

Wayne N. Aspinall Oral History Interview – 11/10/1965
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Biographical Note

Aspinall, U.S. Representative from Colorado from 1949 to 1973, discusses his memories of John F. Kennedy (JFK) as a congressman, agriculture and land management issues, and JFK's reaction to the results of the 1956 Democratic National Convention, among other issues.

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Wayne N. Aspinall

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Date

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Date

Wayne N. Aspinall

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Oral History Interview

with

WAYNE N. ASPINALL

November 10, 1965
Washington, D. C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me when you first met John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

ASPINALL: I met John Kennedy in January, 1949. It was either the day before, or the morning of the convening of the Congress in 1949, which was the first session of President Truman's [Harry S. Truman] administration on his own right. I remember that the then Representative Kennedy came to his office which was just across the corridor and two doors down from where I was situated. Our secretaries, the young man who had just joined my office, a Massachusetts resident, and Mr. Kennedy's secretary, were friends. This is the way that Mr. Kennedy and I first met each other. At that time, of course, I was attracted to the young man because he was many years younger than I, because of the New England grace and courtliness which surrounded him, and I suppose I was attracted by his apparent self-assuredness. He had already been in Congress for some time. From that time on, our offices were in close association with each other. The President--later to be the President, then a member of Congress--and I had very little in common as far as legislation was concerned. However, we did have a common meeting ground in as much as he, as a young man, and I, as an older man, had just gotten out of the World War II activities. He, of course, had his service in the Pacific and mine was in the European theater.

It was soon noticed by me that he was taking part in some of the debates on the floor of the House. He had a willingness and an ability to express himself independently of House leadership even at that time. This, of course, would be rather noticeable to me because I had come to Congress riding on the coattails, more or less, of President Truman, and I felt during the first session of the first Congress, 1949 and 1951, that I should stay rather close to the president. Every once in a while this young member of the House from Massachusetts was exerting his independence of thought and action.

In an aside, at this time, I might say that I have often been intrigued by the fact that at that time he was independent from the state of Massachusetts, and yet later on he became a leader, not only of the United States,

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but the leader of the party. I think that perhaps it can be said that the late President Kennedy was more sympathetic towards the independence of some members of Congress because of the electorate that they represented, or of the section of the nation which they had the honor to represent, than many of the other presidential leaders and leaders of the party. This was to stand me in good stead later on when he and I were differing on some important conservation measures which he desired very much, and which I approved, but we were far apart on procedures.

During the second Congress that I was here--that was in 1951 and 1952--of course the President-to-be was in a great deal of physical torment, because of his injuries received during the war. It was always remarkable to me that President Kennedy, with his frail body and his rather slight physical frame, with battle injuries, could so control himself that, even though I know he was in constant pain a great deal of the time that I knew him, never were there any complaints or any outbursts of expressing oneself against the difficulties that injuries bring to the body.

MORRISSEY: Did he ever comment to you on the independence that he was showing in the Congress?

ASPINALL: No, he never did comment as such. He took it for granted. I think that this, perhaps, is one of his outstanding traits. He took it for granted that he was sincere in his position and that anyone else would be sincere in his position. These disagreements would just naturally have to be worked out. He was a difficult antagonist; he was not a soft antagonist by any means. He was hard, just like he was a ruthless politician--a fair politician; I use the word ruthless in its true sense. This was to get the job done, but not to get the job done by any means. It was to get the job done by fair means with due respect for those who were in opposition. I have seen him take issue with his then colleague from Massachusetts, the present Speaker, Mr. McCormack [John W. McCormack]. But he always did this with a sense of proportion. He left no hard feelings, as far as I was concerned. There have been those who have objected to it. Maybe it was because I was almost old enough to be his father that I had no ill feeling at all when we were in opposition to each other. I never questioned him

when he tried to represent his view which often times, of course, was much different from the view of those of us who represent the West.

MORRISSEY: Would you say that he came to Congress without any well defined opinions about conservation, land management and agriculture?

ASPINALL: My answer to that question would have to be that he had none. He had a sense of the appreciation of the values of nature. He had a good sense of the use of the values of nature today as related to the use by those of tomorrow of such values. But as far as knowing the great natural resources of the United States, as far as knowing the agricultural problems of the United States, I think as far as knowing the difficulties of communication and transportation between the populous East and the populous North, when I first knew him, I thought that he was more or less unprepared and not too well equipped.

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I can still hear him arguing on some matters that had to do with labor, it seems to me it was during those first four years--it had to be, sometime during the first four years—of my acquaintance with him when I thought that his reaction to some of the rights and ambitions of the laboring man were a little bit provincial. On the other hand, I soon learned from my own experience back here that he too then was giving expression to his own thoughts on a problem that is never solved and on the relationships between peoples in our economy which are before us continually. Even in his arguments on some of those problems, it was a statement of facts, building his argument upon cold logic as much as possible. Fact of the case is, I never really appreciated, never understood his ability to appeal to the emotions like he was able to do until he got into the campaign. Then, of course, as a campaigner on a national scope, and this is the first time that I knew anything about it--this was in 1956 when he was actively campaigning for the vice presidency--then I began to see a side that never appeared as far as the House of Representatives was concerned, and later on was to be, I suppose, brought to its height in his inauguration speech.

MORRISSEY: Did you attend that 1956 Convention?

ASPINALL: Oh yes, I was present at the 1956 convention. I suppose as much as anyone I was responsible for the votes of Colorado going to Estes Kefauver [Estes Kefauver] rather than to my personal friend, John Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: Could you tell me more about that?

ASPINALL: Yes. This convention, of course, I remember was held in Chicago. After the nomination of Mr. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] for the second

time, the nomination for the vice presidency was thrown open, Mr. Stevenson preferring to abide by the decision of the convention rather than by any expression of his own. Then Senator Kefauver and then Senator Kennedy were the two chief contenders. When it came to the vote of our delegation, the delegation polled and I was one of the senior members present. They asked me my position and I very frankly stated that I thought Mr. Kefauver was the most seasoned of the two and would be the most valuable to the ticket. At the time we voted, the vote could have been something to the result because of the fact that later on, as you know, the vote was very close. But that's the way it was voted, and Senator Kennedy didn't get very many votes from Colorado.

Then in January, soon after Congress reconvened I got a call from Senator Kennedy. He said, "Wayne, I'd like to talk to you about some matters." I said, "That's fine, Jack. Whenever you're ready, we'll get together." He understood my reluctance to accept an invitation just to go to the Senate just because a senator had requested it. He understood this matter because he always considered and always acted upon the hypothesis that, the two bodies were coordinate bodies, and that although the protocol went with the United States Senate, as far as the responsibility was concerned the two were on equal plane. So he said, "Would you mind coming over for lunch?" I said, "No, that's all right, if we get together at the right date." Even

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at that time, as chairman of one of the subcommittees, I was about as busy as I have been since. So we set the occasion for the following Friday. I went over to his office and he had lunch brought in from his Georgetown home in warming pans. We sat down soon after I was in his office. We had lunch, and nothing was said during the time of lunch; it was just a pleasant visit.

But as soon as the dishes and pans were taken away, he didn't hesitate. He said, "Wayne, why didn't I get more votes from Colorado in my bid for the nomination for the vice presidency?" I frankly told him that I considered that he wasn't a friend of the West. I just said, "Jack, you're not known to be a friend of the West." He said, "Oh, yes, I am a friend of the West." I said, "Well, it never has appeared to me that you're as interested as much in the West as in even Europe." And I said, "This is understandable. You live closer--your associations have been.... We folks in the West, we feel that you just haven't been as friendly as your opponent has been, so we cast our votes from Colorado for Mr. Kefauver." He said then--I'll never forget it--he said, "I voted for the Colorado River Project." I said, "Well, maybe you did, Jack. You say you did, and that's all right with me. As far as I can remember, you didn't have a formal roll call on the final vote." He said, "Well, I voted for it." I said, "That's fine. You voted also for the Paul Douglas amendment." He said, "Yes, I did. I thought that was right." I said, "Well, that shows you that you don't understand the West and what is needed because if you follow that kind of understanding of economics you'll never develop anything west of the Mississippi River."

He hesitated a minute and he said, "Well, I voted for the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project." Now remember, this was in January, 1957. I said, "Well, Senator, that

shows that you don't know anything about the West. The Fryingpan-Arkansas Project has never been ready." He said, "It was passed through the Senate." I said, "Yes, it was passed through the Senate just like you pass a lot of these projects through the Senate. You don't understand what's involved and you just go ahead and pass them and then let the members of the House work them out." He said, "Well, I don't understand." I said, "Now, we don't just settle the quarrels with different sections of the state; they have to do this themselves. The Fryingpan-Arkansas has never been ready." And if you will recollect or remember, it was during the first Congress of his administration that we passed the Fryingpan-Arkansas, and he was very friendly to it. After we had this little tête-à-tête back and forth, he said, "Wayne, I'll tell you this. I'd like to understand about these reclamation projects, and if I can't support a project that is brought up by the Senate or sent over by the House and I feel that I should vote no on a project, may I call on you for an explanation before I cast my vote?" And of course that was the time that I knew that Senator Kennedy was running for the presidency of the United States. If I remember correctly, this was in the third week of January, 1957. I said, "Certainly, Jack, this would be fine because we want you to understand the West." Well, then he went a step further, and this was very usual with him. He said, "Wayne, I don't know very much about the agriculture of the West." I said, "That's understandable, Senator. You folks in New England don't even feed yourselves. I can understand that." He said, "Well, can I call on you for some advice on agriculture?" I said, "Hell, no, Jack, I don't

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know anything about the agricultural problems as they're presented in the Congress. I have to rely upon members of Congress, especially in the committee, who are more or less learned on these matters." He said, "Will you give me the names of two or three of your advisors?" And I did, and I know that he not only contacted them immediately but he used them for the benefit of his administration and the benefit of the nation until his death, because I have heard about them since then.

This is the way that President Kennedy was able to get so much information. He was able to put his trust in people in whom he had confidence and who, by and large, never failed him. He had a retentive mind, he could remember what was told to him, and he also had a mind that could weigh the material that he had, and in most instances, I think as much as most of our great leaders, he was able to come out with universal solutions, which were not solutions for just individual segments of our economy and of our people.

MORRISSEY Because we're interested in interviewing people who advised John Kennedy at various times, may I ask who the two names were that you...

ASPINALL: No, I don't think I want to reveal those two names. You'll more than likely find them along your way.

MORRISSEY: Well, I hope I do. Do you recall back when you both were members of

the House if he ever speculated out loud about running against Henry Cabot Lodge?

ASPINALL: No. I would have to say that as far as his political ambitions as he went up the ladder, all that I knew about what was happening was through my secretary at that time, Mr. Desautels [Claude Desautels]. Of course, this is understandable. After all, I'm a Coloradoan and from the West and he was a Massachusetts resident from the far Northeast and we had very little in common as far as our local politics was concerned and as far as our procedures in politics--entirely different. The candidate for office in my country is about as different from being a candidate for office in New England as politics could possibly be.

MORRISSEY: I have heard that when he was a member of the House that he used to depend on your judgment on matters of conservation.

ASPINALL: Well, I think that this would be, more or less a natural thing to do because right from the very beginning my work in the House has been on matters having to do with conservation. This includes reclamation and irrigation, public lands, mines and mining, Indians, national parks, we've added since then recreation areas; and of course, also the territorial operation. It was in the far Pacific where he served during the Second World War, and over which my committee now has jurisdiction. These different things, I would say, even though we didn't have to talk, but nevertheless when it came to presenting them before the House, and this was especially true when he became president. I think that's

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about as much as we should do at this time,

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much. I've enjoyed it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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