

(Elizabeth) May Craig Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/02/1966
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Washington, DC Newspaper Correspondent, discusses covering John F. Kennedy's time in Washington D.C. as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Senate, and as President, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

(Elizabeth) May Craig

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(Elizabeth) May Craig – JFK#1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Impressions of John F. Kennedy [JFK] as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives
2	Professional relationship with JFK and Craig’s time on “Meet the Press”
3	New England and the Kennedy family
4, 28	JFK’s illnesses
5	JFK’s appearances on “Meet the Press”
7, 10, 25	Personal contact during JFK’s time in the Senate
8	JFK in social settings and his relationship with female reporters
10, 14	Opinion of JFK’s campaign effort and covering the primaries
12	West Virginia during the 1960 campaign
13	Craig’s experience as a reporter
14	Discussing World War II experience with JFK
15, 18	JFK’s handling of the press and working with White House press secretaries
16	JFK’s relationship with women and women’s rights issues
17	Comments on managed news in various presidential administrations
19	JFK’s thoughts on miscegenation
20	Relationship between JFK and various figures on Capitol Hill
23	JFK’s efforts to make the Democratic Party a national party
25, 27, 30	Thoughts on JFK’s major accomplishments and failures as president
26	Hearing the news of the assassination in the Senate press gallery
28	Anecdotes about JFK’s campaign habits
29	Inauguration Day 1961

Oral History Interview

With

(Elizabeth) May Craig

June 2, 1966

Wheaton, Maryland

By Ronald J. Grele

Also present, John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mrs. Craig, do you recall when you first met John F. Kennedy?

CRAIG: When he came to the House. I knew him in the House.

GRELE: Do you recall a specific instance?

CRAIG: Only that I was working mostly then for New England papers, and therefore I was interested in him. He had been in foreign affairs, and he was notable, and his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] was an ambassador. And living in Washington as I have since, oh, childhood—most of the time here—I was always interested, of course, in ambassadors and government people. So that when he came, I was interested. He was a very attractive man, you see. And he was a man who always knew what he wanted to say, and didn't usually go outside of what he wanted to say, although he was always interested in questions or conversations or people, or at gatherings where he could find out something, learn something, and also get acquainted with people and make his own estimate of them. He was very good at that, you know.

[-1-]

GRELE: Did he ever talk with you about his program for New England?

CRAIG: Oh, sometime, of course, because I covered all of New England, he wanted to get into the New England papers. Even when he was just representing a district in the House, he had his ambitions. I think he always had his ambitions. Although, of course, the family had planned that the older brother should be the one, you see, who was to be president. Oh, they had it all planned out. The old man was really quite a guy, too. I never knew him well, but he made it his business to know all about anybody that knew anything about Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] or Jack, I knew him, particularly on account of New England.

And then a lot of people were interested in talking with me because for, oh, fifteen years I was on the "Meet the Press" program, you see. And everybody wanted to get on that. It was a very good program for people in politics or in public life. So that made an added avenue open to me for really seeing people quite beyond my paper. And then working for the *New York World* was a great thing. It was funny the way that happened. I was doing odds and ends around Washington. Long years ago, there was nobody who did really feature stories in Washington. So I got into the feature service for the *New York World*. It was an odd thing.

Perhaps you remember years ago, Sir Oliver Lodge was looking into psychology and transcendentalism, all that sort of thing, you see. So everybody was interested in whether there was or wasn't a soul. And the *New York Sunday World* had really quite an imaginative Sunday editor. He and I just got along fine. He always wanted something a little different. He called me up and said, "Go around and ask scientists and people if they believe in the soul." So I traipsed down to the National Academy of Sciences and got hold of some scientist. He was grumpy. He didn't want to see me anyway. He didn't believe in women reporters. You know there was great objection to women reporters in the beginning. They thought they didn't have any brains and certainly no judgment. So I went in, and I said, "Do you believe in the soul?" He said, "Well, define what you mean by soul." Well, that stumped me right there. But it turned out an extremely good thing because he started on a discussion of all kinds of ideas about the soul, the Karma,

[-2-]

you know. So I got an awful good story about him. Got some extra pay for it, too. So those things just happen, you know.

GRELE: Did John Kennedy ever come to you to request your help in getting on "Meet the Press?"

CRAIG: I don't think he did, I don't think he needed to. I mean, "Meet the Press" was always looking for new talent, and particularly, since it was a picture thing, they liked somebody who was nice looking too. I don't know that he got on as soon as he wanted to because everybody wanted to get on. It was a very good program for publicity purposes. He was ambitious, but he wasn't pushy. He usually got what he wanted and he went after it, but he did it in a nice way.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the specifics that he talked to you about New England? Did he question you about the problem of textiles in Maine or in Massachusetts?

CRAIG: Yes, but we went far beyond that. We talked about New England problems because he was ambitious and he wanted votes wherever he could get them for his future plans, although until Joe died, he didn't know he was going to be the one to go on. He didn't restrict himself to New England because he had a much larger view of what he wanted to do. But of course, New England was his stance, so that he wanted to hold on to his place there, and in the House of course. But he was always ambitious and had a very wide view of things. He knew he wanted to go to the top if he could.

GRELE: You've mentioned a couple of times now that Joe was slated to go to the White House, and John was not. Did the Ambassador ever give you this information or....

CRAIG: I don't understand the question.

GRELE: The question is, how do you know that it was Joe who was going to go to the White House?

CRAIG: Oh, everybody knew because his father meant it that way. He brought him up to be that way. The old man was quite frank about it. He was going to have his sons get on; Joe was the older, and Joe was to go to the

[-3 -]

White House. Then, of course, when Joe died, Jack was next in line. They didn't call him Jack much around the Capitol, though. I knew him briefly you see, before he came down here because he was quite prominent with his father an ambassador. But only very casually. I never thought about his being president. Then, of course, when he came to the House, I wrote about him for New England. He was a good speaker, and he was handsome, and he had a good voice, and he really worked at the job. I mean it just didn't happen for him, he really worked at it.

GRELE: Do you recall when you began to consider him worthy of wider coverage than the usual New England congressman or senator?

CRAIG: Yes, as soon as he came to the House, I found in talking to him that he not only had ambition, but he had qualifications. His father having been ambassador, he had traveled widely. He had been around, and he knew languages. I could see that he wasn't going to be just restricted to a district. Only thing I didn't know was whether as a millionaire's son that he'd really work at it—it's hard work—and whether he'd do it right. He was a liberal, which didn't always sit too well back home.

For instance, when they wanted the Saint Lawrence Seaway. The railroaders and the businessmen up there didn't know what it might do to the ports, and that was all they were thinking about. Well, he was already thinking about what's good for the country. Of course, the Saint Lawrence Seaway was a great thing. First, it bettered our relations with Canada, which were not always very friendly; and it was good for the whole country, and so he was for it, but at any rate, he was among the few who did. So that even then, he had a wider view than most.

GRELE: Did you think at the time that his illness might hinder him in his drive and ambition?

CRAIG: Yes, of course, we all did because it was a bad thing, that back of his. He was in pain most of the time, a lot of the time he was immobilized. I remember when he came through Washington once on his way South, he was immobilized on a stretcher and, after all, the presidency is an

[-4-]

awful tough job physically. You've got to travel, you've got to stand for hours shaking hands and talking and making speeches and that kind of thing. The presidency is physically tough, and we didn't know whether he was going to be on his back. Well, I didn't think that anybody on his back would ever get elected president. After all, the presidency is physically a tough job, with travelling, and campaigning and speaking. Now that was the thing. If he was going to be bedridden, as you might say, people wouldn't have voted for him. But he kept at it, and he exercised. Swimming was a great thing for him, and he sailed a lot. The swimming was good exercise. It helped his back immensely. And he took exercises. That's another thing about him. He took exercises and worked at it. Most people will only do this for a day or two, and then they'll get tired of it, you know. He was not like that. I came to realize, in the House particularly, that he was really a tough character, and what he wanted, he wanted, although he had stood back as long as it looked like the elder brother was to be the one to make the family famous.

GRELE: When he was a senator, he appeared on "Meet the Press" a number of times. How did he handle himself on "Meet the Press?"

CRAIG: Oh, very well. In the first place, you see, he was good to look at. He was handsome. In the second place he had a composure because from his boyhood as the ambassador's son and living around, he had a great deal of poise. It stood him in good stead. And he had a good voice. He was experienced and thoughtful way beyond what the ordinary young congressman comes down to the Hill with who had scarcely been out of his district. He had a good background to begin with, and he utilized it. And then his father pushed him and helped him. They had a lot of money, which helps, you know. They didn't have to think of every five cents. When somebody wanted him to come make a speech, they didn't have to say "We're certainly sorry, we can't pay expenses," which happens, you see.

GRELE: Do you recall if he was ever stumped on “Meet the Press?” Did he ever fumble a question?

[-5-]

CRAIG: Well, if you asked him a question which had a lot of implications to it, he wouldn't hurry himself to give you a quick answer. But again, you don't get on “Meet the Press” until you've had considerable experience. They seldom have anybody that hasn't been on the air before and had experience of some kind which qualifies them. Most people like that can do fairly well. Some people are very shy, it's not that they're not able; some of them are afraid of the microphone. [Laughter] Really, you know. Not so long ago, down at the Press Club, Larry Spivak [Lawrence E. Spivak] had a show with a lot of excerpts from “Meet the Press.” There were several of me. I looked at myself and I was speaking, and I said to Larry, who was sitting next to me, “Did I say that?” You know, it's true. But there it was with my own voice and my own picture on the screen. So you can readily see when a man's going into politics, he has to learn that, too.

GRELE: Did you notice a change in time in John Kennedy?

CRAIG: In what time?

GRELE: A change when he first came to the House and then when you knew him later as a Senator when he was on “Meet the Press.” Did you notice that there had been any change in him, in his bearing....

CRAIG: What kind of a change?

GRELE: Did he feel more at ease in the interview situation?

CRAIG: Oh yes, of course. As I said, being the son of a rich man and having travelled and known people and having been an ambassador's son, he had an early education in being with people and had observed a great many prominent people around the world. He was very fortunate in that way. And then he traveled himself. And he did extremely well in college, you know. Choate, I think, picked him as the most likely to succeed. He just progressed and learned, so that I think he was always at ease by the time he got—well, maybe not to the House, because the House tames new members! They don't like new members to be brash. That's where Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] has made some little mistakes. Bobby came to the Senate and started making

[-6-]

speeches, you know. They tame them. They tame them when they do those things. Seniority is a great thing, you know. All your committees, your progress, is by seniority in the House and Senate. But Kennedy had a good deal of background around the world which was helpful

to him. When I came to know him, he was always at ease, but never ahead of himself. He held back more than Bobby does, which was a good thing because it made him well received in the House, and then he didn't make too many mistakes by talking too much too soon.

GRELE: During the senatorial years, did you have any personal contact with him or his staff?

CRAIG: Not much with his staff but always with him because I had known him in the House and he was interested in what I was doing. And we liked each other, you see, and we liked to talk to each other. I could give to him, and he could give to me. It wasn't that I got interviews, particularly. Outside of the House chamber there is a little sitting room, a place where you come to talk to people; we used to just talk, he liked to have me come down and tell him what was going on, and he'd tell me what was going on.

GRELE: Do you recall what you talked about?

CRAIG: Everything, everything. Politics, family, and what I was doing, and what I thought of everybody, and what he thought of everybody. He knew that I was very discreet. I never would quote anybody unless I said so. Any reporter that does that even once, you know, is poison.

GRELE: Do you recall what his specific opinions were of the leaders of the Congress at the time? That was during the Truman [Harry S. Truman] Administration.

CRAIG: Well, of course Rayburn [Sam Rayburn] was a great man; everybody respected him, and he was a fine, experienced, good speaker. McCormack [John William McCormack] is not. McCormack kind of fell into it. He had a good background, and he progressed, and he took advantage of everything. He is really shrewd and sharp.

[-7-]

GRELE: Did John Kennedy ever give to you his opinions of McCormack?

CRAIG: Oh, yes. We talked about everything. But that would be off the record. And, you know, that's where, if you prove yourself trustworthy, then you're a much better reporter because you know whereof you speak. You don't ever write everything people tell you. You have to be very discreet or else they won't talk to you. They'll know better. A reporter can ruin a man by repeating something that he had thought he was just saying as we were having a chat. Most of my press education and my knowledge of the scene was gotten by completely off the record talks with people. I knew Mr. Rayburn well. He didn't talk to many reporters, but I knew him long before he got to be speaker. I used to go to his office and sit around and chat. That's the education that gives you

good judgment. But if you betray anybody, by golly, that's the last time you betray any of them because they'll pass the word around so-and-so is poison.

GRELE: Well, was the tension between John Kennedy and then majority leader McCormack as deep as some people have made it to be, or as slight as it was presented in terms of Massachusetts politics?

CRAIG: Well, the answer would have to be kind of yes and no. It was quite natural that McCormack should be envious of a young man who should come up in the world like that, although I doubt if John Kennedy would have ever been elected speaker even if he'd wanted to be.

GRELE: Yes, I mean, do you recall their bitter fight for control of the Massachusetts party?

CRAIG: Oh yes, but that was a local thing and didn't bother us too much here. The only thing we cared about in fights up there was who was going to get to come to Washington.

GRELE: Eleanor Harris, in *Look Magazine*, claimed that you favor parties of one male politician and eleven women reporters. Did you ever have such a party where John Kennedy attended?

[-8-]

CRAIG: Well, we had so many. I used to have them to my house, you see, and I very carefully selected people who I asked to come. Everything was off the record and everybody talked and ate my fried chicken. That was my Southern background you see. I had a wonderful cook. I've had her for forty years, you know. (This cook still comes to me once a week for odds and ends of work and serving.) Yes, Senator Kennedy did come to my parties, but I don't recollect a specific occasion.

GRELE: You wouldn't recall how John Kennedy handled himself with a bevy of women, newspaper...

CRAIG: Oh, extremely well.

GRELE: Did he?

CRAIG: John loved the ladies, you know.

GRELE: Was it reciprocal?

CRAIG: What?

GRELE: Did the women reporters love him too?

CRAIG: Oh yes. He was handsome, he was nice to them, he'd give them news stories, and with the ones he could trust, he really was very good at the stories. He never discriminated against women reporters. Some politicians did many years ago. Unfortunately, most of them were only society reporters and that didn't interest a politician up at the Capitol very much.

GRELE: Did you every talk with John Kennedy about your early problems as a woman reporter?

CRAIG: Oh yes, but he was very liberal and he'd help me in any way he could. He didn't believe in any type of discrimination. He was young, and he had a tough time getting down here too, partly because he was Catholic, you see. That was quite something. When they elected a Catholic president, that was a great thing. He had it in his

[-9-]

mind all the way, you see. After Joe died, he was to be the one. And, oh, we talked about everything. That was what made us friends because he felt that I had a good deal I could tell him, and I knew he had a good deal he could tell me.

GRELE: Would you care to recall for us some of those discussions that you shared, of the opinions that you shared in those days?

CRAIG: Well, I couldn't because we talked about everything, and quite freely, because I could trust him and he could trust me. And I got around too, you see, so there were a lot of things I could talk with him about. It was a mutual benefit to society besides being very pleasant.

GRELE: When he was in Congress, what were his relations like with the other members of Congress?

CRAIG: Well, some of them rather resented him. One, because he was young. One, because he was rich. And in the House they go by seniority and they like to tame new ones, you know, and if you try to burst ahead.... That's one thing that happened to Bobby. They all thought Bobby would be fresh, but Bobby did pretty well at holding himself back.

GRELE: Do you recall in particular who wanted to tame John Kennedy?

CRAIG: No, I don't particularly.

GRELE: When he announced for the presidency, when he announced that he was going to seek the nomination, did you think that he could get it?

CRAIG: Well, no, I didn't really. He was young, he was a Catholic, and he was liberal, and those were three things that were tough, you know. But they all helped him, after all. There are a lot of young people in this country, and nothing says you couldn't have so young a president. One thing did surprise me: I was out there when he finally decided to have Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] as his running mate. And that astounded us. It was a shrewd thing to do because Johnson had

[-10-]

wanted it himself, you see. Johnson was an older man, experienced, and self-assured. And who was this young whippersnapper! I was at the Convention at the time with a whole lot of other reporters. They were having meetings, you know, and they were trying to decide who was going to be the vice president. Then they called us in and they said, well, it's to be Johnson. I must say I was a little surprised, both of them being very self-willed, you know. It was quite a thing. I wrote a piece that Johnson happened to see, and he didn't like it too much. When he would have to appear with Kennedy, of course, he would stand one step behind him. I wrote a piece in which I said, "Standing decently two steps behind him with a 'your most obedient servant' look...." Mr. Johnson and I also used to talk about things, you know, and he said, "What do you mean, 'most obedient servant'?" And I said, "Well, that was really an entirely appropriate description. That's the expression you had on."

GRELE: Did you cover John Kennedy during the primaries?

CRAIG: I did not travel with him much. Just enough to see how he did.

GRELE: How did he do?

CRAIG: Very well. In the first place, as I say, he was tall. You take a short man.... Now that was one thing about Rayburn, for instance. He was short. And you get behind the speaking stand and it's difficult to see you. Kennedy was tall, and he was slim, and he dressed very nicely. Never a show-off, but he dressed very nicely. He didn't dress up with jewelry much, just tie clasps. He'd usually go in for plain jackets. He was an awful good campaigner. And of course, all the women liked him. There are more women voters than men anyway now. So that was a big help, you see.

GRELE: During the primary days did he ever comment to you on anything you had written about him?

CRAIG: Oh, yes.

GRELE: Favorably?

[-11-]

CRAIG: Both.

GRELE: And unfavorably. Do you recall...

CRAIG: I never aimed to be unfavorable.

GRELE: Do you recall any of the specifics of both favorable and unfavorable?

CRAIG: No, I don't really. I have a recollection of sitting there where reporters go to talk to people, and there was a fuss about someone, but I don't remember now what it was. I said, "Well, I always try to write it the way I see it, when you needed help and I wrote the way I saw it, you were a good candidate." He liked that.

GRELE: At one time, you criticized the government's failure to provide for the needy in West Virginia. This was in 1960 at a news conference with President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. Did this have any connection with the primary in that state at that time?

CRAIG: I don't remember what it was about, but we had some fusses. Eisenhower, of course, unfortunately had been a general and a military man and had not spent his life answering questions. And he was never very good at it. He was handsome, had a nice voice, and he was nice about it, but he was never really a politician.

GRELE: Governor Underwood [Cecil H. Underwood], at that time, took umbrage at some of the things you said about the needy in West Virginia. Do you recall that?

CRAIG: Oh, yes. You see, if you're a reporter, you're suppose to write a thing just as it is, as far as you can find out. You're bound to get in trouble because very few people will take it in stride if it's something that hurts.

GRELE: Did you go down to West Virginia during the primary in 1960?

[-12-]

CRAIG: Some, not much; because, after all, I had all the states to cover. My papers wanted me to go where I could get the most for the expense money.

GRELE: I was wondering if you had any impression of John Kennedy's first impressions of the poverty in West Virginia. The very wealthy son of a wealthy ambassador...

CRAIG: I went on that trip, and I was just horrified at what I saw. I really was, I was just petrified about it. But, having come from the South where we have these Negro slums and everything, and having traveled, and been in New York in the slums, I knew they existed. But one of the reasons Kennedy got elected was because he really was a liberal and he had a feeling for people. He had a feeling for poor people, which in a millionaire's son always surprised me a little bit. Rich men's sons mean well, but they just don't know what it is, you know.

GRELE: Do you recall anything else about the Convention of 1960 other than your surprise at the vice presidential nomination, or selection?

CRAIG: No, it was like most of them, except Kennedy was a very charming candidate. I probably have a tremendous lot that I probably got while I wrote about it at the time down in my files, but it would take a lot of going through to find it, and I don't think you care that much about it.

GRELE: Well, someday somebody should have the...

CRAIG: Well, I'll tell you. The Library of Congress had asked me officially for all of my papers, and I have replied that they could have them subject to my children's consent at the time. I thought that it was very nice to be asked. In the first place, I was quite flattered. In the second place, it's a good place to be because, after all, my newspaper career, my life has been in Washington, and that is the place for it to be. I wrote a daily column, you see. I finally cut it down to five a week instead of seven. And I've got most

[-13-]

of them, so that there's a vast... And I wrote all kinds of odds and ends about everything, just like I'm talking to you, both the men's side and the women's side. I traveled a great deal; I was war correspondent in World War II. That was a great experience. I was among the first three reporters that went into the Dachau concentration camp when the Americans got there. Oh, that was awful. Three thousand bodies flung up against a brick wall of the crematorium.

GRELE: Did you ever talk to John Kennedy about that experience? Did you ever...

CRAIG: Oh, yes, we talked about everything. That's one reason I liked talking to him, because he knew things that I didn't, you see.

GRELE: During the election, did you travel at all with John Kennedy?

CRAIG: Oh, yes. I went with everybody, some. It was very expensive and my papers were fairly small. They wanted me to go with all of them because after all, that was part of being a Washington correspondent. And, if I may

say so, I was known all over New England. And then my papers were in the Library of Congress newspaper files, you see. The House has a file of nearly all papers in the House Members lobby outside of the chamber so that congressmen in the House would read what I wrote too, occasionally. They liked to keep up on what everybody says.

GRELE: What were the differences between the Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and Kennedy organizations during that campaign?

CRAIG: Well, what would you expect against two self-willed, ambitious men who wanted to win? But they didn't actually fight. They realized that that wouldn't look well because people would say, "Oh this is childish," you know, and that's bad so....

GRELE: I'm sorry, I didn't mean differences in that sense. I meant, was there easier access to the candidate in the Kennedy entourage or in the Nixon entourage?

[-14-]

CRAIG: Oh, both of them wanted reporters in. They wanted as many press to go as they could and to see them. And both felt perfectly competent to handle the press, and they were. If they were running for the president and couldn't handle the press, they were beat before they began. Anybody that's going to really be a serious candidate for the presidency is well aware of the "press problems," as they call it.

GRELE: Was that the first time that you had dealt with Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger]?

CRAIG: Yes, it was.

GRELE: How is he to work with? How effective is he?

CRAIG: Oh, I got along fine. Of course, I realized that he was circumscribed in what he could say. He had to know what the boss wanted and be prepared for every kind of a question, and yet he didn't do himself or the president any good by not answering questions that ought to be answered. The thing was to do it right. But any presidential press secretary learns that they've got to be good to be the press secretary, and then they learn to kind of ride a straight path. Don't get mad with the press and don't act superior and don't act funny. Tell everything you can, and frankly say, "I don't think I can answer that, or I don't think I can discuss that right now." Most people who get up to be a press secretary to a president have learned; they know. Of course, they have brain sessions ahead of time and say, "Well, what is so and so going to ask do you suppose?" And they decide if he's going to say no comment, or if he's going to answer, or what tack he should take. It's tough being a press secretary for a president. Yes, that's tough.

GRELE: Would you care to compare for us John Kennedy's handling of the press with that of the other presidents that you have worked with?

CRAIG: Well, of course, Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] was awful good with the press. In the first place, he was a very competent man; he'd been around, and he knew a lot of us. He did fine. Truman was not so good in the beginning as president, but he got better. I always had a great sympathy

[-15-]

for a president's press secretary because he's supposed to give out the news, and yet he's got to be so careful in the way he says it. He may make a perfectly honest answer, but it may have been very indiscreet, or simply misunderstood or underplayed or overplayed or something. And then the boss gives him hell.

GRELE: Was John Kennedy as confident and easy with the press as President Roosevelt?

CRAIG: Well, not perhaps so, because they were different kind of people. Roosevelt was long experienced as a governor, and he was handsome, and he was more easy to begin with. Kennedy was not as easy to begin with.

GRELE: On November 9, 1961, you questioned President Kennedy on the status of his campaign promises in terms of the status of women. Were you satisfied with his response?

CRAIG: I don't remember the exact response, but he was always for women having a fair shake. You see, he'd had some hard times getting elected himself. Being a Catholic. That was a tough thing, you know. Some people had the Pope moving right into the White House.

GRELE: Did you find much of this in New England among your readers?

CRAIG: Everywhere. Oh, it was everywhere. But it was a senseless fear.

GRELE: Do you feel this made him more sympathetic to women, the plight of the status of women?

CRAIG: I think so.

GRELE: His response to your particular question concerning women was that, "Whatever it was, we're not doing enough, Mrs. Craig." And the press corps started laughing. What was your reaction to the laughter of the press gallery?

CRAIG: Oh, I don't mind because, after all, you see, I was one of the pioneers in women's rights. I expected it to be tough, I expected it to be hard, and I'll say with all

[-16-]

modesty that some women would have been just nuisances, and if they got elected, it would have been too bad. But I learned in a hard school because I had to be just as competent as any man could be in order to hold a job. As a matter of fact, I've always been for women's right, but I'm for everybody's rights, you know. The only time that I ever marched in a parade that I recollect, I marched in a parade for votes for women in Washington, and the police didn't give us any protection. I was a young, married woman, and they had a homemakers' section, so I was marching in the homemakers' section. That seemed a good thing to do. Show everybody that it was for votes for women and not necessarily defeminized. It was on Pennsylvania Avenue, and they didn't really give us any protection. The hoodlums stood and called out bad names at us. I must say that one hoodlum yelled, "Why aren't you home looking after your children?" And I said, "Why aren't you home looking after yours?" Which, of course, was the really unwise thing to do, but I was so annoyed. Of course, men don't stay home and look after the children, but at any rate, it surprised him so that I marched right on.

GRELE: You also questioned the President on the problem of managed news. How serious was this problem in the Kennedy Administration?

CRAIG: Not anymore than many. This managed news business is.... Well, it's very hard to draw a line. The President or any prominent person is responsible for what he says. It must be discreet, it must not malign anybody, it must be true. It must be justified, not something somebody dragged in. And yet as a reporter, you ask what ought to be asked over a wide range. But you also ask what your particular publications would like to have asked, so that it's like a game of tennis. You bat the ball back and forth, you know, and you don't know who's going to win.

GRELE: Was it as great a problem or did it differ seriously from earlier administrations, such as the Truman Administration or the Eisenhower Administration?

CRAIG: Well, they all differ according to the person and according to his politics, and according to whether he's a liberal or not so liberal. Most people who get

[-17-]

to be president have learned to handle it, and the White House press goes on forever. Of course, now it's changed, but a White House conference is a White House conference, and everybody tries to ask everything they can think of that ought to be asked.

GRELE: What was your opinion of the innovations in the press conferences under Kennedy? Holding them in the State Department Auditorium, televising them....

CRAIG: Oh, I was all for getting them televised; TV is a new medium, and besides, it was very good for the President because it showed him as a person, not just as a depersonalized voice. Of course, if you didn't look well, that is just too bad; and if you don't do very well, that is just too bad. That is your fault, not the fault of the press. But I'm very much in favor of as much television as you can get for the people's information because to see the person and to hear it come right out of his own mouth is not like anything else. And really, if you haven't got confidence in yourself, you'd better not try for a high post.

GRELE: Did you feel that women reporters were treated equally during the Kennedy Administration?

CRAIG: They're never treated equally in any administration.

GRELE: Never?

CRAIG: No.

GRELE: Why?

CRAIG: Big papers, important papers or big publications necessarily you get in.... After all, the personage wants publicity. I'm using publicity in a perfectly decent sense. He wants the widest circulation possible, and in varied publications or on the air.... And, that's quite natural. Everybody does the best they can for themselves.

GRELE: Do you feel that if you worked for, say the *New York Times* or ABC [American Broadcasting Company], you would have had much more access?

CRAIG: Oh yes, of course.

[-18-]

GRELE: Then, it would seem to me that there is a kind of hierarchy in the press.

CRAIG: Well, I don't like the word, but it's quite natural that if you were in public life you would want widespread. . . . Of course, I think you'd probably think you'd get the best coverage, the most favorable coverage, from people who thought as you did, who were on that side of the fence. But, that's all right. Good gracious. If you're in public life or in a place where you want your views to get out, you take the good with the bad. You may get in a critical publication, but at the same time, you'll get in the good ones. And I think it's a good thing to be covered, even though critically, in the kind of publications that those hostile to you might read. Otherwise, they'll never get to know what you say.

GRELE: When you asked the question about miscegenation, you said that you spoke to the President afterwards.

CRAIG: Yes.

GRELE: Did he expand his remarks? What did he say in that private conversation?

CRAIG: Oh yes, we talked a long time about it. He was for equal rights racially as well as every other way. He really was. That book that I have in the photo. You know, the one I'm holding in my arm, did you notice it? Well, did you notice the title?

GRELE: No, I didn't notice the title. I noticed that you were holding a book. You got the book from the Library of Congress?

CRAIG: Yes. When I was going to ask a President a question, I always tried to know something about the background of the question I was going to ask, because otherwise he can really cut your throat if he wants to right there in front of everybody, and on television. There are a great many problems in renting houses and all kinds of things, but the principal thing that's objected to is marriage of two races. So I went down to the Library of Congress and went to a friend of mine, and I

[-19-]

told him what I wanted. And I said, "Have you got a book on it, and may I take it?" Well, many of the books they don't lend out, and this was one of them. But he fixed it, and I got it, and that's the book in the picture. And I took it down to the President with me, and he was terribly interested and kept me in the office and flipped the pages and looked at it and talked about it. Of course, that's a very ticklish subject, you know, this mixed thing on races. So in that picture that I just showed you, I'm holding this particular book. If you want to boil the whole book down to one sentence, it says there haven't been any pure races for thousands of years and probably not since the Garden of Eden.

GRELE: What was President Kennedy's comprehension of the problem?

CRAIG: Oh, he was very liberal about it, but he realized the difficulty. And as a Democrat, of course, he wanted Southern votes. And in the South—you can't blame the South where the majority are Negroes—it becomes a personal thing. Miscegenation, a Negro man with a white woman, you just say that to a Southerner, and they all turn Ku Klux Klan on you. But there shouldn't be a law. Now I think mixed marriages are very difficult and usually unhappy because you live in two worlds and you don't really belong to either of them. It's a very difficult thing. But there certainly oughtn't to be a law that you can't marry whomever you want to marry. Miscegenation laws are certainly unconstitutional.

GRELE: To your mind, did President Kennedy feel the same way?

CRAIG: Yes, he did. Yes, he did.

GRELE: Excuse me for a minute while I change the tape.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

GRELE: Did President Kennedy every comment to you on your reported feud with Senator Smith [Margaret Chase Smith] of Maine? *Newsweek* magazine at one time carried a report that you were feuding with the Senator.

[-20-]

CRAIG: Well, it wasn't exactly feuding because I try not to feud with my sources. But I did intend to write whatever I thought I ought to write, and I did. And she is extremely sensitive to criticism. She's a bright woman, a brilliant woman, and a good senator. But she's very sensitive, and she has an administrative assistant who just thinks that she is wonderful, and he doesn't like anybody to write anything about here that he doesn't want written. So that made it a little bit difficult. But my papers were always with me, and when she was back in Maine and her administrative assistant was in Maine, too, in the summers and other times, the other people on my papers had their troubles. So they understood perfectly what I was up against here.

GRELE: At one time John Kennedy had had some trouble with Senator Smith.

CRAIG: Oh, much. Oh, very much. They didn't get on at all. Being New Englanders, you see, and when he was in the Senate, she had been there a long time, you see, and so they had some feuds too.

GRELE: Did he ever comment to you on the similarity of your situations?

CRAIG: No comment.

GRELE: No, none at all.

CRAIG: I mean I'm saying no comment.

GRELE: Oh, he did then?

CRAIG: I didn't say he did, I said no comment. That answers you.

GRELE: You've had too much experience with press conferences.

CRAIG: And of course, you see, it's a little difficult to feud with a woman member. You want to be polite and you want to be nice, and you don't want to be rude... But still you have to because it's a matter of business and politics. Senator Smith succeeded her husband [Clyde H. Smith]. He was in the House, and she succeeded him when he died. She was his secretary, and awfully good at it. She knew the whole picture, as a matter of fact, she was very experienced in handling congressional affairs. When he died, she got elected. She was perfectly competent to handle the job.

[-21-]

GRELE: This brings up another question that we discussed earlier off the tape, John Kennedy's treatment of women. You said that he was formal with women?

CRAIG: Well, formal in a nice way. He gave a little extra politeness and courtesy to women. He was that kind of a person, and he did. Most of the time, he still called me Mrs. Craig, you see, although he'd known me so long. Once in a while he wouldn't because most people just called me May Craig like it was one word. But he was always very nice. He was just courteous to women and very thoughtful about them. If you sent in for him, if you came down from the press gallery to the place where you would see them, either in the House or in the Senate, and you sent in for him and he couldn't come right away, he'd say, "I'm sorry I kept you waiting." He was just like that.

GRELE: I've been told that you were very close to Judge Smith [Howard W. Smith]?

CRAIG: Oh yes, he and I are great friends.

GRELE: What were relations like between Judge Smith and the President?

CRAIG: Well, not so good.

GRELE: Formal or just reasonable?

CRAIG: Well, I don't know what went on in the purlieus of the private office, but the Judge felt that he was one of the boss men at the Capitol, which he certainly was. And he didn't like being dictated to, particularly by a young whippersnapper of a President.

GRELE: Was he being dictated to or was it just something he felt?

CRAIG: Well, you know, when you've been around as long as that, and as one of the top guys at the capitol, you see.... He and I got along fine. As a matter of fact, it was on "Meet the Press" that I got out of him

[-22-]

a half-promise that he'd do something about getting the sex clause in the legislation, you see.

GRELE: Equal rights?

CRAIG: Yes. I asked him how he felt about it, and he expressed himself. And I said, "Well, then why don't you do something about it?" And he said, "Well, I might just do that."

GRELE: Did he?

CRAIG: Right on the air. "Well, I might just do that." And by golly, he did.

GRELE: Were you ever called upon to mediate between the President and Judge Smith?

CRAIG: No.

GRELE: No. The President never asked you to feel out Judge Smith if Judge Smith....

CRAIG: No. No.

GRELE: How were the President's relations with the Southern members of Congress?

CRAIG: Well, yes and no. Each needed the other. He needed them, particularly because the South is mostly Democratic, and they needed him because they wanted to keep a Democrat in the White House if they could. Of course, when you say Southerners, they're of all categories now. Some are very liberal, and some are not; and when you belong to the same party, you have to submerge differences as much as you can in order to stay in power. And sensible, ambitious members and Presidents do that. It's like everything else in life, you have to compromise.

GRELE: In your notes, you said that you felt President Kennedy would not succeed in making the Democratic Party a truly national party. Why did you feel this way?

[-23-]

CRAIG: Well, there again, you have the Negro problem. If you lived in the South, where the majority are Negroes, and unfortunately suffered long centuries of submission, ill-treatment, of unfair treatment, you would find that it was a very difficult thing because you've got to have white votes and you've got to have Negro votes now. When Negroes didn't vote, maybe it was easier. If you live where the Negroes are in the majority, you certainly need the votes now. So it's rather difficult for a Southerner to please everybody and get reelected.

GRELE: Did President Kennedy want to make the Democratic Party a national party?

CRAIG: Oh, of course he did. He believed in it. He was a Democrat from the heart out, and he wanted to make it a national party so you could keep the Democrats in power in Congress and everywhere else.

GRELE: How did he compare to President Truman or President Roosevelt as a party leader?

CRAIG: Well, now that's a wide question.

GRELE: Did he have more control over the state organizations or less control, or did he want...

CRAIG: In the party, or the Congress?

GRELE: As a party leader.

CRAIG: As a party leader.

GRELE: As a party.

CRAIG: Well, I suppose Roosevelt was the biggest of my time, and then he was in so long, and that meant years of patronage and that sort of thing, you see. If Kennedy had lived, he might have been just as good in welding the party together as Roosevelt tried to be. You see, you can't tell. You can't even say that Kennedy was great because he wasn't in long enough to know. I think he had the elements and the ambition and the will, but he wasn't in long enough really to have a fair chance at it.

[-24-]

GRELE: My next question was going to be, how would you assess his presidency?

CRAIG: I don't think it would be fair to try to do it. For the time he was in, I thought he did very well, and he had a lot of problems. But the time was too short. I never particularly blamed him for the Cuba thing.

GRELE: Which, the Bay of Pigs?

CRAIG: Yes. My inclination was to say, "Well, for goodness sake, if you're going in at all, why didn't you go in to win with whatever it took?" And still within myself I feel that way about it. But after all, there were many very difficult aspects of that, including, you know, what they always say about the United States: it wants to run all of Latin America.

GRELE: Yes. Would you say that this was his greatest failure? Would you say that the Bay of Pigs was his greatest failure?

CRAIG: Well, it was the most noticeable failure. Personally, I always feel that if you're going in at all, go in to win with everything it takes. But I don't know whether the country was willing to do that.

GRELE: Yes. What do you think was his greatest accomplishment?

CRAIG: Well, it's hard to pick out a single thing. I think he did a great deal for his party because he was a liberal, and for so long Democrats were regarded as only the South, you see. And he really made a great advance in making his party national. I think he would have done more had he lived. He was young and experienced, as I say, with his knowledge of foreign affairs, and I think he would have done a great deal for the party if he had lived.

GRELE: You mentioned that you had spoken with him after you had gone abroad a few times.

CRAIG: Always when I went, he'd have me come in and talk about it. At the Capitol, too.

[-25-]

GRELE: Do you recall any of the specifics of these conversations?

CRAIG: No, just everything. What did I do, where I'd been, and who'd I'd seen, and what did I think.

GRELE: Did you feel that he was taking your opinion seriously, or just asking you as decorum?

CRAIG: Oh yes. Oh, he always took my opinion seriously because he'd known me a long time. I had been covering Congress before he got there. And we liked each other, and we had respect for each other's opinion, and it made our contacts not only friendly, but mutually beneficial.

GRELE: Did he ever ask your advice in dealing with Congress since you had been there so long?

CRAIG: Not in the way of advice. He'd ask me what I thought of such and such a situation, or what did I think of such and such a bill. But never advice. I wouldn't advise anybody, it might not turn out right.

GRELE: That's the end of my questions. Can you think of anything we've missed.

CRAIG: No, I have this little paper that I have jotted down a few things that I thought you might like to run over.

GRELE: Certainly. Where were you at the time of the assassination? You have, "In the Senate press gallery someone shouted 'Kennedy shot!'"

CRAIG: I was in the Press Gallery, and we were, of course, listening to what was going on. Suddenly, from the Associated Press, which was in the next room but not cut off from the press gallery if you've ever been there—there's wide open press gallery where we all sit and talk, with the doors into the chamber, and then the press associations have a little separate place—the AP let out a shout, "Kennedy shot!" And then, of course, we all rushed and hung around the press association tickers. Then we set up a television which we had in the press gallery. We kept it on all afternoon, and we all clung to that to see what was going on.

[-26-]

GRELE: You were in Washington when President Johnson returned?

CRAIG: Yes, I was.

GRELE: What were your impressions of President Johnson at that moment in history taking office?

CRAIG: Well, of course the first thing is the shock of any calamity to a public person in a place of such importance. And then, if you have a personal feeling for them, there's hurt, there's grief. And then there's anger that it

should have happened. I was not among those who criticized the Secret Service about the Kennedy thing. You can't, you can never wholly protect the President, particularly when they ride in slow moving parades. That was a dangerous thing, and yet they have to do it. The inaugural parade is probably the first great danger to any president because it's very formal, it's very long, it moves so slowly, and the sidewalks are crowded with people, and who knows how many Oswalds [Lee Harvey Oswald] are there, because anybody who is willing to be killed himself on the spot can kill a President. He's a public personage and he has to appear in public with crowds of all kinds of people. And if you get a fanatic, you know, there's no safety for the President. But I have the greatest respect of the Secret Service. They work hard, they are criticized, they aren't paid very much. It's a dangerous business. I have a great respect for the Secret Service. I know a good many of them. They're friends of mine; I mean friends in that I hold respect for them and I've been able to be of a little service to them sometimes.

GRELE: You have here in your notes something that refers to an earlier questions; whether or not John Kennedy will be thought of as great, but you couldn't tell until ten years perhaps, and that....

CRAIG: At least ten years before you can judge.

GRELE: You have written down here sentiment and grief at the death does not make one great. Do you still believe that?

[-27-]

CRAIG: You're so apt in the first grief, you know, not to make a cool estimate of the person. I've always tried throughout my newspaper reporting never to let my personal feeling about a person influence my judgment of them in whatever their capacity might be.

GRELE: You have in here, just as an off comment, that you always liked to remember that he loved chocolate creams as a boy. Did he tell you that?

CRAIG: Isn't that interesting! I knew it.

GRELE: Did he tell you that?

CRAIG: I knew it. I saw them in his office. As a matter of fact, one time he ate one while I was there. He took it out of the drawer.

GRELE: You say he lived mostly on soup while he was in the Senate?

CRAIG: In his travels and his campaigns, it was quick and it could be made quite nourishing. You can get it anywhere. And in a hurried campaign the way he did, because he campaigned fiercely and hard and continuously.... So

soup was quick.

GRELE: You have a point here that you believe that he deserves to be in the category of the other people who are mentioned in *Profiles in Courage*.

CRAIG: What?

GRELE: The people who were mentioned in *Profiles in Courage*.

CRAIG: Yes, I do think he could have been. Think of it. That back! You know he lay on his back.... The time he went to Florida, you know, on a stretcher. Operations, you know, and discs slipping in and out, and fusing discs. Fusing discs I understand is a very ticklish thing. Maybe it works and maybe it doesn't work. And constant operations are very bad.

[-28-]

GRELE: Was he depressed during that period of time when he was undergoing these operations?

CRAIG: Yes, and just think of the courage it took. And he didn't have to, you see. He was a wealthy man of a good family, he could have sat back and enjoyed an easy life, but he didn't. He wanted to be President, he loved being President and everything.... One thing I think I perhaps mentioned is that this business of people who are at ground breaking ceremonies. They always pick up these great big heavy shovelfuls of dirt. Well now, lifting a shovelful of dirt is a very peculiarly taxing physical thing, but they almost all do it, you know. And I used to shudder sometimes when I would see him picking up this heavy shovel, thinking of that back. Because his back had been injured and re-injured. The time in the Pacific when he swam for three miles for four hours, dragging one of his men by the strap of his life belt, with a bad back to begin with. He went in for swimming and sailing because it was something he could do to develop him physically. He had a long illness as a child. He had all kinds of things. He had measles, and then he had jaundice, and then he had double pneumonia. For a man with a bad back, you see.... And then he had to wear that belt all the time. It wasn't a big one, but he still had to wear it all the time. I never saw a president in a rocking chair until I saw him. I mean just in front of the press and everything rocking, but he had it around. It was just a common old.... I don't know whether you've ever seen it. It's just a common old oak rocker, you know. But everybody ought to rock. Doctors say that it's a tranquilizer and it's a good even exercise all over as you go back and forth, even with your feet it's good. Look, you're sitting in one of my rocking chairs right now.

GRELE: Very comfortable. Do you recall Inauguration Day?

CRAIG: Oh my, I'll never forget it. It was bitter, it was cold, it had snowed. I sat with my feet in the snow. I had galoshes, but it was cold. I had a seat in the press section which was quite close to the platform so I could look right up at him. And I nearly froze to death. And when he took the oath, he wouldn't do it in an overcoat, you know, he didn't even have an overcoat on.

[-29-]

GRELE: Do you feel that he did live up to his inaugural speech, you know, "Let us begin."

CRAIG: Yes, he did so far as time and the circumstances allowed and what people would accept and let him do. You see, a president has always had to battle with Congress because Congress is very proud of its own prerogatives, and there's always more or less problems, even in the same party, between the White House and the Capitol, which is all right. They batter out some things. They make the laws, and he administers them.

GRELE: Do you feel that he tried to get more liberal legislation than Congress would give him?

CRAIG: Oh yes, yes he did. But remember, he had in his own Democratic party a lot of "not-liberals."

GRELE: You have a note here about the missile crisis. Do you feel that that might have been his greatest accomplishment?

CRAIG: Which?

GRELE: The Cuban Missile Crisis, getting the Russians to pull the missiles out of Cuba.

CRAIG: No, because we're never sure whether he got them all out. That might have been his great failure. I don't think it was either a great failure or a great accomplishment, but at least he did make them take visible missiles out of Cuba. I think what he did was a blow to Castro's [Fidel Castro] ambitions to run the whole hemisphere, and that was a great victory. At the same time, we don't know how many came out, and always the charge was that the United States wanted to run the whole hemisphere, you know.

GRELE: You have here that he soon found out that the legislative and executive branches of the government are enemies. Did he ever tell you this?

[-30-]

CRAIG: Well, not in quotes. Of course, sometimes, they're not even of the same party, you know. Just once in a while that happens. It doesn't last long. But the President knows what he wants as an executive and needs, all he needs, perhaps. And Congress says, yes, but we make the laws. And then in Congress, even if his party were for something that he wanted in legislation, maybe they couldn't get it out of the other members of Congress.

GRELE: You have here, he never forgot his war service?

CRAIG: That's true. He remembered. The Navy. After all, he liked to have died on that wreck of his boat in the Navy.

GRELE: You might want to read some of this into the tape or else put it into the transcript when you finally get it. Some of it, especially down here, is something that we would like to use as a final comment, perhaps.

CRAIG: This you'd like to....

GRELE: Yes, if you'd like to read that in, we could use that as a final comment to the tape or the transcript.

CRAIG: Oh, yes. You want me to read this?

GRELE: Yes.

CRAIG: Yes. I would like to read this paragraph if I might. I jotted it down for you. I went to his funeral in Arlington National Cemetery. From there you can see the White House. The Unknown Soldier lies there, and the inscription on it says, "An American soldier known only to God." But the John Kennedy I knew for so many years is not out there in that marble tomb. He is alive in what he did for his country in war, and in Congress, and in the White House; and what he did for us being the man he was. He was passionate, political, selfless, patriotic, tenderhearted, but tough as nails. He was an American man.

GRELE: I think that might be a good place to end then. Thank you very much, Mrs. Craig.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

(Elizabeth) May Craig Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

C

Castro, Fidel, 30

E

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 12, 17

H

Harris, Eleanor, 8

J

Johnson, Lyndon B., 10, 11, 27

K

Kennedy, John F., 1-31
Kennedy, Joseph P., Jr., 2, 3, 4, 10
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., 1, 3, 4
Kennedy, Robert F., 6, 7, 10

L

Lodge, Sir Oliver, 2

M

McCormack, John William, 7, 8

N

Nixon, Richard M., 14, 15

O

Oswald, Lee Harvey, 27

R

Rayburn, Sam, 7, 8, 11
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 15, 16, 24

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G., 15
Smith, Clyde H., 21
Smith, Howard W., 22, 23
Smith, Margaret Chase, 20, 21
Spivak, Lawrence E., 6

T

Truman, Harry S., 7, 15, 17, 24

U

Underwood, Cecil H., 12