of a tough struggle, but Byron was there leading the way.

GRELE: Did you and the Senator make any attempts to contact people in Utah?

SPOLAR: Yes, I went to Utah. In fact, I spent a few days there advancing both Teddy Kennedy as well as the President, and I made some contacts there, and I also happened to go to Utah accompanying Averill Harriman. There we had some very fine meetings.

GRELE: Harriman came out in support of John Kennedy?

SPOLAR: Oh, yes. He made a tremendous speech to a kind of an egghead group at the University of Utah, and it was just marvelous. I mean, they perked up because instead of speaking out of political context, he was just absolutely, what should I say -- he had all the material with him available about his having been with Stalin,

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been with people, actually talked to them. He told them what they said and what he said. This was taken very, very well by the chaps that were sitting around smoking their pipes and kind of fumbling with their Phi Beta Kappa keys. It was a great impression. Later on, quite by accident again -- as many things happened with me -- I accompanied the Governor to meet with Dr. McKay [David O. McKay] at the temple. I was ushered in along with him into a chamber there that I'm told very few people have actually seen. They had the disciples, or whatever the terminology is for the closest workers along with the doctor at the head of the church there. We were introduced to them. It was very impressive.

GRELE: Did Governor Harriman at that time attempt to make any overtures to Dr. McKay?

SPOLAR: Well, the overtures, if such he made, were.... It was cordial and a cordial greeting but it seemed that Dr. McKay in one of his speeches, I think where he was on the rostrum with Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], made a kind of Freudian slip by mentioning the fact that "John Kennedy spoke here the other day," he said, "but I kind of hope you make it" or words to that effect. And this got around wildly, as a matter of fact. Governor Harriman kind of reminded him of it. There was a kind of a sheepish grin that was exchanged at that stage of the game. But we went on to more general subjects after that.

GRELE: Was there a problem with the Mormons in terms of the religious issue?

SPOLAR: Very much so, yes. And of course with the Mormon organization a mere inflection need be said and it translates itself to almost every corner of the earth, as I at least felt it.

GRELE: How did Ted Kennedy and Governor Harriman look on this issue? Were they frightened by it? Or did they recognize it for what it was?

SPOLAR: I think they recognized it for what it was because it was definitely a problem issue, not only in Utah but in Idaho and parts of Arizona. You might almost say it touched in different areas throughout the states. But we had our own chairman that, of course, were Mormons in different areas, and very effective ones too.

GRELE: Were you at the Arizona convention?

SPOLAR: Yes, I was. This was [laughter] pretty wild.

GRELE: How did Udall steal that convention?

SPOLAR: Well, there was a great deal of preparation that was made. I would like, for the record, to inject something. I think that Stewart Udall is a very, very effective man, he's a very dedicated man, hard working man, and certainly was a standard bearer

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for the late President. I would also like to bring in other people that had, I thought, as much to do with the state convention. One of them was Bill Mahoney [William P. Mahoney, Jr.] who has recently resigned as ambassador to Ghana. Bill was the kind of a spark that had to burn a low flame during the entire episode because, as he expressed himself when I first met him in Arizona, he was an Irish Catholic, president of the Notre Dame Alumni Association, and had everything going for him which they didn't want heralded at the moment. But he worked very effectively with all the delegates and all the ins and outs of the.... I was almost at his side in the wheeling and dealing that went on. I know that Stewart's situation -- Stewart Udall if I may call him this -- his potency came about because in the fourteen counties in Arizona Stewart was the only Democratic congressional representative, and he brought to the convention his thirteen counties, which almost made up in population as well as delegate strength that which Maricopa County had as a single county and, of course, which housed the Republican representative. We locked horns and clashed over this and there were.... The late Steve Langmade [Stephen W. Langmade] who was the national committeeman was perhaps one of the, oh, I'd say, decisive factors in going over to the Kennedy side and managing to pull the convection out that way, or the state convention, the delegates. There was a surprising effort that was made, some of which, even as long ago as it seems to be, there still may be a few hard feelings about. And that is that at the very last moment when everything seemed to be lost and, as you say, Stewart was taking the Arizona delegates to the national Convention pledged for Kennedy, they tried to put the elderly Carl Hayden up as a favorite son as a last minute maneuver. When that failed, it kind of was embarrassing to the Senator and some of his closer followers because he had actually not enjoyed good health at the time and was back in Washington. He didn't have any visual offerings at the squabbles there. So

his name was kind of just used. So there was a kind of a tough of, oh, I can't really call it bitterness but....

GRELE: Was there any debate within the Kennedy organization about giving up the fight because of Senator Hayden's...

SPOLAR: No, none whatsoever. This thrust, I will say, both on Stewart Udall and Mahoney's part was one where they never gave up for a moment on this thing. They had to have the pledged delegation, absolutely.

GRELE: Did you have any contact with people in Washington?

SPOLAR: Washington, D.C.?

GRELE: No, the state of Washington.

SPOLAR: Yes, I did. I was up there, too. As a matter of fact, this is where I met Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman] first. His wife worked in the campaign headquarters there. My principal effort, if

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I might put it that way, was working with Ted up there in advancing a tremendous rally that he had which was very successful. He brought out the Kennedy charm there and did very well indeed despite the problem that we had with the governor.

GRELE: You had a problem with the governor?

SPOLAR: Yes, the governor, Rosellini [Albert D. Rosellini], was, well, he was quite hard-nosed about having all the activity, oh, kind of in his own campaign headquarters. He didn't want anything segmented out of his outfit. Of course, eventually it was, but he had a pretty good control of the situation and the state chairman, so we had a bit of a rough time up there with that.

GRELE: How much reliance was place on Senator Jackson [Henry M. Jackson]?

SPOLAR: I think quite a bit was. I wasn't too familiar with his role. He was back in Washington at the time, but I'm sure the members of the Washington campaign staff as well as Bob [Robert F. Kennedy] were very much in contact with him.

GRELE: This brings to mind a question now. The situations in each one of these states were really so different. Were you prepared in advance for the great differences

that you were to find between the systems of nomination and the conventions -- some places primaries, some places the senator was effective, some places the congressman? Was there a general....

SPOLAR: I had some inquiries that I would have made on immediate arrival, names that I had been given, names that had been sent in possibly even a year or two in advance of the effort.

GRELE: Who gave you the names?

SPOLAR: A lot of the names I actually got from Ted because he had not only screened the area but had had consultation with other members of the staff in Washington, and I was advanced some of these names. I also at times had a traveling companion -- or perhaps I should say this in reverse -- Hy Raskin [Hyman B. Raskin] had a companion in myself. Of course, he had been involved in politics, in western politics, and had knowledge of the people and the places and some of the key contacts to make. I worked with him in a number of areas, Montana included. Of course, I had great respect for him and his judgment, and at various times I was very eager to learn because he had experienced many of these things that I was just finding out about.

GRELE: In the Byzantine recesses of California politics whom did you try to work with?

SPOLAR: This is almost impossible in this way to answer because I will never forget, of course, as I never will forget any of this, the first meetings in California where we tried -- I should say we; I was a member of the ensemble -- where Ted tried to get

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together committees. And it seemed that almost everyone arrived on the scene just as they would to a Hollywood casting office, having all their press notices with them as to what their attributes and great accomplishments were and everything else. It became such a mishmash of impossibles to define because everyone was greater than the other one. And it's almost never ceased. I think that you could ask a half dozen people today, and they would build themselves up in the same way, and unless you were really closely in touch as to what the results might have been in the last election or even some campaign effort, you couldn't really tell. Of course one of the more publicized people in the area then even now is Jesse Unruh, and he worked very closely with some of the initial formulation of the California scene before we had arrived with Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and I'm sure Bob Kennedy and people that came to California the first time for observation purposes. I mean, the CDC [California Democratic Council], which is much in the news now, and various splinter factions of organizations.... California, the minute a small youth group is formed ten others will form over night to compete with that one. This is almost the way the operation goes. There's a northern and a southern chairman which alternates, and this causes a little

dissention to because they're never really able to get together. So then you have a northern attitude and a southern California attitude.

GRELE: Was it easier to work in the north or the south?

SPOLAR: I think from a kind of organized sense of the word it was little easier up north because you just couldn't really tell what was going on down south. There were too many factions, too many elements to work with.

GRELE: Were you ever privy to any of the discussions with the Governor?

SPOLAR: No, I was not. I had almost seen him on a number of occasions, but I didn't have this contact.

GRELE: When you came to the Convention, what did you do at the Convention?

SPOLAR: When I arrived at the Convention, I had these multiple assignments of going from state to state on an advance basis and looking up various key people to find out what was going on -- Jack Beaty in New Mexico, Byron [Byron White] in Colorado, people of that kind, they were dedicated Kennedy people that had had the organization working for some time and had literally kind of pioneered the effort, Bill Mahoney in Arizona. I, from my publicity experience of the past, worked with youth groups for rallies, got enthusiasm, crowd support in places, and organized these through just standard methods that are used to get a crowd up in a hurry. When I arrived at

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the Convention, I was given a task which I will also never forget, and that is to kind of oversee the demonstrations and rallies and crowd enthusiasm. This became quite a situation because the enthusiasm was that high, that tremendous, that it was kind of a managerial or organizational effort more than bringing anything out. It was almost too much there. You had to arrange it.... Even at times the enthusiasm was so high that you had to actually give a lot of thought to security for people not to trample themselves. Well, it was just segmenting organizations in places where they might be.... When the senator was going to arrive at the National Convention, we had not only the boulevards and the streets all lined, but we had the most massive howling enthusiasm in front of the Biltmore where we are right now. It was just impossible to conceive, actually, what was going on.

GRELE: I understand that the senator's behavior itself present a security problem.

SPOLAR: Yes, yes, I'm afraid that he was a little bit.... Well, he was a little bit on the human side, the way we all knew him. So he would just shake hands and burst right through the security guard and jump over fences and greet people and youngsters, and everybody came running. It was a tough job trying to take care of him.

GRELE: Did you organize the demonstration, or work on the demonstration?

SPOLAR: Yes, I did. In fact it was a marvelous thing to see because we had groups of youngsters, hundreds of them, working all night long just putting signs together and making them up, just around the clock effort. It was just the greatest thing to see, this kind of enthusiasm. There was kind of a central theme that permeated through all this where everybody knew things were going to be alright, that victory was there and they wanted to be part of it. It was just something tremendous.

GRELE: What happened with the tickets to the gallery?

SPOLAR: [Laughter] Well, most of this is.... I didn't see the exchanges, but there was a great deal of swiping that was going on. And if my memory serves me correctly, I know that the Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] people did quite a job on that.

GRELE: Did anyone ever comment to you on the Stevenson demonstration?

SPOLAR: Yes, in fact, I made several comments about it too, I mean, because it was -- and I hope I can say this as respectfully as possible but -- it was a little bit on the beatnik side, not only on the inside but very much on the outside, too. It looked like it was a kind of a must enthusiasm that was engendered. It didn't have the spontaneity that Kennedy people had. I mean, you had to

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almost keep them down. I know that we tried it; everybody tried it later, you know -- organized enthusiasm, that kind of thing. But at the National Convention itself, around the grounds and inside, it was too much the business of we were able to detect the idea that everybody was doing what they had to be doing at that particular time.

GRELE: Did you work at all with the people on the newsletter?

SPOLAR: No, I almost was assigned to that by Pierre but found that the demonstration job was so commanding that I had all I could do to keep up with it.

GRELE: In organizing rallies or the demonstration were there particular states that presented problems, where there was antipathy towards John Kennedy, you know, Johnson states?

SPOLAR: No, I didn't in my experience because my approach to rallies, or the organization of rallies, was very much the same in places -- going to either the citizens or the regular headquarters and getting the youth, which was something that was no problem at all -- the telephone campaign, the kids calling one another, and

getting together with the colleges. It was great, great. In fact, you had to kind of hold them down so that they wouldn't, you know, get too charged up about the thing and maybe cause a little too much racket in the community or something. But there was no problem at all that I could point out in any particular state.

GRELE: What do you do during the election?

SPOLAR: During the election I went around through the eleven western states again. Ted's efforts were concentrated in California most of the time, and he was rushing all over the state, or actually commuting between Los Angeles and San Francisco headquarters that were established. Although I was in California a great deal, at the same time I was traveling around the horn, so to speak, either starting south with Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado up that way, or going the other way, Oregon, Washington, Montana, or Idaho, back around the other way.

GRELE: Did these states present any different problems than they had presented during the pre-Convention campaign?

SPOLAR: I don't think the problems, as such, were different. I think the anti-Catholic issue became a little more prominent. I think the feelings were heightened in areas because where I went to meetings and heard discussions and everything, feelings were pretty high. I mean, the anti feelings were. And then, of course, even the undertones of the Catholic, the literature, the [H. L. Hunt] stuff that came out of Texas and everything started to get pretty rough.

GRELE: During the campaign there was some complaint that Senator Kennedy was not paying enough attention to the West. Did you encounter any of that?

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SPOLAR: No, no, I don't think so, no. I think that the job that was done here by Ted was one that as I look back on it now there really could not have been.... The problems that were presented at the time could not have been faced in any different way, the principal one, of course, being in California. This was this stream or this web that exists over here with these different factions. It was impossible to transpose it immediately. It's just much too complex.

GRELE: To your mind, is that why California was lost?

SPOLAR: I think in some ways it had to do with this because there was an absentee situation that existed at the final hours that could have spelled the difference. I don't know whether it was really overlooked, but the area of concentration wasn't there as it should have been. I think that in California, as it is right now, the Democratic structure, there are too many people that want to be highlighted rather than

working for the overall effort. There is no really basic party structure that exists here. One of the significant factors in California politics -- it doesn't really matter who is running with the next election, let's say -- each congressional area is fairly autonomous. In the last election every incumbent won, every legitimate, you might say, incumbent won. They won whether they were very far to the right, almost of the Birch type, or they're extremely liberal. They work for their district. They become identified with their district. They can carry on in this manner. Johnson can come in by a landslide, as he did the last time. Oh, some of the votes might have trickled down and helped a couple of people but not noticeably. Actually, in the same we could defeated, and at the same time if the incumbent congressman does his job and portrays himself in front of his people as working for them, he's fairly safe. But again he can't get involved with the mainstream of California thinking in that respect because, if he does, then he becomes identified with one or more of these factions, and this could be a setback if he's with the wrong faction.

GRELE: I've been told that the reason why Wyoming in Colorado went Republican was the religious issue. Do you agree with that interpretation?

SPOLAR: Yes. I agree.

GRELE: For the whole West?

SPOLAR: No, I wouldn't say for the whole West. I would say it was an important factor. I doubt there's any way, really, to.... I would say it was significant. This I'm sure of. But there were other attitudes that were expressed that as a whole made it very difficult. There was an unsureness. I mean, the basic conservative attitude is that at the eleventh hour they'd rather not take a chance. I mean, I have jotted down for one reason or another here, if I may, this

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business of being prudent, or prudence as it is -- and it's this business of to see and to judge and then pull back because the tion might affect you unfavorably -- is kind of a form of cowardice. I think this is a situation in.... I mean, the religious issue you mentioned, the fact that he was young, supposedly inexperienced for the job, oh, all kinds of statements that were made. The Wyoming conservative, the old rancher, a lot of the Mormon interests, and people in through the West, I think they withdrew. They didn't want to see ahead on the thing or take the chance or go on. They'd just rather not rock the boat. I think this had a great deal to do about this thing.

GRELE: During the convention and the election did you have any personal contacts with John Kennedy?

SPOLAR: Yes. They were just in snitches and snatches wherever I might see him -- on a plane or in a hotel lobby or up in a room to talk to him.

GRELE: How was he bearing up under the pressure?

SPOLAR: Very well indeed. I, at times, noticed some discomfort but, I mean, this was on the two or three occasions where I was very close and in his presence and the circumstances were quite private. He was a great human being. I am thinking of an incident up in a hotel suite in Montana where there was a fine lady, a Marie Merrill, that was a kind of an executive secretary coordinating the notes and the contacts in that particular area, who I worked with. She was up in the hotel suite, and the Senator had just arrived and he was very tired. I think there was about a three-room suite. One bedroom already had been utilized. There was some telephoning and a lot of scrambling of the papers. The living room, I remember, Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver] were in and were making calls. The senator went into a small bedroom with a wall phone in there, and we got a board for him to harden the bed. He was trying to relax a little, and the telephones, the three of them, just kept jingling simultaneously. People from all over the country were calling in. I don't know what they thought, to this day, at that Placer Hotel switchboard at this point. But he tried to retire, he would invariably have to get up and, of course, walk across either into the main living room or even sometimes catch another phone clear across to the other bedroom. And here this lady was jotting down dictation notes, you know, taking directions for six or seven people at the same time, that business. The senator with his fine physique and his trunks would just come storming up. At one point, he turned around and said, "Mrs. Merrill, you are married aren't you?" And she said "Of course. Don't think a thing about it." And then he tried to wash out his own pair of socks and, of course, she wouldn't allow him to do that. This is all part of the story.

GRELE: After the election did anyone ever mention to you the fact that they hadn't done too well in the western states?

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SPOLAR: Oh yes, yes, I have heard this comment made, but I don't think that the sources of these comments, except in purely a Sunday quarterbacking situation, really had anything definite to say -- and certainly not at the time because, I mean, we were in the throes of this. I think that the way we reviewed it is fairly correct in its religious and other overtones that had to do with people not quite ready to take the chance, as it were. I think in the organizational aspect there, it couldn't have been much different. I mean, the enthusiasm was there. It was there in such degrees that possibly it buried some of this, you know, hidden feeling -- the unknown.

GRELE: After the election were you asked to come to Washington?

SPOLAR: Yes, I was.

GRELE: By whom?

SPOLAR: By Bob Kennedy, to come there and work at the National Committee which I did through Inaugural. And that was the greatest experience I've ever had in my life.

GRELE: What were you doing working at the National Committee?

SPOLAR: I just was actually assembling all his data, the millions and millions of letters that had been pouring in, putting them in their own places -- orders of preference to be answered, personal notes that I was assembling and bringing to Bob's attention. He had already started to move over to the Justice Department. I was sometimes messenger going there and having some of these personal notes signed. Also there were those massive, massive tons of names to be assembled for thank you letters, for patronage and assemblage. I did this for about six weeks directly after the election right here in California. I arrived in Washington on, I think, the 28th of December after I had gone through the western portion here.

GRELE: During that time, how would you describe the Kennedy organization, that period of waiting after the election?

SPOLAR: Oh, I think the organization was going full blast. Are you talking about the Democratic Committee in Washington?

GRELE: No, I mean the Kennedy people. Were they now relaxing after they had won, happy and just waiting, or were they continuing the frenetic pace?

SPOLAR: I think the pace was going. I think that it was almost like perpetual motion. Speaking for myself, I couldn't get off the cloud at all. I was pedaling away like crazy, I guess, and enjoying every minute of it at the committee. I was thankful for having something, even something as stereotyped, you might say, as assembling literature or names or anything, just to keep going because

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it was almost like somebody at the end of running two miles or five miles -- you have to run around the tract two or three more times to cool off. No, I remember being right in the throes of the Democratic Committee with all the patronage talk and the patronage information, and the screening committees, and the inaugural committees, and all of this was very, very much in high gear. There was almost no transition, as such, except a certain attitude, of course, that we won and that this is great and that kind of feeling.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the discussion over particular appointments?

SPOLAR: I recall not as such, but many wires were coming in from county chairman, state

chairmen, different people, on key appointments. I think they had a screening committee that carefully studied these. I think the comments that might have been made at the Committee there were, you know, just off the cuff comments that anyone would make, that might have been personal to them, or their choice didn't make it or did.

GRELE: When did you go to the Post Office?

SPOLAR: I went to the Post Office about the second week of January. This was '61.

GRELE: Was it a presidential appointment?

SPOLAR: No, it was not. I was given a kind of a special assignment there to work very closely with the Kennedy staff and work very closely with the White House because some of the Congressional contact situation which I had was very closely allied with Larry O'Brien's operation in the White House. So I called members of his staff almost daily.

GRELE: Oh what particular issues, do you recall?

SPOLAR: Yes, in fact, up until recently the same system that was kind of installed and I felt very much a part of its inception.... The congressman always like to have press releases issued in their name for anything favorable as to new construction or appointments and that. The little shop that I had, or still have in part, in Washington has to do with congressional contact for building construction and appointments. I let them know, and in that way they can send out a blurb in advance.

GRELE: Postmaster General Day [J. Edward Day] in his book claims that the attorney general did most of the appointing of the postmasters? Was this true?

SPOLAR: No, no. I'm afraid that Postmaster Day had.... Well, he might have had preconceived notions about the job. When he arrived there, he was a well, schooled businessman, had been in business and administrative life. But as much as he should have or

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was even given credit for having the light touch, so to speak, I found an absence of this in his being.... He wasn't too pliant toward getting into the stream of political thinking with the administration. He had some hard fast rules that he had apparently lived with, and he was injecting them in his own way in his own office, which was fine as far as administration was concerned because it is a job that entails some rather strong and an experienced administrator. But it also has its other aspects that have to do with not only getting along with the administration but having knowledge of the different political idiosyncrasies that are taking place all over the country. This I would say he fell short on. Either he didn't wish to

know them or find out... By his own admission, he was non-political, as such, or not too well politically oriented. It just seemed that wherever there was a choice, the choice was his. This, at times, kind of fell short, and there was some area of disagreement and a terrible misconception on his part as far as Bob Kennedy was concerned. I know in my own personal situation he had imagined simply because I was brought into this little spot in the Post Office as a kind of a buffer arrangement -- the role that I played or the job was getting information from the Post Office Department and offering it to members of Congress for their consumption and for releases -- he thought that possibly I was being primed and schooled and tutored in all of this from the Justice Department. I think I saw Bob twice in one year and not at all the next year. That is how busy he was. Because I had a regular routine assignment that I was clearing with as far as Larry's congressional office was concerned. This was absolutely on a daily basis that any information that I needed on the congressional side was given to me in that office.

GRELE: How effective was Larry O'Brien?

SPOLAR: Oh, I think he was tremendous, tremendously effective because I think -- which has, of course, proven itself out now -- his approach to, the manner in which he handled the congressional, the House, on both sides was very well respected. We had a very difficult time -- I was in on some of the legislation that had to do with the Post Office Department -- because the forces were kind of lined up against the new President when he arrived. The coalition between the Republican interests and the Southern delegation made it kind of tough.

GRELE: Did you ever have any personal contact with the President, with John Kennedy when he became President?

SPOLAR: No, not actually except only to say hello by accident a few times. One of the highlights during the beginnings of inaugural week, I was invited along with just a few others -- in fact just a handful of others -- to witness the cabinet swearing in. This was a very close significant kind of experience that I enjoyed with, oh, possibly only forty or fifty people that were, seemed to be there at the time.

GRELE: That's the end of my questions. Would you care to make any further comments? I know you have some notes that you'd like....

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SPOLAR: Since we've talked, particularly in the last few days, I was just reflecting back and thinking over things of what I might have thought of him or how I would describe him if somebody on the street just asked me who he was and, you know, what... I just jotted down that he was a Christian gentleman and he was dedicated and sincere and certainly without ostentation. He inherited all the good things and, I think, put them to use. I was so taken with the action motif of this entire period because now in some of

my postal speeches whenever I can I inject the idea. Particularly if there's any enthusiasm in the crowd or it's responsive or they come out in large numbers or something, I think them and I always remind them of what the late President was trying to get across to the multitude, to the people in this country, about not just being spectators but active participants, and the fact that they've taken the trouble to come out to a civic function for an hour to show their appreciation, let's say, to their postmaster or to their post office department or to the government, as such, is something that actually he had in mind. I'm finding more and more now with the youngsters that I mentioned six and seven years ago, that are certainly of voting age now, that this has followed through. There's a different attitude on the political scene. There's a different kind of participation. It's not this business of it's just one of those things to do. They're actively interested. On college campuses they're not only discussing the structure of government but they're discussing issues. They're debating on both sides of the fence, and Democratic and Republican clubs can be seen in almost every large university in the country now.

GRELE: Do you feel this is a result of...

SPOLAR: Oh, I do, I do certainly because this is one thing I can say with all the assurance because going to the schools before that I did with the rallies and everything, there were just the beginnings then on the basis of his visits. People were just getting interested. And now it's just exploded into a situation where I think some of the younger people are actually that much involved that in areas they seem like they have a foothold. They have an actual foothold in politics, and it means something. Not only means something to what they're doing in the political, but it's a very significant as to the outcome of the elections, and they're a very vital factor in the organization in the country. I had the great pleasure in Washington of belonging to the New Frontier Club. Of course, I'm sure you've heard this mentioned by many other people. It was a group of the younger appointees. We met, oh, -- on the average of at least twice a month, I'd say, to discuss mutual problems of our agencies, how we could help one another and do something about this. Not only do something about it, but, I mean, it became a real "now" thing which was the significant party, again, of the whole Kennedy attitude. I mean, we'd hear something and we were going to do it now.

[END SIDE I, TAPE I]

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GRELE: When you met with the New Frontier Club, you would decide on action among each other and...

SPOLAR: Well, we were all, as I say, younger appointees in different agencies, and we decided how we could help one another, help the people, help government, help the movement of whatever we were faced with on a mutual basis. It was a kind of an open group therapy, that had, well, great potency. We invited speakers, some of the

more prominent people from the agencies -- Harriman, Lyndon Johnson was there, oh many other Cabinet members. When the thing began to get rolling over there, they just welcomed the idea of being able to come there and hash out things in front of the group, and it was a real open wonderful session. There were no punches pulled. How do we help? What do we do? And how do we do it right at this moment to get this thing going?

GRELE: Was there a consciousness of a generation distinction? In a city like Washington which is so conscious of seniority was there a consciousness in the New Frontier Club of young bucks against the system?

SPOLAR: There might have been in part on, you know, some of the old civil servants as such. And I'm sure you're referring to, you know, those staid people in government. I imagine at times there was even some resentment on this. But I think the enthusiasm of the Administration actually put a complete new light on the city of Washington. This I gather through... I had a couple of old secretaries who had been around, and although their noses were a little out of joint at first, they saw to it that they also were included, that for the first time that the people that had been there since the Roosevelt Administration pounding on typewriters were beginning to be interspersed with what was going on in Washington. They didn't know before. I mean, it was just a job, another job to come in and go home. But they were excited about what was going on in the White House, about what events were coming up, about the different functions that were being -- whether they were musical or dramatic or even the sports interest increased as a result of the President's enthusiasm in that direction. He was a great sports fan, and the sports people loved him as a result. Of course, his physical fitness program that was so well appreciated, I'm sure by everybody. ANother thing that I had even not thought about too much relative to, oh, just society in general, you might say that I think there was a little more keenness expressed by people -- and that was his attitude toward the church because he loved his church and his God and he was never ashamed to talk about it. So that became a... I mean, people were talking about the different churches that he was going to around town or that he was seen in. I think this was all a very, very important part of the scene because I think it just refreshed the entire outlook of the nation. And certainly if you can do that in a place like Washington, this is something. I know in watching some of the things that he did in his campaigns and even watching him on TV or the news later on about this business he never

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never hesitated to enter any dialogue even with the most humble person. I think this is a wonderful thing that everybody knows him to be. There was no affectation about it because he did it just so naturally and wonderfully. Of course, everybody knows about the things that he himself has said about his notion of universal brotherhood, regardless of national origin. I'd like to conclude if I may. I want to bring back this business of the young again because this is such a vital factor in my getting into this thing. He just so thoroughly believed in the young not only because this is such a vital factor in my getting into this thing. He just so thoroughly believe in the young not only because the young can project a long range program

in the future, but he was just like a part of them in his feeling and his attitude, and I'm sure that's the reason for the great response he got out of youth. They came running, just as I experienced, with the stamina to continue to run. Older men, as it's been said, saw in this type of projection fatigue and the contentment of the status quo which I've heard repeated. But the young will always be young, thinking of John.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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