

Jennings Randolph Oral History Interview – 7/5/1965
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Biographical Note

Randolph, a Senator from West Virginia (1958-1965), discusses his work on the Senate Labor and Welfare Committee with John F. Kennedy, the 1960 Democratic primary campaign in West Virginia, and Kennedy administration economic development programs in West Virginia, among other issues.

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Jennings Randolph

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Oral History Interview

with

Senator Jennings Randolph

July 5, 1965
Weirton, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Senator, would you begin by telling me of your contacts with the late President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

RANDOLPH: Yes, indeed. I am delighted to meet with you today and to respond to your request. It was my privilege, and good fortune to have been a member of the Senate of the United States at the time Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, later to become the President of the United States, was serving in that body. We were particularly close to one another in reference to legislation in the fields of labor and education. Senator Kennedy and I were members of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. He was the chairman of the subcommittee on labor of which I was a member and we worked closely and cooperatively during the periods when labor legislation was before the Committee and the sub-committee. I used to sit with him and listen to the scores of witnesses who would come to testify on matters of importance to the worker and to the employer. I recall so very well his leadership on the Disclosure Act which became a law by action of the Congress and with the approval of the President.

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We felt that the labor unions of this country had the responsibility, and truly they wished to share the responsibility of having their records properly kept, and having that type of

leadership in the ranks of labor which would reflect favorably on this great segment of our society. The Senator from Massachusetts was the principal sponsor of that very worthwhile legislative act. There was some opposition to that bill. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, as a Senator and as the President, was a friend of working people and yet he believed that this legislation was in the nature of protection to the employees.

As we reflect on the workings of the measure, it is believed by most people that it has had a salutary effect. It has brought management and labor closer together. It has in reality lifted the level of labor leadership in this country and has added to the responsibility of men and women who belong to unions but are very much a part of management as well as production. I know the President actually became identified with the national scene, to a greater degree than he had ever been before, because of this effort to which I have spoken. It is important that the record reflect the interest of the Kennedy's in membership on the Senate Labor and

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Public Welfare Committee. Many people do not realize how these young men—John, Robert [Robert F. Kennedy], and Edward [Edward M. Kennedy]—identified themselves with the cause of those who toiled. We have on that committee Senator Robert Kennedy of New York and Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. The committees these men are serving on are important. I think that it is very vital to remember that both Teddy and Bobby wished to serve on the same committee that Jack served on, the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. I am gratified to continue service with the two brothers of the late and the great President.

Now, with reference to the 1960 campaign. I remember so very well that I was sitting in my seat on the Senate floor and Senator Kennedy came and leaned over my shoulder and asked rather seriously and yet rather lightly, "Jennings, do you think I would have any chance if I entered the West Virginia primary?" I said, "Senator Kennedy, I feel you should enter the West Virginia primary. I believe that there is a significant issue at stake in the United States.

We've heard the rumblings throughout the country that there is opposition to a man not because of the man but because of the religion that he holds." I told

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him that I was proud of my West Virginia heritage, that I believed here was a testing ground where he could prove something that would be helpful not only to him but to the people of the United States as a whole—helpful, in fact, to our image throughout the world. He said that this was a rather new thought to him about using West Virginia as a typical state from the standpoint of this factor which I was stressing, namely, refuting religious prejudice.

Now I recall that he asked me not only on that occasion but on two subsequent occasions whether I felt that he should enter the West Virginia primary. I said, "I am not going to tell you at this point whether you are going to win the West Virginia primary, but I am going to tell you that I think you owe it to yourself and you owe it to the country to test yourself on this problem that I know exists among some of the people of West Virginia." I recall that I hoped he would be a candidate in the West Virginia primary, and I was pleased

that he did determine in the closing hours to announce his candidacy, because I felt it would be a helpful action from several standpoints. He paid his one thousand dollar filing fee and entered. He gave that very intimate touch which he had then, and as he had during his later period

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as President, to the making of friends and influencing voters in the State of West Virginia.

I remember that campaign so very well. I was a candidate for reelection to the United States Senate. In the primary election of 1958, I had had opposition from three members of my own party for the nomination and then had been elected over the Republican candidate in November. But in 1960 I was fortunate in that I had no primary opposition and so in a sense I was perhaps a little more objective in looking at the campaign as a whole than I would have been had I been a candidate against one or more opponents. I went throughout the state and I spoke throughout the state, not for a candidate or against a candidate. No candidate having filed against me, I reminded the voters that I was to receive the nomination uncontested and then would be the candidate of the Democratic party against the Republican after the primary was over.

I am doing this reminiscing today in the very building in Weirton, West Virginia, where I presented Senator John F. Kennedy and this came on a few evenings before the 1960 primary election day. I recall the very large crowd present for the annual Weirtonian banquet, and I was requested to introduce my colleague.

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It was a privilege to present him to that large and enthusiastic audience. I recall that I spoke briefly but pointedly about his record as a member of the United States Senate, and sketched in certain other phases of his earlier life. Then I said in essence that I believed qualities of courage and compassion were in this man, and that he had the qualities necessary to constitute the character and the makeup of the next President of the United States. I talked, of course, longer than I am now talking of Senator Kennedy. I spoke of his keen mind and of his compassionate understanding, and I said that in the Senate of the United States, Democrats and Republicans admired Jack Kennedy. They believed Jack Kennedy. When he gave his word, they knew that it would be kept. He was courteous. He never tried to press his views on senior members of the Senate. He counseled with them. I discussed that fact in the introduction of the Senator who was to win in the primary election in West Virginia the following Tuesday.

I recall very well flying back that night with Senator Kennedy to Washington, D.C. We flew in the plane which was being used by the Senator in the campaign in Wisconsin before the West Virginia primary. The interior of the cabin of the plane was dark. The

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President had unbuttoned his shirt collar. He was relaxed and, although not lying down, he was stretched out in the comfortable chair at my left. I remember so clearly his questions and

reactions to my replies. The plane left the Ohio County airport and we were moving above the Alleghenies toward Washington, D.C. In a few minutes out of the darkness came this question by Senator Kennedy; "Jennings, how do you think I'll do in the primary in West Virginia?" I replied, "Senator, you will win the primary, and you will perhaps win it by a substantial majority." He observed, "That's not what they tell me." I asked, "Who do you refer to as 'that's not what they tell me?'" "Oh," he said, "mostly newspaper men who are covering West Virginia; magazine writers, people who had been taking polls." I emphasized, "Senator, I have been active in West Virginia politics since 1930. This is 1960. I ran in '30, won the Democratic nomination, and lost the election against a Republican from the second district of West Virginia that year. I have been very close to West Virginians for many years before and since coming to the Senate. I believe I know the sense and the direction of the West Virginia elector. I believe that what I have told you is absolutely true." He said quietly, "Thank you very much," and went to sleep. Now I was telling him what I had noted, what I

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believed. I recall walking from the Baptist Church in Elkins after a Sunday morning service before the primary election in West Virginia, in fact the week before the primary. I passed the Presbyterian Church and a gentleman and his wife came out and I shook hands with them. I talked with them and I didn't initiate the subject. "Jennings, we are voting for Senator Kennedy on Tuesday." I asked, "Why?" They replied, "Well, people say that Protestants won't vote for Senator Kennedy because he is a Catholic. We want to prove that's not true." I stressed, "Then really you are leaning backwards to prove yourselves." The husband said, "That is exactly right." And he continued, "I know many people in the First Presbyterian church here in Elkins who are doing just what we are doing." I had sensed and I had heard that this was true in other areas of West Virginia.

I also came in contact many times during the campaign with Franklin Roosevelt, Jr., and I could sense, of course, the remembrance of FDR, Sr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt] as FDR, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.], talked for Jack Kennedy. People do remember and the people in West Virginia call themselves mountaineers. Our state motto is "Mountaineers Are Always Free." I think they wanted that primary to be one of freedom, one of an expression of freedom, not hedged by any prejudices or

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practices of the past. They wanted to meet this head on, as it were, and vote for Jack Kennedy not only because he was a member of the Catholic faith, but also because they believed that he was a very fine man and would make a good chief executive. I know that our people had a feeling, I say this very carefully now, that Senator Hubert Humphrey was a very likeable person; they knew he had a flair, but they seemed to feel that he was not the administrator, not the executive type that the Senator from Massachusetts was. Yet it was a very hard fought campaign between two able candidates and the lines were drawn closely.

It was my privilege to have presented Senator Kennedy in 1959 in the northern section of West Virginia not far from where I'm recording these comments today. He came and spoke at a Democratic rally at the Elks Club, near the city of Wellsburg, but outside two

or three miles. I saw the appeal he had then for people and I saw how people reacted. They sensed that here was a leader apart, to a degree, but a part of them. I noted this even in 1959 in West Virginia as I presented him for his well applauded speech at the Brooke County rally.

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I was on the ticket with the Democratic nominee for President in 1960. We were together in West Virginia on numerous occasions. I was conscious of Senator Kennedy's tremendous dedication to the campaign and I was aware of his feeling that, if elected President of the United States, he would give to that office truly wonderful gifts which were so much a part of his life.

He was elected President of the United States, and I was reelected to the United States Senate. I became a militant member of Jack Kennedy's team in the Senate. I worked on much of the legislation which he fostered; helped to write considerable of it, sponsored it with others. I became, as I had been in the Senate, an ally of his. The executive branch and the legislative branch worked cooperatively in bringing these ideas into form. There were some successes in the first few weeks and months, but frankly it was principally in the last few weeks of his life that he began to obtain the larger legislative goals which he had sought.

He gave priority attention to the State of West Virginia. One indication perhaps, is important. Congress had authorized a pilot food stamp program, but it had not been implemented. President Kennedy's

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first official act was to sign an order activating the program and designating McDowell County, West Virginia, to participate in the initial project. He wanted it to first function in West Virginia. After awhile it was expanded from McDowell county into other counties. We had the beginning of the food stamp plan which has spread to other counties in the nation. He wanted West Virginians to remember his concern and interest. In a very real degree, President Kennedy felt that the winning of the West Virginia primary gave him the springboard which brought the Democratic nomination to him, and enabled him to go on to win election to the Presidency. I sensed that he felt he had a debt, not one that he felt he was forced to repay, but, frankly, a debt which he gladly wished to commit himself to as he worked to help all the people of the country.

West Virginians, I think, believed that the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was the Jack Kennedy whom they knew as the man who came among them and had promises to make forecasting a brighter future for them.

Frankly, as the Chief Executive of the Republic, he was making those promises come true for West Virginians and for other people of the nation. I recall

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him of course as a dedicated statesman; West Virginians remember him not so much as a person they needed to look up to, but they naturally lifted their sights when they thought of John F. Kennedy as President of the United States. They felt that under his leadership we would have an administration of excellence and achievement. They knew that he would pursue to the end of his term or his career in public office the goals which he believed in—the objective to make possible better living for men and women, the goal to provide finer education for boys and girls, and, above all, the attainment of a status of peace and understanding among the peoples of the world. West Virginians continue to talk of President Kennedy, and they often ask me, “I wonder what would have happened if President Kennedy had continued in the White House.” There is not an implied criticism of our present gallant leader, but a continuing remembrance of a truly great and martyred leader.

YOUNG: Thank you very much, Senator. I wonder, in closing our interview, if you would say a word about your observations of the effect on West Virginia and West Virginia politics of the tremendous amount of attention

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focused on the state by the national press and other communications media during the primary campaign of 1960.

RANDOLPH: Yes, I know West Virginia was in the spotlight, and sometimes this made it more difficult to carry programs forward because the President certainly didn't want to be accused of being a person who was giving handouts or showing favoritism toward the State of West Virginia. Actually, President Kennedy never really allowed himself to be in that position. I believe, however, that the spotlight on West Virginia in that primary campaign was a spotlight which in most instances generally was helpful to West Virginia. I do know that because of unemployment in West Virginia, the President—then the President-elect—conceived the idea of the Task Force on Depressed Areas which made studies that eventually were implemented by Congress and became the Appalachian Regional Development Act, The Area Redevelopment Act, Accelerated Public Works Act, and others which I had the responsibility to have managed or otherwise helped to move through the Senate of the United States. These were among the

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many dreams of Jack Kennedy which became reality. These programs are very important, especially the Appalachian Regional Development Act. The Appalachian program, which is now the law of the land, was a prime Kennedy objective, even though it did not pass Congress until after his death. Many other programs in depth and scope touched West Virginia. There were persons, naturally, who were looking at West Virginia with jaundice eyes. But, because of the President's concern for West Virginia, and because many newsmen who covered the 1960 primary believed there were good, courageous people, hardy folk, our citizens reacted favorably and appreciatively. The President did not forget. West Virginia

continues to be a state which has much attention focused on it, and this is going to continue for many years.

I remember that in February, 1960, *The Saturday Evening Post* carried an article, "The Strange Case of West Virginia." By and large it was an article containing some sensationalism here and there and some untruths here and there. I thought that there should be another article or letter in response or rebuttal. I sent a telegram to the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* and asked him if he would consider the publication of an article that I would

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prepare on the subject, "What's Right With West Virginia." Back came a telegram of refusal and disinterest. There are people, of course, who are interested in knowing the truth about West Virginia. The truth, I think, came to the fore in the Democratic presidential primary campaign of 1960.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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