Dan H. Fenn, Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/02/1968

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Staff Assistant to the President (1961-1963); Commissioner (1963), Vice-chairman (1964-1967), Tariff Commission, discusses Massachusetts politics in the 1950s including various state elections and the 1960 presidential election, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Dan H. Fenn, Jr.

October 2, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don’t we just start out by you giving a little bit of your own background especially as far as your introduction into Massachusetts politics is concerned?

FENN: Well, my father was a minister in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and when we moved there about 1931 or so, the then Speaker of the House, Leverett Saltonstall, was a member of our parish there in Chestnut Hill. So, following tradition, my father was chaplain of the House of Representatives. And I remember I used to go in with him and stand up there with the Speaker and got very interested in the whole political process then. And as a youngster I used to do a little work for Saltonstall from time to time and brought students in and so forth through his years as Speaker and governor. I guess that’s the real origin of my interest in this. I became a Democrat as so many people of this general type did in—well, let’s see, during the war I switched over. I became directly involved in 1952, I guess, when I ran for state representatives from 19th Middlesex district, which was a strong Republican district and certainly strong Republican in 1952.

STEWART: That’s not Lexington. It was Newton or…
FENN: No, it was then Lexington, Bedford, Billerica, Tewksbury, and Dracut. And I didn’t even know where Tewksbury and Dracut were when I started out. [Laughter] Then in 1953 after the great debacle when Dever [Paul A. Dever] got beaten by Chris Herter [Christian A. Herter], and the state party was in great disarray and President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], Senator Kennedy…. Although I think he really was interested in the state party, it was not such a strong interest that anything really materialized about it. So he was off in Washington, and the state party was a real mess. And Dick Maguire [Richard Maguire], who subsequently came here, of course, and was treasurer of the Democratic National Committee, pulled together a group called the Commonwealth Club.

STEWART: Could I go back a little bit? In ’52 when you ran for state rep, did you have contact at all with the Kennedy campaign?

FENN: No, I didn’t. I had some contact with the labor people; I had some contact with the House of Representatives fundraising operation; but I had no involvement with that ’52 campaign at all. I had met Kennedy a couple of times when he was a congressman because I used to run something called the World Affairs Council. We used to do radio shows, and I remember bringing him in on a couple of those. But I had no involvement in ’52 at all.

STEWART: Is there anything as far as these occasions are concerned that stands out in your mind when he was a congressman?

FENN: Not particularly. I remember we did some kind of a debate. I remember this was about 1950 or ’51, and he was taking every speaking engagement to every local Red Cross chapter he could lay his hands on, so we had no trouble getting him to do this radio show for us. It was a debate about, it was a conversation, I guess, about Far Eastern policy. Mrs. John Fairbank [Wilma Fairbank] was running the show for us then. Arthur Holcombe was on it, Carl Friedrich [Carl Joachim Friedrich]. But we would turn to him as we’d turn to any local figure to do a show from time to time, or a speech, or something like that. I recall him as being pleasant and articulate,

but nothing really stood out in my mind about him that made him different from the other public figures we had as speakers.

So my involvement, as far as the Kennedy operation was concerned, came later through Maguire’s Commonwealth Club which was a very ill organized and casual, well meaning group of people—a couple from Lowell, a couple from Worcester, Boston, lawyers mostly. And I got involved in that because I’d run in Lexington and had gotten a certain amount of notoriety from that. Bob Murphy [Robert F. Murphy] was involved, and so Dick and Bob asked me if I would participate in it. And I got very interested in the problems of the towns because after 1952 with Dever’s defeat, there really was nothing in Massachusetts. Paul Dever had so dominated Democratic politics from 1940 on, I would say, that—and there
was nothing that you could even remotely call a party organization. Some of the cities had
bosses like Danny Brunton [Daniel B. Brunton] in Springfield and Jim O’Brien [James D.
O’Brien] in Worcester. Boston was a mess. But there was no organization throughout the
party. And the idea that these people had was, “Well, let’s see if we can’t put some kind of a
real party together.”

So I got interested in the problems of the towns because I knew something about
towns, knew something about my own anyway. And I suggested that the thing to do was to
turn the Commonwealth Club’s attention to building some kind of an organization in the
towns which were growing and pull together guys whom we already knew and see if we
couldn’t create some kind of a party there. And so I left my job at the World Affairs Council
because Dick said that he’d raise some money, which he never really did. We did go to see
Paul Dever about the idea, I recall, and John Carr [John C. Carr] who was state chairman, but
neither showed any interest in it. Dever did make clear, however, that he would not be a
source of funding! So I left the job that I had to do this full time, but it very quickly merged
into Bob Murphy’s campaign, first, for the nomination for governor in 1954 and then for the
election. So as of that April I started working on this Commonwealth Club thing, but as of
about May I was working, we were all working on the Murphy business. And that’s where I
first ran into the Kennedy operation on any substantial basis.

What happened was that the Republican legislature passed a bill which called for
going back to the convention system in Massachusetts, and 1954 was the first state
convention for twenty years, I guess, pretty close to it. And the Democrats always thought
that this was foisted on them by the Republicans because they commonly put on a lousy
show at a convention. So the state…. As far as the Democrats were concerned, there were no
city and town committees. There might have been ten or a dozen organized in the state. In
Lexington in 1952, I got elected to the town committee, write-in. I had two votes, the leading
fellow has three votes, and there was one other person had two votes, but there just wasn’t
anything there. And the people in the towns were the old David I. Walsh organization
because he did have an organization, and there were older, Irish Catholics who were a real
tiny minority and who had had their day, and they were by no means Kennedy people. So
with the 1954 convention all of a sudden the city and town committees spring to life, and you
had city and town committees all over, everyplace in the state because they had some reason
to exist, they were going to elect delegates.

So it was at that 1954 convention that I ran into Ken O’Donnell [Kenneth P.
O’Donnell] whom I had known in college and whose brother is a classmate of mine, Cleo
[Cleo O’Donnell, Jr.]. And I said, “What the hell are you doing here?” And he said, “Well,
I’m on the Kennedy thing.” And I said, “Gee, I had no idea you were doing that.” So then I
chatted with the senator briefly because I hadn’t really had any time with him at all before, in
Worcester, and then he made a speech. And he was too booed at that 1954 Democratic
convention because it was dominated by groups of people with whom he didn’t live in
Massachusetts: one was these remnants of the old David I. Walsh operation, Curley [James
Michael Curley] operation, because by and large he had gone around them in his own
organization in 1952, and they weren’t his kind of people really; another was the state
legislators who weren’t his type of politician either. And that convention was dominated by those people. The Kennedy organization could do hardly anything for us in that convention because those delegates weren’t their kind of people. Well, Kenny was there and Larry [Lawrence F. O’Brien] was there, but in the first place, they weren’t that concerned; and in the second place, they didn’t have the leverage with those people. And then the other group, of course, Kennedy wasn’t comfortable with was the professional liberals, the ADAers [Americans for Democratic Action] and Civil Rightsers and those guys. They were, of course, a much smaller group in numbers, but they were very active and articulate. If he’d been running in California, the CDC [California Democratic Council] never would have backed John Kennedy in those years. I think this is an important fact to note, in view of what happened subsequently. John Kennedy was never the candidate of the professors, the liberals, the station-wagon set. He appealed to a new breed in Massachusetts politics.

So, at any rate, we got through that convention, and then when we got started on the primary. I remember Kenny and Larry coming in because the senator had agreed that he would support Bob Murphy against Frankie Kelly [Francis E. Kelly] who was running against him in the primary, and then against Chris Herter. Not I think that he ever thought that Murphy was the greatest thing in the world, but he was a more than acceptable candidate. So Kenny and Larry brought in the books, and by this time I was running—we divided that campaign up into three sections, the cities, the towns, and the city of Boston. And Jim Mellon [Judge James Mellon] did the city of Boston, and Jack Sullivan [John Sullivan, Jr.] did the cities, and I did the towns. So I got from Kenny and Larry their book of names, and my recollection is very clear that it was pretty thin, that compared to any kind of organization which Massachusetts had seen before, they had a damn good operation, and they had terrific leadership in terms of quality. Of course, the Kennedys and then Kenny and Larry, who were both superb, but when you started talking about Lexington and Shrewsbury and Great Barrington, it was very, very spotty. The guys that they had were good, but there was by no means broad coverage, nor were they uniform in quality. They had their share of “mail drop” names who never produced, too.

STEWART: This was from the ’52 campaign? Not anything since?

FENN: They didn’t do anything since; they really didn’t do anything since. They didn’t do much between campaigns. They’d warm it up a little bit, but not much. So they really weren’t a heck of a lot of help. And it wasn’t that they didn’t want to be, it was really that the stuff wasn’t there. Also they did have a different philosophy from mine—and this was partly because we were running for governor and they were involved with the Senate—and that was that I felt that you should do everything you could through the formal city and town committees because it seemed to me
if you’re going to build a party, you had to build it that way. And they didn’t have the kind of concern, obviously, for building a party structure in Massachusetts that those of us who lived there did. So at any rate, I remember turning to some of their people, but it was not an organization which they or anybody else could just sort of turn off and on, any more than you can with any political organization, because it was a personal kind of enterprise. It is always difficult to take a group of people who are devoted to one candidate and turn it on for another?

STEWART: Did you people make an attempt, though, to use all these people or to contact them all at least.

FENN: Yes, yes, yes, and said the senator wanted them to help Murphy out and so forth, and so on. But I don’t remember…. Well, I set up a system of regional coordinators covering groups of about ten towns each, and—I’ve got all those records somewhere, I guess. But my recollections would be that we used darn few Kennedy people as those coordinators, that I was disappointed in the kind of coverage that they had. And I don’t mean to downgrade that operation because it was certainly the best organization—Paul Dever had no “organization” in the formal sense at all, although he had so many friends and supporters that they did the job for him. And the most important part of it was, again, not the extent of the coverage, but the quality of the people who were in it, and the quality of the people who were leading it. Now, I should also say that it may be that in the cities they were an awful lot stronger because I was messing around in towns, and towns in 1954 aren’t like towns in 1968. If you’re talking about Middlesex County now, you’re talking about a heavy weight of votes, but in these days they were pretty Republican, and you were scrambling around for every vote you got except places like Brookline.

STEWART: Did Senator Kennedy himself do as much as you would have wanted him to to try to get these people?

FENN: Yes, Kenny and Larry did, and they used to come in periodically and we’d talk about it and so on. And I think they sent out some letters to their people. So there was no problem that way. I think they did everything they could be expected to do, but it wasn’t the kind of—you used to read in the papers about that well-oiled Kennedy machine—it wasn’t the kind of machine that you could just push a starter, you know, and get it going for somebody else. The senator himself, of course, was sick at the time; this was the time that he was about to go into the hospital. I remember well the famous television show with him and Foster Furcolo [David Foster Furcolo] and Murphy just the day before he went in the hospital. That Furcolo-Kennedy thing, just as Paul Dever had dominated Massachusetts politics, that Furcolo-Kennedy feud was a dominant feature of Massachusetts politics from about—well, it broke out in the open in 1954, but certainly from 1952 right through to 1960 when Furcolo was reluctant and playing games on that appointment of Ben Smith [Benjamin A. Smith, II] as the president’s successor in the Senate.
STEWART: Where did that all start? I’ve heard any number of accounts of exactly why it came about.

FENN: I think it started down here when they were both congressmen. And Furcolo had a couple of things, including a phony scholarship bill, and his view of John Kennedy was that this was a parlor dilettante and that he was going to really con him into supporting some lousy stuff, and he found that Kennedy was a pretty rough guy, a pretty bright guy, and did his homework better than Furcolo did. That’s part of it; I can’t remember the details now. I do remember something about that scholarship plan he had, and then, I think, also, Furcolo was a very untrustworthy guy, and I think Kennedy sensed this, knew it. And then in 1952, of course, after Larry O’Brien and Furcolo had their big blowup, Larry came back. And then Kennedy picked up O’Brien almost immediately thereafter to run, I guess originally, the western part of the state. And Furcolo, whom I talked to about this a good bit in ’56, felt that this was a direct slap in the face, and was pretty sore about that. So that by 1954 the thing was really quite hot and fairly public, and then that television show, it was much brooded about and created, I think, real problems for Kennedy for the next six years or so, and certainly with the Italians it created some real problems.

STEWART: But this didn’t really have any impact on Murphy’s campaign, or did it?

FENN: Well, Bob was pretty nervous that it would because what we were trying to do was to run a really unified campaign for the first time. Usually, what happened was that everybody in Massachusetts politics on the slate went roaring off in their own direction, and we tried to pull the thing together and not without some success. We had some trouble with John Collins [John F. Collins] who was running for attorney general. He figured that he was a shoo-in because George Fingold was the Republican nominee. “What the hell, the Yankee Republicans aren’t going to vote for a Jewish Episcopalian.” But they did. So Collins was interested in building a Dever type operation. And what we were interested in doing was to build a unified kind of campaign around the existing party structure as best we could. But Furcolo was going off in his own, to a fair extent, and Collins was totally. So that we were nervous about the spillover on our operation of the Furcolo-Kennedy thing because it disrupted this image of unified operation.

FENN: If he did, if he or Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] or any of those people were involved in the ’54 thing, I never saw them. He didn’t turn his Washington people loose at any level that I saw; they certainly weren’t around headquarters or anything like that. I think this is characteristic, I think that he never really—Joe Ward [Joseph D. Ward] got nominated in 1960; well, he certainly never had a
hand in that. His one involvement was in 1956 when Furcolo and Sonny McDonough [Patrick J. McDonough] were running for the nomination for the governorship at the convention, and the old Commonwealth Club group tried to get Torby [Torbert H. Macdonald] to go, I think that Kennedy talked to Torby about it two or three times, tried to talk him into it. But really while his interest was not peripheral, his involvement was peripheral. Now, after 1956 and after the great state committee—no, 1958 and after the great state committee wrangle, which must be on another tape when…

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STEWART: In ’56.

FENN: No.

STEWART: Yes, the Onions Burke [William H. Burke, Jr.]-Pat Lynch [John M. Lynch] thing was in ’56.

FENN: ’56. Yes, that would be right, 1956, yes that’s right, sure. Because they are four year terms along with the presidential election, that’s right. After 1956, the idea was that Larry was going to move from Springfield, take over the state committee, really going to build a party. Kenny was going to work on it, and I was. We’re going to pull all these things together and so forth and so on. And everybody started out with the best intentions in the world. But nothing ever happened. John Carr was replaced by Pat Lynch. But that was really the end of it. Nothing was done particularly. And again I think it wasn’t because he was not concerned and interested; it was because he was more concerned, more interested about other things. So he involved himself very little in the state situation.

Again, in 1960 the idea was then after he became president that I was going to be Ben Smith’s Boston operator, which I was for a few short months before I came to Washington, and Pat Lynch was going to stay on the state committee and Jimmy Mellon was going to be collector of the port of Boston, collector of customs. And that the three of us, then, were going to take the responsibility for putting a Massachusetts party together. But again, you know, Jim Mellon never did go over to the port, and I was yanked out of the Ben Smith operation very quickly because there were other things which were more important to them and to him. And again, it never materialized.

It wasn’t until Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] came along in ’62, and you remember in that campaign all the liberals and the longhairs and the do-gooders and the ADA’ers and the Mark Howes [Mark De Wolfe Howe] and all these fellows were all with Eddie McCormack [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.],

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which is an unholy marriage. And we didn’t have one professor, I don’t think, and I went and talked to Bob Wood [Robert E. Wood], and Bob said, “Well, you know, I’ve been doing
some things for Eddie, and I’ll do some things for Ted if he asks me, and I’m just going to sort of stay out of it.” And Sam Beer [Samuel H. Beer]. So I talked some people into coming out for Kennedy and working for Kennedy on the basis that Ted really was going to do something about Massachusetts. And there was an exchange of letters, there was an exchange of correspondence, which Ted wrote to them, a letter which I had drafted with them in which he pledged himself to do certain things about the Democratic party in Massachusetts. And I think, by and large, he has. My impression is that he’s been more directly involved in trying to shape up something there than the president was. But he was under a good deal of pressure because of the involvement of these two or three professors in his ’62 thing.

STEWART: Could we go back to ’56 for a while? Exactly how did this whole drive to get rid of Burke and to change the whole thing originate? It was strictly with you people up there? Kennedy’s operation down here had nothing to do with it?

FENN: Oh, no. Oh, no, no. You didn’t turn Larry and Kenny and Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] and those guys loose on something which was just their project. That was looking to the 1960 convention because, you know, that state committee picks the delegates or the official slate…

STEWART: You mean the ’56 convention.

FENN: No, because we agreed it was ’56; he state committee fight was ’56.

STEWART: Right. Before the national convention, when Kennedy was interested in…

FENN: Yes, but it’s the old state committee that picked the delegates because…. You see, the delegates to the 1956 convention were picked by the state chairman who was elected in ’52, right? So when you’re talking about the fight over control of the state committee in 1956, you’re talking about the group that’s going to pick the delegates for the 1960 convention because the delegates and the state committee are on that same slate, the same ballot in April, in that April primary.

So that it was the 1960 convention he was concerned about, and he just wasn’t too enthusiastic about going into that convention with a state committee controlled by people who were not his people. So that was what that was all about. And the problem was to get that chairmanship and get a majority on that committee. And that was a knock down drag out fight; that was a real battle. And, as you know, a battle in the physical sense by the time they got down to the meeting. But everybody was turned loose on that one.

STEWART: Primarily to control the thing in 1960?

FENN: Yes, yes.
STEWART: Was there much talk about this being the start of some real effort to build up the party in Massachusetts, or was this still the easy way?

FENN: I think that the main concern was 1960, but I think, again, there is always this concern of, God, you can’t have John Carr running the state committee any longer. And as I said, once that committee was taken over, then the idea was that all these great things were going to be done with it which were never really done. But my reading would be that the major force in that was the ’60 convention. And that was, of course, the big McCormack [John William McCormack]-Kennedy battle. At least that was what that turned around.

STEWART: Did this just spring up in ’56? Had this whole McCormack-Kennedy thing been going on before?

FENN: Well, they certainly weren’t the same kind of people. The McCormack types would not be the Kennedy types. But I’m not, I just don’t know, I’m not aware of it. I certainly don’t remember any of it in ’54. Now, whether it goes back to the kinds of situations in which he found himself in ’46—Dave Powers’ [David F. Powers] famous story about O’Brien [Daniel O’Brien], the undertaker in Cambridge, saying, “This is Mike Neville’s [Michael J. Neville]—” what was the term he used? Not turn, but that was the idea. And so I think that Kennedy was always resented by the older Irish Catholic politician who didn’t understand why

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he was doing so well, who knew he represented something different, just as he was by the professional liberals. All he had was the people.

STEWART: But you have no doubts that he wanted to get into that ’56 fight; he wasn’t forced into it by, well, for example, by John Fox and by the Boston Post and the McCormack people generally. He wanted to get into it.

FENN: I never had any feeling but that he wanted to get into it, that he initiated it, that he just didn’t want to take a chance of a committee dominated by John Carr and Onions Burke going to that 1960 convention. And I think he was right; I don’t think there was any question about it.

STEWART: Were you at the ’56 convention in Chicago?

FENN: No, no.

STEWART: You were an alternate delegate….

FENN: At 1960.
STEWART: Not in ’56?

FENN: No.

STEWART: I thought I saw your name on that…. Well, you weren’t there at all.

FENN: No, I was at all the state conventions, but I was not at the national convention until 1960.

STEWART: You mentioned, let’s see, in ’56 Ward won the nomination for attorney general and they had a big Ward, McCormack, and Peabody [Endicott Peabody] primary, I think. Were you at all involved in that, and where did the Kennedy people stand, as you recall?

FENN: I don’t, I was personally involved with Chub a little bit. I’m one of that large organization known as the Chub Peabody Alumni Association. I don’t remember that the key…. Certainly, there was no concerted movement in one direction. I would say to the extent that they were in it as individuals they would have been in it with Peabody. And I know Dick was, for instance, Donahue.

But I don’t remember Larry and Kenny being involved in it particularly. I think this is, again, a part of the noninvolvement. Now after Furcolo’s nomination and election in ’56—of course, there wouldn’t have been anything they could have done as far as the governorship is concerned anyway. But I don’t recall that the organization was turned on for Peabody.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in the Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] campaign in ’56?

FENN: Yes, a little bit, a little bit. Kenny asked me to do the towns, and so I went in, and we had a desk in the Furcolo headquarters there on Beacon Street, I guess, or Washington Street, but it didn’t amount to anything. I did a little bit. But it was a pretty embryonic effort. And I remember I guess I did a newsletter and did some traveling around the state a little bit.

STEWART: For the…

FENN: …for the Stevenson thing. We had kind of a tricky problem because we weren’t interested in Furcolo in the least bit and trying to keep these two things apart, and yet not obviously at war. Then the 1958 campaign, I remember pretty well, never could remember the guy he was running against, Vincent Celeste [Vincent J. Celeste]. But in that campaign, the Washington people were involved, and the ambassador [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] was involved. There was a lot of action in that
one. And Dick Donahue and I did something on the whistle stop visits around the state. He was doing it, and I was helping him a little bit. And that one, that was a major effort; that was a major effort. The idea being, of course, to get an enormous vote as inexpensively as you could possibly get it. And it worked, of course.

I remember Ted Kennedy, he’d come running into headquarters about 4:30 or 5 o’clock at night grab a bunch of bumper stickers and go out to wherever he could find traffic jammed up behind a stoplight, and he’d go to the cars, and he’d tell the driver who he was and ask him if he could put a bumper sticker on his car for him. So that was pretty lively.

STEWART: What about the whole role of Ambassador Kennedy? Had you had any contact with him before ’58 or was it generally assumed by everyone that he had his hand in just about everything that went on Kennedy-wise in the state?

FENN: I don’t know, it’s hard to say. At the level at which I ever operated in these things, he was sort of the shadowy figure. He’d show up in headquarters every now and then and cheer on the troops, we got a feeling, I got a feeling that there were some strong differences of view between the senator and his father on things, and some of the kinds of liaisons, like Basil Brewer, that the ambassador had cooked up, and John Fox [J. John Fox], were not always the ones that John Kennedy would have preferred. But I never had the feeling of a gray eminence who was really pulling the strings. There was never any question as to whose campaign it was; it was always John Kennedy’s campaign. And his father was up to some kind of activity in the background that nobody knew, at my level nobody really knew too much about what it really was.

STEWART: What about his relations with Paul Dever and people around Paul Dever?

FENN: Well, of course, the O’Donnell-Fox warfare was classic. Dever by this time, by 1952, earlier maybe, had become not just the symbol of corruption in Massachusetts politics, but had begun to handle himself as if it really was going on, and he had some people around him who were pretty unattractive. He was inaccessible, very tight in-group, very arbitrary and dictatorial because he was riding this huge wave. He had all kinds of dough for any campaign he ever ran. We ran the Murphy campaign on a million dollars which was real dirt cheap; we didn’t have money to buy coffee for the volunteers. And Paul Dever, when he ran a campaign, he just—you know, they used to say that you’d send the boy out for coffee and tell him to stop by at 1 State Street and pick up the money, and he’d come back with a paper bag of coffee in one hand and a paper bag of money in the other hand. So he was riding pretty high, and he had some pretty good people around him, but it was a very bossed, it was a bossed kind of an operation without the organization to go with it. And I think…. Now, how Kennedy and Dever personally got along, I don’t know, but certainly between the
Kennedy people and the Dever people, there was no love lost.

STEWART: Well, Dever was relatively prominent, especially in ’56 in the vice presidential effort and so forth.

FENN: Yes, on that keynote—oh, yes, yes, ’52 was the keynote. Yes, that’s right, that’s right. But, I mean, he didn’t have anywhere else to go. What the heck was he going to do! But I just don’t know. I just don’t recall, and I don’t know that I ever knew. I remember in ’52, I remember in ’54 hearing reports of some of the tensions between the Dever operation and the Kennedy operation in ’52. But whether this was any more than the standard kind of thing you’d expect, I just don’t know. I do know that John Fox and Kenny O’Donnell never got on worth a damn.

STEWART: John Fox on the Post or…

FENN: No, no. John Fox, Paul Dever’s guy, the judge. I thought Fox was a very impressive fellow myself.

STEWART: Let’s see, we’re kind of skipping around here. You haven’t really talked about the liberal, academic support or opposition throughout this whole period, especially the whole McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] thing.

FENN: Well, the ADA in Massachusetts—I don’t know how it was elsewhere—was a very simplistic, dogmatic, ideological organization, just the kind of organization a Kennedy would not feel comfortable with. And he didn’t. And they didn’t feel comfortable with each other. And in 1960, the heat from those people was for Stevenson at the convention; they weren’t, you know, they weren’t interested in Kennedy. Now, he had some support from some individual faculty people, but certainly he was not their candidate; he was not the candidate of the professional liberals; he was not the candidate of the Civil Liberties Union chapter; he was not the candidate of the inter-group relations council type guys anymore than he was the candidate of the old David I. Walsh people out in the towns, or the old city committee people in the cities. He had no appeal to either of these two wings.

And it is really quite surprising how late some of the big name people got into the thing. I remember Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] coming up to me as late as April, I would say, of 1960, and I’d just met Rostow at a dinner party that winter, I guess, and saying to me, “Gee, that Kennedy is really great. I just met him, and I think I’m going to do some work for him.” Now this is May, June of 1960. Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] in November—my parents’ house then was a few doors down from his on Francis Avenue, and I ran into him the end of October and said, “Are you going to Hyannis Port to watch the election returns?” And he said, “Me? Oh Lord, no, no. Would you like to come and watch
them at my house?” these people really…. Now Sam Beer goes a lot further back, but some of these other people were really late. And Abe Chayes’ [Abram Chayes] operation that was a great cover operation, but I’m not sure how much real substantive impact those people had even in the campaign in the fall of 1960.

So I’m amused by the columnists who talk about him being the darling of the liberals because of his style and all this kind of stuff, because he just plain wasn’t. He was the darling of the blue collar workers, the Irishman and the Italian who’d moved out of the city, who is in the suburbs, and who is in the Everetts and the Arlingtons and the Maldens. This is where his support came from, and this is the kind of basis on which he built his support. And it was an amazing thing; I’ve trotted around with an awful lot of candidates, but I never saw a candidate where you didn’t have to struggle to get a crowd. But boy, with him, that was not what you worried about—at least, by the time I got into it about ’56, ’58. Even in Lexington, you did pretty well.

STEWART: Well, you weren’t involved, I assume, in any of Sorenson’s efforts, or—who was that woman that was coordinating the academic people?

FENN: Diedre Henderson. Yes, no. Well, yes, I was a little bit, I was a little bit because I was pulling together some of the Harvard Business School people, and then I got a couple of friends of mine who were interested in the sort of science and technology and space area, together with Abe Chayes, I recall, but nothing really happened with any of that stuff. They were theoretically going to meet and all this kind of

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stuff, but they didn’t really.

STEWART: Were you aware of any of the organizational problems they were having? For example, I think there was some conflict between Fred Holborn [Frederick L. Holborn] and Sorensen as to exactly who was…

FENN: …running it?

STEWART: …running the show up there then.

FENN: No, I’ve very conscious of Abe Chayes sort of churning around, and have a feeling that there was more optics than substance in all that stuff. But that’s all. I was in Wisconsin in 1960 for a week, and again, the well-oiled machine was something other than well oiled. I was working in that second district around Madison which Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.]—I think it was the second district—which Sarge took over after I left. As I say, I was only there a week. But Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] and Pat Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey], Ivan Nestingen [Ivan A. Nestingen], and Kenny were out there all the time. But boy, again, in comparison to anything else that you’ve ever seen in politics, it was great, but it had its sputtering moments. And I think this is really
characteristic; it certainly was of Bob Kennedy’s [Robert F. Kennedy] campaign. Everybody on the outside talks about these enormously beautifully financed and organized and staffed things, and I think that the real difference is in the leadership. I think that’s what made that thing go, because most campaigns don’t have guys like Sorensen and O’Brien and O’Donnell that are guiding it.

STEWART: Was there a real effort by a lot of people in Massachusetts to get in with the Kennedy group, especially in ’59 and ’60 when it became apparent that he was going to be running for president? Well, did this ever become a problem that you know of?

FENN: No, I don’t think so. Certainly not with the station wagon set, the liberals, and the long-hairs. I suspect that the old-line Irish politicians had softened considerably by then out of sheer necessity, but I don’t remember any great rush. He came out to Lexington one time at the start of the 1958 campaign, and we had for us a darn good crowd in the high school—we must have had four hundred people or something like that—for a town which was then heavily Republican.

And his speech was only moderately well received. His handling of the question period was just extraordinary with a group like that, just as crisp and direct as it could possibly be. It was a funny kind of affair, I remember, because I’d gone through all the things that you always go through with Frank Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey] setting it up in advance, and saying, “Okay, this is the kind of group it is, and these are the sorts of things that they’re interested in,” and so forth and so on. He got there, and as we were walking up to the platform, he was as jumpy as a high school sophomore about to make his first speech and he says, “What do I talk about? What do I talk about?” And I said, “Oh gee, Jack, you know this kind of crowd, the Connally Amendment and the United Nations and all this kind of stuff.” And he said, “Yes, but what do you want me to say? What should I…”

STEWART: He didn’t have a speech?

FENN: No, he didn’t have a speech, and he was really nervous, he was really nervous. And I said, “Ye gods, you know this kind of people. You’ve made hundreds of speeches to people like this.” And he said, “Yes, yes.” So he’s sitting there scratching something out on the back of an envelope during my introduction—I guess the introduction wasn’t quite long enough for him because he was sort of taken by surprise when I got finished. And as I say, the speech itself didn’t go over that big. And then he was very shy afterwards; I sort of had to propel people up to him and propel him up to people to shake hands and all this kind of thing. Even in that sort of audience, he just was not comfortable. As I say, the question period was great, but the sort of peripheral kind of stuff, even as late as 1958, he was very uneasy, very, very uneasy.

STEWART: Because it was Lexington and he figured the kind of people or was the…
FENN: No, no, I don’t think so because they’re the kind of people who—granted, it wasn’t the strong sort of Kennedy audience that he’d get in Malden or outside of Pittsfield or something like that, but bright sort of League of Women Voters types, but good grief, he’d been involved in the business for twelve years by this time and he…. No, I don’t think so. I think it was just that he didn’t terribly much enjoy this aspect of business; and he didn’t feel comfortable with it; and he’d never just sort of come charging into a room and start shaking hands around the way some people would. And he was sort of standing there, you know, first on one foot and then on the other, with me kind of rustling around trying to get people to come up and say hello. So you had a group of a hundred to a hundred and fifty people sort of standing, shuffling around after the meeting and him shuffling around. [Laughter] Kind of an awkward situation.

STEWART: That’s interesting. As you say, especially as late as ’58. Do you remember any other instances of situations like this?

FENN: Well, the next time we had him out was in 1960, as I remember—no, I guess that was ’58, too. We had a picnic, sort of a family-type picnic, which went pretty well. But that was outdoors, and he came in, he made a speech, and he shook a few hands on the way out because he was under a tight schedule at that time. So you didn’t have this sort of standing around, and people came up to him pretty well. But he was moving fairly fast that time. And it was a perfectly good talk that time. So it was the same kind of audience, but it just went more smoothly.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in the ’59 Boston mayoralty race? He got tied in with John E. Powers, who was later an embarrassment, I guess.

FENN: No, I wasn’t. I don’t recall having any hand in that right now.

STEWART: Did you ever do any work for his Senate office during this whole period?

FENN: No, I got into that Senate situation with Ben Smith, about May of 196, April or May of ’61, but I was out on the farm, I was pretty…. I wasn’t in the high policymaking group by any remote stretch of the imagination.

STEWART: Let’s see. You were at the 1960 convention, you say?

FENN: Yes.
STEWART: And you had been in Wisconsin just a brief period….

FENN: February, yes.

STEWART: Were you involved in any of the other primaries?

FENN: No, no, West Virginia, no. Wisconsin was the only one.

STEWART: And what about the convention, did you have anything really to do?

FENN: Yes, yes I was…. What I did primarily was one of those chores that had to be done but really didn’t make much difference, which was the Missouri operation. And I remember seeking out and delivering to each of those little paper weights he was…. This was a great gimmick, you know, because it meant that you called on each delegate and didn’t make any pitch particularly, but just the fact that you’re coming and handing him this little gift was good, massaging attention. And then the governor got some kind of a special big pen and pencil desk set or something with a PT boat on it. The governor was—I had trouble finding the governor. I can’t remember who it was now.

STEWART: Dalton [John M. Dalton]?

FENN: No, great big tall guy. But I remember he was absolutely polluted by about 2, 2:30 in the afternoon. [ Laughter] I finally found him. And I picked up some gossip in the course of this as to where the soft spots in that delegation were and so forth and so on. But as I say, it was just one of those things that somebody really had to do, but it didn’t have much effect on the outcome. I think the outcome of that thing was pretty well crystallized. I remember seeing him at the Harvard commencement in June; he was sort of walking across the yard, and he stopped me, and he said, “You were in Wisconsin.” And I said, “Yes, that’s right.” I said, “Boy, it’s a long way between people out there.” And he said, “Yes, when you find them, they’re not too friendly either.” And then I asked him about whether he didn’t think that things were pretty comfortable. And I thought he felt fairly confident by that time, and that would have been, what, the first week in June.

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STEWART: A lot has been made, too, of his whole relationship with the Harvard community going back to his election to the Board of Overseers in what?—’58, I believe. He lost the first time he ran. Do you recall any of this or any indications of his uneasiness or his feeling about being accepted there?

FENN: No, but he certainly was…. I think people’s view, this kind of community, this academic community and the people that surround an academic community, thoughtful people, good people, not phony intellectuals but
good people, their…. As I said, he was never a hero of theirs. Their view of him was dominated by the picture on the cover of *Life* magazine sailing his boat. Here’s a too rich, too successful, nice lightweight who is farther along than he deserves and, my God, shouldn’t be running for president of the United States. This is madness, you know. And Bob Kennedy, the same to a certain extent. It’s funny. Until somebody sits and reads some of these things that these guys have written…. I mean, I remember the thing that really turned me on was the introductory section on *Profiles in Courage*. But people, despite their protestations of making up their mind rationally and so forth and so on, they don’t. These people don’t any more than anybody else does. And he was not a great favorite in that Harvard community by any means.

STEWART: There was something else I wanted to ask you about the ’60 convention. Do you recall any grumbling by people in Massachusetts or in the delegation that they were just being taken for granted or they really weren’t getting involved as much as they thought they should? Did most people in the delegations have something to do for the Kennedy operation?

FENN: No, no, no, I wouldn’t say so. They were not…. Again, you had the Kennedy people, and then you had sort of everybody else. And they were not just wildly steamed up about John Kennedy. And they were off to the night clubs and stuff. Yes, I remember a little bit of this; I don’t remember it being terribly important, but I remember their feeling of “What the hell, there’s no place else I can go,” you know, and a feeling that they didn’t have much of a decision-making role. I remember John McCormack

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when they made the announcement at the caucus that he was going to be the floor leader for the campaign at the convention saying that there’s nobody that he respected more, would rather work for than John Xavier Kennedy.

STEWART: Really?

FENN: Yes, you know, and everybody got…. [Laughter] God, that was wild.

STEWART: This was at the caucus out there?

FENN: Yes. This was when the great announcement was made that the complete operation at the convention was under the control of John McCormack; he was going to run it. I don’t know if he was getting back at them for this little bit of phony activity or whether he just screwed it up.

STEWART: I’ve heard that was the first time he’d been west of the Mississippi River, in his life.

FENN: Is that right?
STEWART: I don’t know for sure. Kennedy or his people supported Furcolo for the Senate nomination in 1960 against O’Connor [Thomas J. O’Connor, Jr.] in Springfield. Were you involved in that whole…

FENN: I was there….

STEWART: Furcolo was nominated by the convention.

FENN: Oh, I remember very well because I was one of the few people who voted against him. Yes, it may very well have been. It certainly was a nominal kind of support. They didn’t like Furcolo any more than the other guy.

STEWART: Well, then John Powers in fact nominated Furcolo which was the big…

FENN: Oh, I remember that very well, too. That’s right, I’d forgotten that. That was supposed to be under some kind of pressure from Kennedy. I remember at least that’s what Johnny said. I saw Johnny afterwards; he was the most beaten looking individual I’d ever seen.

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But, now again, it was, gee, I don’t know how…. Did you get the feeling from some others that this was a real concerted effort and that they were doing great?

STEWART: Well, no, just, as you say, the story that Kennedy got Powers to support Furcolo which presumably was the clincher as far as Furcolo was concerned.

FENN: Oh hell, he had that thing anyway; he didn’t need that. Look, how do you beat a sitting governor at his own convention? I went to vote, and standing in front of me was Don Falvey [Donald B. Falvey, Jr.] and I guess Bunny Solomon [Bernard Solomon] and Chick Mahoney [Charles F. Mahoney], and every time a delegation voted, those guys were there with a pad of paper and a pencil. O’Connor didn’t get any votes at that convention, damn few. I did, but I think very few people voted for him. It’s awfully hard to do that. And I think Furcolo would have gotten through there, Kennedy or no Kennedy, because the governor’s got an awful lot of muscle in a situation like that.

STEWART: But Kennedy didn’t really get involved in the primary at all. Of course, there was no…

FENN: No, and really, why should he? I mean, he had some other projects he was interested in at that point. And I would’ve thought that his involvement in the convention would have been…. Why would he care, really? The only
reason he would care was in terms of Italians and wanting to dampen down the national impact of an Irish-Italian feud. But other than that, it didn’t make too much difference to him.

STEWART: What did you do during the 1960 campaign, or were you involved to any extent?

FENN: Not much, as I remember. I did some stuff around Massachusetts and did a little bit on this professor thing now that I recall. But very little. And just things around the state but nothing of any…. Oh, I remember a couple of times I went out to California on trips and did some sort of snooping around and intelligence stuff, but nothing very substantial.

STEWART: Were you at all involved in selection of Ben Smith?

FENN: No, I talked to Kenny about it, but after the decision had been made and when they were wrestling with Furcolo to get him to make the damn appointment. This was sort of a problem. But not in the selection.

STEWART: Did Furcolo seriously consider doing….

FENN: He was delaying it; he was delaying it. And he was giving him a bad time, and I guess finally the president just had to say, you know, “Do it. And do it Wednesday.” He was saying right up to the last minute, well, he wasn’t sure, you know, that this was the fellow that he really wanted to—and all this kind of nonsense. And or the Smith thing, my impression is very, very clear that at the time that decision was made and right through the summer of ’61, maybe even later, the question as to whether Ted was going to get into that thing was open. There was always the possibility, but he was looking for a guy who could both continue to serve and a guy who wouldn’t create problems if Ted wanted to run, but I think that the concept that he was put in there originally just to keep the seat warm for Ted is just wrong.

STEWART: Oh, really?

FENN: Yes, I could…. Just wrong. I know it was a completely open question in Kenny’s mind; it was a completely open question in Ben’s mind. He was starting to campaign; he had Joe Napolitan [Joseph Napolitan] working for him by the spring or early summer of 1961. I think when I left, then he began to think it really was. I think that it was just that Ralph [Ralph A. Dungan] and Kenny were looking for somebody to do the kind of job that I did here. So, I think that Ben—in fact, I know that nobody had ever said to Ben, “Okay, well listen, this is a two-year deal for you.” Because I don’t think they decided.
STEWART: Do you know who was…. Was Smith always the clear choice or were any others….

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FENN: I just don’t know. My impression would be no, but I just don’t know.

STEWART: Were there any patronage problems? You were working for Smith up in Boston in part of ’61. Do you remember getting into any patronage problems?

FENN: Oh God, those postmasterships, you know it! We had a hell of a time with them. Half a dozen of them. They were all over our back, and then you got right back into the old problems again of are you going to go with the town committee or not and which part of the town committee are you going to go with and same old things all over again.

STEWART: Were there any conflicts as to who was handling that, whether it was…

FENN: No, there never was any conflict. It was going through Ben’s office, but Kenny was making those decisions. No, no, there was never any tension or conflict between Ben and the White House ever. And Kenny was making those choices.

STEWART: Did we cover everything on that list, or…

FENN: Well, I think so, I think so. I ought to quit anyway. Why don’t you…

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