

Frank Thompson, Jr. Oral History Interview—JFK #1, 03/10/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Frank Thompson, Jr.
Interviewer: Michael Monrone
Date of Interview: March 10, 1965
Location: New Jersey
Length: 22 pages

Frank Thompson, Jr. served as a representative from New Jersey (1955 - 1980) and as chairman for the National Voters Registration Committee (1960). This interview focuses on support for and from John F. Kennedy [JFK] between 1956 and 1960, work with JFK on legislation like the Education Bill, and involvement with voter registration during the 1960 campaign, among other issues.

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Suggested Citation

Thompson, Frank, Jr., recorded interview by Michael Monroney, March 10, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

FRANK THOMPSON, JR.

March 10, 1965
New Jersey

By Michael Monroney

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MONRONEY: This is Michael Monroney, Executive Assistant to the Postmaster General. The date is Wednesday, March the 10th, 1965. I am interviewing Congressman Frank Thompson, Jr., of the 4th Congressional District of New Jersey, in conjunction with the Oral History Project of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library.

Congressman, in our preliminary discussions you mentioned that the office of your predecessor, Congressman Charles Howell, was next to that of the then Congressman John F. Kennedy, and it was during that period in the late 1940s that you first met John Kennedy. Would you like to comment on your first meeting with him?

THOMPSON: Yes. Actually, my first meeting with John Kennedy was in about 1949, as I recollect it, and he was a neighbor of my predecessor, Charlie Howell. Our first two early meetings were just really not much more than "This is my friend from New Jersey" -- I was then Assemblyman Frank Thompson -- and "This is Representative Kennedy of Massachusetts," "How are you," and so on. It developed later, much to my surprise, that John F. Kennedy, despite the passing of several years, remembered on sight that he had met me and just exactly where.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that you also had got to know him through some mutual

friends who had been in the Navy: Torbert Macdonald and Ted Reardon.

THOMPSON: Yes. When I came to the Congress in the 84th Congress, I guess the first person I met was Torby Macdonald, a Congressional classmate. I didn't know it at the time, but Torby had been President Kennedy's roommate at Harvard and, of course, one of his closest friends. Torby and I became close friends over a period of time. Thanks to him I re-met John F. Kennedy and got to see something of him.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that you had lunch with his assistant, Ted Reardon, on several occasions, and did Ted Reardon have anything to do with your getting better acquainted with Jack Kennedy?

THOMPSON: Well, I think he did. There's a place on Capitol Hill called Mike Palm's where for a number of years a great many Legislative Assistants and Members have had lunch and in those days, in 1955 and 1956, Ted Reardon was a frequent visitor at sort of a regular table there, as was I, and we did have lunch very, very often. And there was a rapport established, not only between us as individuals but between our Congressional offices. Of course, in the meantime the President had gone over to the Senate side.

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MONRONEY: In 1956 when Jack Kennedy was a candidate for the Vice Presidential nomination, you mentioned in our preliminary discussions that you were for him but that you didn't go to Chicago. Was your support of Jack Kennedy for the Vice Presidential nomination solicited or was it just a matter of your own personal preference?

THOMPSON: No, it wasn't solicited at all but I was enthusiastically in favor of him. As a matter of fact, I wasn't a delegate to that convention. I was vacationing in New Hampshire at that exact time of the convention. But my support was more moral and that of spreading the word among my friends in New Jersey that I thought he'd be a great Vice Presidential candidate.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that shortly after the 1956 convention in Chicago you called Senator Kennedy and invited him to speak in New Jersey for you during the 1956 campaign.

THOMPSON: That's right. Almost immediately following the convention, as I remember it, Senator Kennedy went back to Hyannis Port and I communicated with him and asked him to appear in New Jersey at a dinner to be held jointly by the Democratic organizations for two Congressional districts -- mine and what is now the 15th Congressional district of New Jersey. He accepted and he spent the early part of that day, most of the daylight hours, with the now Senator Harrison Williams -- Pete Williams --

who was seeking reelection to the House in Union County, New Jersey, in the 5th district. Senator Kennedy was met by my wife and myself late in the day and we went to the campus of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, where we had this dinner.

MONRONEY: And he made the speech there for you and for the state ticket.

THOMPSON: Yes, he did.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that it was at this time that he asked for your support for the Presidency in 1960.

THOMPSON: That's right. He asked if I would. Well, he wasn't quite that definite about it. He said, "I have some hopes for 1960." I wasn't sure at that time whether it was Vice President again or President. But he asked if I would do whatever I could to help him in New Jersey between then, 1956, and 1960.

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MONRONEY: And you agreed to help him.

THOMPSON: I certainly did.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that after this meeting at Rutgers in the gymnasium, that after that, all of his New Jersey appearances he checked personally with you or that Mrs. Lincoln did.

THOMPSON: To my knowledge every appearance following October, 1960, by Senator Kennedy was checked with me by the President, by Evelyn Lincoln or by Ted Reardon.

MONRONEY: This was October '60 or '56?

THOMPSON: I beg your pardon. Between 1956 and 1960.

MONRONEY: And you mentioned that in 1958 he came to Trenton to make a speech.

THOMPSON: Yes, he did -- again, at my request. We had a fund-raising dinner in the Armory at Trenton attended by what was then a tremendous number of people, and he was the principal speaker.

MONRONEY: He was then quite a drawing card as a political speaker.

THOMPSON: Unbelievable as a drawing card. It was astounding to me, even then, because, although I had an enormous affection for him, I didn't realize

until I saw him draw, what a hold he had on people.

MONRONEY: Up to that period, say 1958 when he made his appearance in Trenton, had you ever had any association with him involving legislation on the Hill?

THOMPSON: Yes.

MONRONEY: I'm talking prior to the Landrum-Griffin Labor Management Bill.

THOMPSON: You're talking about between 1955 and 1958 really.

MONRONEY: Right.

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THOMPSON: Yes, we had considerable on some of my ideas on the federal government and the arts, and on a bill which I had, in those days, called a Distinguished Civilian Award in which he had a great interest and which posthumously actually became the Medal of Freedom.

MONRONEY: Then, after these discussions on the arts and on the Distinguished Civilian Award, you developed a close association with Senator Kennedy on the labor management reform legislation.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's very true. Beginning with his legislation with the late Senator Ives of New York, which developed into a bill called the Kennedy-Ives Bill which passed the senate and was defeated on suspension of the rules in the House, we had a tremendous number of contacts which broadened and hardened, I would say, in the year 1959, particularly when the Kennedy-Irvin Bill was the big labor issue. It later, through the machinations of the Congress, became the Landrum-Griffin Bill.

MONRONEY: And you communicated with him on this legislation as on other legislative proposals, also exchanging ideas and giving him a status report on how this legislation stood in the House. What was the communication about?

THOMPSON: Well, we had very frequent communication, particularly after the House defeated on suspension the Kennedy-Ives Bill. In the following session of the Congress there were introduced a great number of labor reform bills in which Senator Kennedy had a great interest and, as the legislation developed on the Senate side, we were in very frequent contact with respect to what it should contain, how far it should go, how it should be handled and what the attitudes on the House side were. That bill which was, if my memory serves me correctly, S.1555, did pass the Senate and came over to the House, and then our contact became even more frequent than in the immediate past.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that there was some trouble on the House side from Congressman Barden and Congressman Teller and the Teamsters Union, and that this concerned Senator Kennedy a great deal. He was in touch with you to find out what they were doing over here to water down his bill. Is that correct?

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THOMPSON: It concerned him a great deal. You see, as initially proposed, the Kennedy-Irvin Bill was not radically different than the Kennedy-Ives Bill of the preceding year. In the course of the debate in the Senate it was amended to include what was called a bill of rights section by Senator McClellan of Arkansas. The bill came to the House. The McClellan amendments, at least in my view, and Senator Kennedy agreed, were punitive. This troubled us greatly because in its original form the Kennedy-Ives Bill was not enormously controversial. It was controversial but not terribly so. But with the addition of the so-called bill of rights by Senator McClellan, it became terrifically controversial, especially in the eyes of labor. This gave Senator Kennedy great concern because he was convinced of the need for labor reform and couldn't quite see, nor could any of us at that time, a way out of this situation which would exclude the punitive McClellan amendments.

MONRONEY: Was Senator Kennedy in touch with what he might call his own whip system in the House to attempt to get the bill not watered down, as I have said earlier, but to prevent it from being stiffened up? Or did he deal with a great number of courses? Did he deal with Members who were against it and get in touch with them personally, or did he count on the Members of the House to do that for him?

THOMPSON: Well, I really have no way of knowing that, although he was in frequent contact with those of us in the House whom he knew to agree with his position, which was that there had to be meaningful labor reform but that it could not be punitive and destroy labor's traditional federally given right of collective bargaining. I don't know whether Senator Kennedy talked with House Members who thought that there should be tougher bills than he thought there should be. But I do know that he talked with me and with Lee Metcalf, who is now a Senator from Montana, the now Secretary Udall, John Brademas, Representative from Indiana, and Jim O'Hara, Representative from Michigan, and others, with a view, I felt constantly, that Senator Kennedy wanted meaningful labor reform but that he didn't want (a) a meaningless program or (b) a punitive program, so that he was in contact with us a great deal.

MONRONEY: Do you have any way of knowing, Congressman, whether Stewart Udall's acquaintanceship with Jack Kennedy began at this particular time, and how it began?

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THOMPSON: Well, if Stewart Udall had anything other than a casual social or political contact with Jack Kennedy before 1959, I don't know -- he may have. But in 1959 Stu Udall was still very much an Adlai Stevenson enthusiast -- an admirer of Jack Kennedy's. I don't think that Stu Udall was convinced that Jack Kennedy was Presidential timbre until Stu saw the Senator operate on the labor reform legislation. He then became probably the most enthusiastic Kennedy fellow on the whole House side. I think that it's reasonable to say that the beginning in the late spring or early summer of '59, Stu Udall was exposed more and more to Senator Kennedy in connection with the labor reform legislation and became more and more convinced that Senator Kennedy was the man who should be the President.

MONRONEY: You mentioned also, earlier, that it was during this period, during your discussions with Senator Kennedy, that you first met Ted Sorenson and one of his other assistants, at least -- Ralph Dungan.

THOMPSON: That's right. I had had a very casual contact with Ralph Dungan before that, in that he did graduate work at Princeton University at the Woodrow Wilson School, and I know that he had. But my first real contact with him and with Sorenson took place at that time.

MONRONEY: Did the then Senator Kennedy ever come over to the House side? Did he ever visit your office, for example?

THOMPSON: Yes, he came over on three or four occasions, one particular dramatic one when there was thought of adjourning the House sine die without acting on the Kennedy-Ives Bill. This would be in 1958. I called Senator Kennedy and told him that there was a very definite possibility that the House would adjourn without taking action on Kennedy-Ives. It had been on the Speaker's desk, in the words of the then Secretary of Labor, Jim Mitchell, for "40 days and 40 nights" without any action and hadn't been referred to the Committee on Education and Labor. Senator Kennedy came over and met in my office with twelve or fourteen House Members. We discussed the need for the House to act on the legislation -- to vote on it, whether or not it passed. And we discussed at some length that need and the possibilities, which are horrid to us, of the House adjourning without acting. At this meeting Senator Kennedy impressed enormously the Members of the House who were in my office. Subsequently, the bill was brought up under a suspension of the rules and was defeated.

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THOMPSON: But I think it was, in large measure, due to that visit and to the determination which he instilled in us that this should be done.

MONRONEY: Were there any Members of the leadership of the House present at that meeting?

THOMPSON: No, there were none. These were young, what we called the liberal types -- Democratic study group types -- and Members of the Committee on Education and Labor.

MONRONEY: Did Senator Kennedy -- was he able to give you at this meeting any ideas on the strategy that you could use in the House, having been a House Member himself, to get this legislation considered before the House adjourned?

THOMPSON: Well, I don't know whether he contributed anything that we were not aware of, but we did discuss at length the perils of bringing a bill up under suspension of the rules of the House which requires a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote to pass. He demonstrated a very clear knowledge of not only the rule for bringing bills up under suspension, but the pitfalls involved, and we discussed at some length the advisability of doing it. He convinced anyone in that room who wasn't up until then convinced of the need for bringing it up, even if it lost, in order to demonstrate the determination that there should be labor reform.

MONRONEY: In other words, he was indicating that public sentiment would be very adversely affected if the bill was not...

THOMPSON: He was acutely aware of it.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that before the Democratic convention in 1960 you went up to Michigan and made a speech for Congresswoman Martha Griffiths and got some political information up there that you wanted to relay to Senator Kennedy's campaign intelligence headquarters. Could you make a comment on that?

THOMPSON: Yes. Mrs. Griffiths is a Member of Congress from a suburb, actually, of Detroit, and this was a very large dinner. And there was a reception first at which then Governor Mennen Williams and the United Auto Workers representative and a number of delegates to the 1960 convention were present. I talked at some length with Walter Reuther and his representatives, and with Governor Williams, and with the delegates with respect to their attitude concerning Senator Kennedy.

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THOMPSON: I determined that they had their favorite son candidate, who was Soapy Williams, and that next in line with their affections was Governor Stevenson, but that they realized that Governor Williams couldn't get the nomination and they doubted that Governor Stevenson would get a third shot at it, and that they really wanted some way to get back to supporting Senator Kennedy. I accumulated some specific knowledge with respect to individual delegates' and alternates' views and when I

came back to Washington, I called Senator Kennedy's office and relayed this information to Ted Sorensen.

MONRONEY: This type of information that you gathered, I would assume, being politically oriented, that you realized this type of information would be valuable to Senator Kennedy. But were you doing it for that reason or because you'd agreed to gather such information for him?

THOMPSON: Well, I had agreed to gather such information and, although my purpose in going to Michigan wasn't primarily to gather such information, it worked out so that I could. When I gathered it I realized that Michigan, being a large and influential state, was terribly important, and that I felt that the realization by the Michigan people that their favorite son and their next favorite candidate couldn't get the nomination, and that they would end up in Jack Kennedy's corner was very significant. And, of course, this is what I hastened to relay to them so that it could be exploited in any way possible.

MONRONEY: Was there any evidence in Michigan that Senator Kennedy or any of his aides had done any spade work with the delegation before you got there at that time?

THOMPSON: Yes, there was. I didn't know exactly what it was but it was obvious that there had been an awful lot of talk about Senator Kennedy and that there was a great deal of sympathy for him, particularly among the Irish-Americans that were there.

MONRONEY: You mentioned your interest and enthusiasm for voter registration. You also mentioned that in 1960, for the convention in Los Angeles, you didn't go out to the convention but that you were recalled and asked to come out. Could you comment on that as it relates to your voter registration interest?

THOMPSON: Yes. Oh, I think from the very first conversations I had with President Kennedy, when he was a Member of the Senate, that I am sure that I talked on every possible occasion about the importance to me of the

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registration of voters and getting the newly registered ones to vote on election day. I remember a number of times saying that up to 70% of the unregistered Americans are Democrats but that we have more unregistered persons than Republicans and, therefore, we need to register them. The thread of voter registration conversation existed in my relations with Senator Kennedy from the first time I met him all the way through. I guess when I talked so much about it, and he was convinced of the usefulness of voter registration, that that's what led to my invitation to go in 1960 to the convention.

MONRONEY: Could you mention who it was that called you here in Washington? Or were you in New Jersey?

THOMPSON: I was in Alexandria, Virginia, actually a suburb of Washington, and on the day that the convention was to open, or the day before, Bobby Kennedy called me and said "Where are you?" I said "I'm here," you know, "in Alexandria." "Well, why aren't you out here?" And I said "Well, I'm not a delegate, I have no real function out there." He then asked if I would come out. At that time I was sort of in a vacation status and was a little bit short on the money side. I said, "Well, I don't want to leave for two reasons. First I'm enjoying myself and, secondly, I don't have the money to get out there." He said, "Well, you come right away and we'll arrange for transportation and hotel accommodations," and so on.

MONRONEY: Then you went out to Los Angeles. Who did you talk to in Los Angeles? I assume you arrived before Jack Kennedy received the nomination, before the balloting on Wednesday.

THOMPSON: Yes, he was there, I think, Sunday afternoon. My wife and I arrived there. I talked with any number of the Kennedy people about registration and also about the possibilities of getting the votes of the New Jersey delegation.

MONRONEY: I would guess, at that particular time, that you were more interested in delegate votes than voter registration.

THOMPSON: Yes, but remarkably enough, this is one of the great things, I think, about the Kennedy organization. Without being cocky, they were confident enough that they had a chance, so that they were lining up a prospective campaign organization at the same time they were lining up enough delegates to get their man nominated. I thought this was great.

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MONRONEY: Who specifically did you talk to on Senator Kennedy's staff with regard to voter registration? Did you talk to the Senator himself?

THOMPSON: No, I don't think so. I talked to Bobby about it, who had a headquarters in a hotel there. I talked to a man, whose name escapes me now, who was later Attorney General -- I mean United States Attorney for Massachusetts. I talked with Ted Reardon. I talked with Ted Sorensen.

MONRONEY: When they were discussing the possibility of getting the New Jersey delegation's delegate votes on the first ballot, with whom did you discuss

that?

THOMPSON: I discussed it with Bob Kennedy, again with Ted Reardon, with Ralph Dungan on the Kennedy side, and then I discussed it at length with Thorn Lord, who was my quota leader and an avid Kennedy enthusiast. I talked also, from New Jersey, with Mayor Kenney, of Jersey City, and some of the New Jersey leaders and with Governor Meyner.

MONRONEY: There was apparently nothing that anyone could do to dissuade Governor Meyner from taking the delegation into the first ballot as a favorite son.

THOMPSON: There was nothing that we could do short of just taking the delegation away from him, and the delegates were reluctant to do that. They agreed that New Jersey would vote for -- and they took a vote on this in the caucus -- that New Jersey would vote for Meyner on the first ballot or my understanding of it was until it was apparent that he couldn't win, but Kennedy could. And the agreement was that, being in the middle of the roll call, New Jersey would vote for Meyner on the first round and then would seek recognition later in the roll call to yield its votes to Kennedy. As it developed, Kennedy was way, way ahead by the time they got to Delaware. I was called to the phone, at the telephone of the Wyoming delegation which sat immediately behind New Jersey. Incidentally, I was assigned to do some work with Wyoming and also with North Carolina, which was seated next to New Jersey. After Delaware had been called, I was paged and went to the phone. Bobby was on the phone. He said "Why don't you tell the Governor that it's apparent now that we have in excess of 588 votes and that it might be well, when we reach New Jersey, it would be appreciated if New Jersey would cast its votes."

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MONRONEY: Did you convey that message to Governor Meyner?

THOMPSON: Yes, I did, and he was only a few yards away. And he questioned my ability or that Bobby Kennedy to count, and said "We have an agreement, we're going to live by the agreement and we will switch." Of course, he couldn't get recognized. I believe it was Senator Symington, or the Missouri Delegation, which was recognized when it was apparent that Kennedy was going to carry it on the first ballot, to be the first switcher and put them over the top.

MONRONEY: Do you believe that Governor Meyner's wife, who was a relative -- a cousin, I believe -- of Governor Stevenson, had anything to do with his reluctance to switch to Senator Kennedy early in the balloting?

THOMPSON: I've never had any question but that that had a great deal to do with it. Governor Meyner had made a nationwide tour of most of the nation in the

spring in order to seek delegates. He had relatively little success but enough to encourage him, and I have always believed that he had encouragement with respect to the Vice Presidential nomination. Helen Stevenson Meyner is, indeed, a distant cousin of Adlai Stevenson. She and her parents -- her father was then president of Oberlin College in Ohio and was later Ambassador to the Philippines -- they were there. They had a great number of telegrams commending Governor Meyner for his courage and encouraging him to stick in as long as possible in order to make this truly a Democratic convention. I'm sure that she had a great deal to do with his holding out.

MONRONEY: New Jersey was never ever recognized at the convention -- never got a chance to be recognized after Wyoming put Senator Kennedy over the top.

THOMPSON: That's right. The ball game was over and there were a number of states seeking recognition. Governor Meyner entertained the false impression that he had a guarantee to be recognized first. New Jersey was seated immediately beneath the chairman's podium at the convention. The late Congressman Clarence Cannon was the parliamentarian. He went to him very early in the roll call and asked if New Jersey had any guarantee of recognition and he said, "Oh yes, New Jersey does but so do eight or ten others." But Meyner was convinced that he was

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going to be recognized first, and I'm sure that he entertained the hope that New Jersey's votes, or whatever number they had that year, would be the ones to clinch it. As you say, though, it developed that Wyoming put him over the top and they were seated immediately behind us.

MONRONEY: Do you know of any ill will that was ever felt by the Kennedy forces toward Governor Meyner for refusing to release his delegation sooner?

THOMPSON: No, I don't think that there was any ill will. I think that the Kennedys were quite magnanimous about it, as they could afford to be, being the winners. I don't think that they felt that Governor Meyner's performance was a superlative one, and there were some indications in private conversations that I had with the President later that he thought Meyner to be something of a dolt -- politically, that is.

MONRONEY: After the convention was over, you mentioned that you were ultimately asked to head up a national voter registration drive. When did your invitation to take that job first come?

THOMPSON: It came very shortly after the convention, about July 22nd or 3rd, 1960. I was back in Washington and Bobby called me. He said that he had had a conversation with Senator Kennedy and that the Senator wanted to know whether I'd be receptive to heading a national voter registration committee. I said that I

would and the next day Senator Kennedy called me and asked formally if I would. I accepted and on July the 26th, I believe, I went to Hyannis Port and the appointment was announced.

MONRONEY: It was at that time that you met a good many of the others on the Kennedy staff. Who were they?

THOMPSON: Well, at that meeting at Hyannis Port, there was the President, Bobby, Ted Kennedy, Sarge Shriver, whom I met for the first time, Steve Smith, whom I met for the first time, Larry O'Brien, Ken O'Donnell, Pierre Salinger, whom I met for the first time and who later conducted a press conference for me, and three or four others.

MONRONEY: What was the topic of the discussion, and how long did that discussion go on up there? What was the nature of your visit?

THOMPSON: Well, the nature of it was that the President had determined that there should be a drive, that I was to be its chairman, and he wanted to

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know what my ideas were so that I could expose my ideas to his campaign people -- what could be achieved, how much money would be needed. And he wanted to know very specifically how many people I felt I could get registered to vote between July the 26th or 5th, and the closing of registration in 1960.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that you sat out on the lawn and discussed this at Hyannis Port and that you ended up feeling you had enough latitude as the chairman of this committee, and enough money to carry out what the President wanted you to do and what you felt you had to do.

THOMPSON: That's right. The President said very, very specifically and categorically that, aside from his personal appearances and his personal work, that the registration of voters was to be the major effort in the campaign. I outlined our needs at being in the vicinity of \$750,000 for the various expenses, and that our objective would be to register 10 million new voters.

MONRONEY: Did the President agree with this as an obtainable figure, that you could register this number of people with that amount of money as a base of operations?

THOMPSON: He agreed thoroughly with it and that was our objective and, as it developed, we didn't get that much money but we did register about 8,600,000.

MONRONEY: Did the discussion at Hyannis Port -- after the convention in July of 1960 -- did it touch on any other subjects besides voter registration while you were there?

THOMPSON: Yes, there were numerous others. There was a discussion, to which I was just a witness, over the establishment of a citizens committee which was done under Byron White. There was discussion of scheduling -- it ran the full gamut, really.

MONRONEY: Did you have any contacts with the President or his staff after that on either voter registration or say, for example, his campaigning in the state of New Jersey?

THOMPSON: I had, from that day in July forward, daily contact with this staff, particularly with Bobby Kennedy, with Steve Smith, with Sarge Shriver, with Byron White, with O'Donnell, with O'Brien, with

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Chuck Roach, with Ralph Dungan, with all of them on an almost daily basis, and I had very frequent telephone contact with the President in the course of the campaign.

MONRONEY: About the progress of your registration work?

THOMPSON: Well, not only the progress of the registration work but also how it related to the citizens effort. We coordinated our efforts very closely with, again, reference to appearances in New Jersey -- their importance. I discussed with him the need for a visit, a last minute visit, to New Jersey and to Delaware, which was achieved. I discussed with him almost innumerable other matters.

MONRONEY: After you left Hyannis Port you came back to Washington and set up headquarters here in Washington. Where was that?

THOMPSON: They were in the Esso Building on Constitution Avenue in Washington. The Esso Building had been -- one floor, I guess -- had been staked out by the Steve Smith operations before the convention, and that space was retained. We established headquarters there, on the 6th floor of that building, for both the citizens -- Byron White's organization -- and for mine.

MONRONEY: And during the campaign you stayed in the Esso Building for most of the time?

THOMPSON: I was there almost every day from July until October 15, when registration dates closed throughout the country, and I had to get back to New Jersey

to campaign for myself.

MONRONEY: You mentioned that you were successful in persuading the President to go to both New Jersey and Delaware during the last days of the campaign. Were you with him when he made his trips?

THOMPSON: Yes, I was. I wasn't in Delaware but I arranged for him to go there and arranged for my very close friend, Representative Harris McDowell, to be with him. Senator Freer of Delaware was cool on the Kennedy candidacy and wasn't mentioning Kennedy. We felt in Delaware that some dramatic move had to be made and, at Harris McDowell's suggestion, I arranged for McDowell to travel from

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Wilmington to Washington to get aboard the candidate's plane and go to Wilmington where it was clear that McDowell, who had been supporting Kennedy, was on the team and got off the plane with him. They made an appearance there and then flew up to the McGuire Air Force Base in Burlington County, New Jersey, where Senator Kennedy made a major appearance at Levittown, New Jersey.

MONRONEY: You met him when he got to McGuire Air Force Base?

THOMPSON: Yes, I did, and I travelled with him in the car and was on the platform with him.

MONRONEY: Did you see Senator Kennedy at other times during the campaign, either in Georgetown or on the campaign trail?

THOMPSON: I didn't see him in Georgetown but I saw him in several places along the campaign trail, particularly in the east where I could get to rush over to see him and have a minute or two to report on the progress of the registration campaign. He was much interested in it.

MONRONEY: How soon after the election did you hear from President Kennedy or anybody on his staff?

THOMPSON: I heard from him early the morning after the election when the outcome in New Jersey was in doubt, and I called Hyannis Port to reassure the President and to tell him that, although his lead in New Jersey was very narrow, I was sure it would hold up. I talked to him two or three times, and Bobby two or three times that night, and the next I heard from him was a telephone conversation later in November just to say "How are you" and "Thanks for the work." And then in December, on about the 22nd, I went to Palm Beach to visit him and to discuss some matters with him.

MONRONEY: What was the subject of the Palm Beach discussion? Was there a particular reason he wanted you down there?

THOMPSON: Yes. He wanted to know -- well first, I think, he wanted again to thank me and all the people that had worked on the registration drive. He wanted to discuss the possibilities of a legislative program in the House of Representatives and the reforms that might be needed in the House rules to bring it about. And in the course of it, he discussed with me any aspirations that I might have had for myself or for people that worked in the campaign.

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MONRONEY: Did he give you any specific idea of what he might have in mind for you if you were willing to switch from the legislative to the executive branch?

THOMPSON: He didn't say exactly. He indicated to me that he was appreciative of what I had done and -- in fact, he wanted to know whether I wanted anything and, if so, what it was. He hinted at a couple of things.

MONRONEY: And your answer was that you..

THOMPSON: My answer was that I felt that my place was in the House of Representatives where I could be more useful to him and where I was then, and still am, happy, and that I'd prefer to stay there.

MONRONEY: He apparently discussed with you, according to our preliminary discussions, other appointments that he made and what you might think of certain people that had been recommended for top executive jobs.

THOMPSON: Yes, he did. Well, without being very specific about it but being very definitely clear about it, he asked whether I might have any interest in Health, Education and Welfare or the Department of Labor or a Federal bench, and I told him that I wasn't. Again, he didn't say "Would you like to be" or anything specific. We then discussed specifically the position of Secretary of the Interior. I was very, very much for Stu Udall and, as it developed, so was the President. We discussed the Department of Labor and we discussed the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. We also had some discussion at luncheon with Ambassador Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy, and the President-elect. We had some discussion of office staff in the White House and the division of responsibilities, and we also discussed his then very freshly made indication that he'd like Ben Smith to succeed him in the senate.

MONRONEY: Did he give you any of his ideas or put out any of his ideas on his own staffing at the White House?

THOMPSON: Yes, he did in a sense. Of course, I assumed quite properly that Larry O'Brien and Ken O'Donnell would be there, and I was so sure of that that I didn't discuss it. I did ask what he had in mind for Ted

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THOMPSON: Reardon, who had been his administrative assistant in the Senate and who, I understand, had been his late brother Joe's great friend and, I think, roommate at Harvard. I also discussed at some length the possibility of his using Ralph Dungan, for whom I have the greatest admiration. And during the course of the conversation it was evident that he intended to take Ted Reardon to the White House, although he had toyed with the idea of leaving Ted with Ben Smith in the Senate in order to show Ben, who would be a brand new Senator, the way around. He concluded during our luncheon conversation that Ted might not understand that, and he had been so valuable and so trusted that he better take him to the White House. He also definitely stated that he would have Ralph Dungan with him, and we discussed to some extent also what use Chuck Roach -- Charles Roach -- might be put to. My interest in Roach was that he was a sort of public relations adviser to the citizens and to the registration drive and I had a great deal of admiration for him.

MONRONEY: Congressman, you mentioned earlier that you had discussions with the President about the problem of enlarging the Rules Committee. To what extent did you become involved in that fight, and to what extent were you involved with President Kennedy personally?

THOMPSON: Well, I became enormously involved almost immediately before I went to Palm Beach in late December of 1960 to see the President. Speaker Rayburn had been there, and the President had discussed with him legislative programs and the need for some sort of reform in the House. He never told me just what the results of those conversations were except to say that Rayburn was sympathetic. So, I came back to Washington and started work immediately on a program to make possible the reporting to the floor of the House the Administration's legislation. I worked on it every day and every night from immediately after Christmas until the House began its new Session, and I was in contact with the President three or four times, took other Members of the House including, for instance, Bob Jones of Alabama and Dick Bolling, to see him to discuss strategy, and had very frequent contact with Bob Kennedy on the subject -- so that I was in it up to my ears and had almost constant contact with the President's office. Larry O'Brien was enormously helpful and worked very closely with us, as did Ken O'Donnell and many others.

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MONRONEY: There was also other legislation in addition to the first initial fight to enlarge the Rules Committee. There was also other legislation during his

almost three years in the White House that you had contact with the President on -- the Education Bill, the farm legislation and tax cuts. To what extent did you have personal contact with the President on some of these bills, and to what extent was your role in the Democratic Study Group responsible for your contacts with him?

THOMPSON: I should mention that one of the major subjects of our Palm Beach discussions was the Education Bill which I let slip my mind for a moment. I had frequent contact with respect to the education legislation -- mostly telephone contact. I saw the President personally relatively few times after he took office. But I talked with him a great deal by phone about the education legislation. He was vitally interested in it. He designated it as the No. 1 priority bill in the Congress. He asked me to sponsor it in the House, which I did. And, of course, we didn't succeed in passing it. He was in frequent contact with me about other legislative matters and, particularly, how the Democratic Study Group -- of which I was then the secretary and the whip -- what the DSG could do and how it could do it. We organized whip calls, we saw that people got to the floor, we had a great many meetings to generate support for the President's programs, and so on. And during this time, also, he was again much interested in the role of the federal government in the arts -- a matter of major interest to me -- and he had been co-sponsor with me of several things along this line in the Senate. He was much interested in the development of what is now the Medal for Freedom and which earlier had been the Distinguished Civilian Award. He had great problems about his farm bill -- particularly with people like myself from an urban area -- to get us to support it. He called me a number of times to ask if I would support it and if I would solicit some support for it. So we had fairly frequent contact although, as time went on, my contact was much more with his legislative liaison people -- Larry O'Brien and his staff.

MONRONEY: Did you ever find an occasion when you were in opposition to the President or any part of his program?

THOMPSON: No, I didn't. With the exception of the farm legislation -- I find it very difficult to support farm subsidy programs -- but even though

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I found it difficult, I supported his programs. I found myself in opposition a time or two with some of the views of his staff with respect to legislation.

MONRONEY: You mentioned in our earlier discussion that you met on one occasion with the President the then Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Secretary Ribicoff, and you mentioned your discussion on including parochial schools in the Education Bill. Would you comment on that?

THOMPSON: Yes. After the hearings on the Education Bill in 1960, or early in '61, it became evident that we had run head-on into a problem of aid to parochial

schools. I took the position, as did Bobby Kennedy and Byron White and the legal adviser to the President, that from a legal point of view it would violate the First Amendment to give direct aid to parochial schools. The President agreed with this and so stated. Subsequently, Secretary Ribicoff had second thoughts and tried to devise a package, with some help from some of the President's people at the White House, which would satisfy the Catholic hierarchy. Ribicoff spent a number of days and nights frantically trying to work out a compromise, a constructive one. In the end, however, he didn't agree with this position and we had a meeting at the White House at which the President, myself, Ribicoff and Sorensen were present -- there may have been one other person, I can't remember -- at which this was discussed. He took the position that under no circumstances should we cave in on the issue and give aid directly to parochial schools. This is the way the position end up and, of course, we got no legislation.

MONRONEY: Did the President give you any idea of how he felt about whether this should be included in the bill or not at that meeting?

THOMPSON: No. I wasn't sure when I left the meeting just what his position was. I learned a few days later, when he had a press conference and restated his earlier opposition to direct aid, that his position was unchanged and was the same as mine.

MONRONEY: Congressman, you mentioned the President's interest, your mutual interest with the President, in the Arts Council. Did you ever have any contact with Mrs. Kennedy because of her interest in the arts on this subject?

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THOMPSON: No, I had only indirect contact through Bill Walton on that subject.

MONRONEY: Can you remember generally what your contacts were with the President on a personal basis -- a non-legislative basis -- during his time in the White House?

THOMPSON: Yes. I was invited up three or four times privately to go in a gate where the press don't hang out and to have a cup of coffee or a drink late in the day to discuss actual social matters as much as anything.

MONRONEY: Can you remember any of the subjects that you discussed at these informal social meetings with the President?

THOMPSON: Well, we discussed a great range of them, including his feeling that he was a captive and didn't have as much freedom as he'd like to see his friends

or to have social contacts with his friends. I'd say, in general, they were mostly either very light conversations or politically philosophical conversations over a drink or two.

MONRONEY: In terms of political philosophy, can you remember anything the President might have said during those discussions that might be of interest?

THOMPSON: No, I don't think so, except that he was enormously impressed by the terrible responsibilities of the Office and said on one occasion I remember very well that, although he found the job much more difficult than he had anticipated, he enjoyed it and it was challenging, and, he felt, very worthwhile.

MONRONEY: Did he ever give any indication to you of how he felt his liaison was with the Senate and with the House -- with his former colleagues in the Senate and House? Did he ever complain about his Congressional programs being bogged down or about any specific Members who might have thrown roadblocks in the way of his legislative program?

THOMPSON: No, I don't remember specifically except, on one occasion, he indicated that he felt that there had been a schism developed between Senator Gene McCarthy and himself and, knowing that Senator McCarthy and I are great friends, he asked if I didn't think that it could be worked out, and that he admired Gene very much and would like to see it worked out. With regard to legislation, his only complaints were that it became

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extremely difficult to get things through the Rules Committee of the House and passed on the floor, and felt that apparently Representatives, as had been true in his time, were so busy that they didn't have enough time to pay attention to detail. I think in general, though, I could say that though he suffered the frustrations which I am sure he expected, he wasn't unhappy with the progress he was making in the House.

MONRONEY: Would you care to comment on what the schism was between he and Senator McCarthy?

THOMPSON: Well, I really never understood the exact reason for it but there was a definite coolness which, before President Kennedy's death, I'm sure had been resolved. I think probably that the genesis of it was the primary campaign in West Virginia, where Senator McCarthy was very much for Senator Humphrey, and Gene's relation of it to me would indicate that he wasn't so angry with Jack Kennedy as he was with Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., and Jack Kennedy for having used Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., in that campaign. He was very resentful of Frank Roosevelt's implication in the West Virginia campaign, or at least the alleged implication, that Senator Humphrey had

been less than valorous during the war and should have been in the service, and so on. Gene was very bitter about that and angry with Jack Kennedy over allowing Frank, first, to say and, secondly, not to repudiate what he did say.

MONRONEY: So, in effect, it was Senator McCarthy being angry at the President rather than the President being angry at Senator McCarthy for nominating Adlai Stevenson, for example.

THOMPSON: Oh, there wasn't any resentment there at all. I remember specifically the President saying to me that, well, you know, "not only did Gene McCarthy do a great job for Stevenson, he did so so damned well that he scared me." Which is, I think, an accurate statement because it was a great speech and Jack admired it. He liked brilliance. He liked style. He liked style. He liked eloquence and all those things McCarthy has, in addition to tremendous intellect and a sense of humor. And Jack Kennedy liked these things. He was just uncomfortable, I think, at the thought that someone whom he admired as much as Gene McCarthy was angry with him. In the very last days I recollect that President

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Kennedy said to me one time, "Well," he said, "Gene and I are on the right track again and I'm very glad." Of course, I don't know what he meant or what had transpired.

MONRONEY: When was the last time you remember talking to the President?

THOMPSON: The last time I talked to the President was just a very few days before his trip to Texas. He had sent Dick Goodwin to see me with regard to the executive appointment of an advisory council on the Arts. And I got the impression from Goodwin that I was to talk to him and discuss the thing in general, and then if I had any specific suggestions I was to call the President. I did call the President the very next day and told him how pleased I was that this was to be done by Executive Order, and I made a specific suggestion or two as to who should be named, at the President's suggestion. And that was my last conversation with him.

MONRONEY: That was just several days before his trip to Dallas.

THOMPSON: Yes. As a matter of fact, the conversation concluded by him saying that "Within a day or so of my return from Texas, I will issue this Executive Order."

MONRONEY: Congressman, you have indicated you didn't want to discuss where you were during the events immediately preceding the President's death in Dallas, and I would suppose that would conclude our Oral History Project interview.

This is Michael Monroney, Executive Assistant to the Postmaster General. The date is Wednesday, March 10. I have just concluded an interview with Congressman Frank Thompson, Jr., of the 4th district of New Jersey.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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