

John W. McCormack Oral History Interview – 3/30/1977
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Biographical Note

McCormack, a Democratic Representative from Massachusetts from 1927 to 1970 and five-term Speaker of the House between 1961 and 1970, discusses his memories of Congress, his close working relationship with Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn, and the relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government during the John F. Kennedy administration, among other issues.

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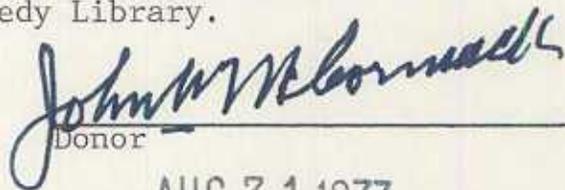
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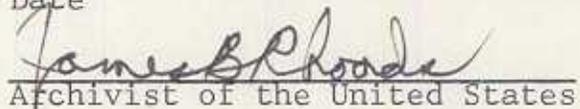
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John W. McCormack

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Oral History Interview

With

John W. McCormack

March 30, 1977
Boston, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Well, can we begin by talking about your early career in Massachusetts, whatever you might recall about what it was like, particularly to serve in the legislature when there were so few Democrats in 1920?

MCCORMACK: Well, briefly speaking why—and the question that you asked—I was born and brought up in South Boston. And under very, very poor conditions. You've heard the old saying, "As poor as Job's turkey?" You probably have. Well, we were poor. And when I was thirteen years old I graduated from the John A. Andrew School, and I wasn't able to go to high school. My father died, and I was thirteen or fourteen years old, so I was the head of the family. There was two younger brothers and myself and my dear mother. And so I built a newspaper route for Sundays, not for every day but for Sunday route, and we used to make eight or nine dollars a week on the newspaper, Sunday, for sale of the newspapers. And I'd go out around Andrew Square to Mt. Vernon Street—you know where Mt. Vernon Street is?

STERN: Yes, I do.

MCCORMACK: In and around that general section was where I would go, and the two younger brothers would go over around Newman Street and Mercer Street, and in around there delivering papers to customers. And we'd make eight or nine dollars a Sunday, and some Sundays we'd make eleven or twelve dollars where some customers didn't pay us for three or four or five weeks, and we'd make a little more. And I went to work for the Western Union or Postal Telegraph; I don't remember now. But three dollars a week and my dear mother was able to keep us together. Then, in delivering telegrams I delivered them to a law office occasionally to a lawyer up on School Street, and they offered and opening as an errand boy at four dollars a week, so he offered it to me, and I took it. That was my turning point, 'cause I wanted to bring home that extra dollar to my dear mother. And that's where I studied law, in the law office. And I don't know how I did it, but I accomplished. I passed the bar when I was twenty-one years old. And by the time I was elected to Congress in '28, I'd built up a very good law practice on the trial side. I was a trial lawyer.

STERN: I see.

MCCORMACK: A trial lawyer. And naturally the district was Democratic, and naturally I was Democratic. I was a Democrat. After I was elected, after I passed the bar and I was twenty-one I was admitted into.... Like in 1913 I passed the bar and was admitted in 1914, notified in December that I had passed, and admitted by the Supreme Court. All those who'd passed took the oath in January, 1914. So friends of mine wanted me to run for public office, and I didn't. I said, "No I'm not going to be one of those who run for public office on the assumption that I'm going to run once or twice or two or three times to make myself known to be elected sooner or later. If I'm going to be elected I'm going to have a chance of being elected when I ran. I might not be, but I had a good chance of being elected. So, having in mind the legislature—that was what I had in mind—and instead of immediately running, I said, "No, I'm not going to run." Then the constitutional convention came in 1916 or '17.

STERN: Seventeen, right.

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MCCORMACK: Seventeen. And it was my right opening. And of course having a newspaper route, about everybody who bought a paper from me would vote for me. And they'd go out—most of them would go out and work for me, so I had a good foundation for a ward fight. And so I ran for the constitutional convention, and I led the ticket. And I served there for two years, and in the meantime I served in World War I. Then I ran for the legislature in 1919, and I was elected. And I served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives for 1920, '21, and '22. In those days we had about forty-six Democrats out of two hundred and forty members; we were a forlorn group.

STERN: Much like the Republicans are today.

MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: Just the reverse.

MCCORMACK: There wasn't much we could do, but we could talk. And we talked. To build up the party. And then in '22, I ran for the State Senate, and I was elected. I was elected for two terms, and I served there in '23, '24, '25, and '26. My first term was—there were five Democrats in the Senate out of forty, and the second term there were six Democrats. We made a tremendous gain, twenty percent gain! From five to six!

STERN: Do you have any particular recollections, for example, of especially the 1920 election in Boston, which was the first time the Democrats didn't carry the city since 1896? A very strong anti-Wilson [Woodrow Wilson], anti-League of Nations sentiment in the city?

MCCORMACK: Yes. Of course I have a distinct recollection of that. It was a very emotional fight, and when you have a campaign that's filled with emotions it's very difficult to interpret the kind of a campaign that runs successfully, because you're running against emotion. And the issues were very, very emotional.

STERN: Yes.

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MCCORMACK: And the emotions were so strong that you just simply couldn't combat them. But that had no effect upon me locally. That had more effect more on a broader scale than locally.

STERN: Right, on the statewide and for the presidential election?

MCCORMACK: Yes. Because we never had many, much more in the Massachusetts legislature than forty, forty-five or once there were probably fifty Democrats out of two hundred and forty prior to that. So there was nothing new about having forty-six members in the first term that I served. But the League of Nations produced a very emotional issue which....

STERN: Do you remember, for example, President De Valera's [Eamon De Valera] visit to Boston in 1919?

MCCORMACK: Oh yes, I met him.

STERN: You did?

MCCORMACK: Yeah, he and I were very good friends. We developed a very close friendship as the years went by. I think that was the time he escaped from prison, wasn't it?

STERN: I think so. Yes.

MCCORMACK: He got aboard the ship and they hid him, and he got over in New York and went around. I don't know whether he was over here on the bond sale at the time.

STERN: Well, of course it was just before the presidential election, and it was in 1919, and there was obviously a great deal of particularly anti-English feeling...

MCCORMACK: Oh yes. Oh sure. Oh sure.

STERN: ... at the time in the city which was identified with the President's position on the League of Nations...

[-4-]

MCCORMACK: Yeah.

STERN: ...and thus, it was clear that the Democrats were not going to carry Massachusetts in 1920, and, indeed, the Cox-Roosevelt [James M. Cox; Franklin Delano Roosevelt] ticket did very badly. And, of course, about four years later there would be a Massachusetts man as president, so it was taken for granted that they would carry. Do you have any particular recollections of any of the major figures of the period like Mayor Fitzgerald [John Francis "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald]?

MCCORMACK: John F. Fitzgerald was a major figure. He had started out some years before I did, but he was still very active politically during the early years, and covered quite a protracted period. Jim Curley [James Michael Curley] was a very prominent figure, and we had Jim Gallivan [James A. Gallivan] whom I succeeded, whom I ran against in '26, and didn't win. He won, but I had a great fight. It was the '26 fight that won for me in '28, strange to say. I lost in '26, but in '28 when he died and I ran to succeed him it was the '26 fight that won for me, because there were thousands of persons whom I had met that knew Gallivan and that Gallivan had done a favor for who would frankly say to me that, "I'm going to vote for Congressman Gallivan." And I would remember well that after a conversation and I'd say, "Well, I'm sorry to hear you say that you can't vote for me, but I admire you for your frankness, and some day I might be running for some public office, and you might be able to support me, and I hope you will." I was making countless friends for the future that I didn't realize. That would be natural with me, with my outlook on life. And in '28 there were thousands of persons that couldn't vote

for me in '26, voted for Gallivan. We had a good fight, but I didn't win. And I learned more about politics in '26 than I could have learned if I had won the fight. It was a losing fight, but it was a very instructive campaign to me from a political angle. And so it was really the '26 fight that won for me in '28.

STERN: The party was very deeply divided, obviously, during this period on issues such as prohibition in '26 when Senator Walsh [David Ignatius Walsh] was running, after he had been defeated before, trying to get back into the Senate. The Klan [Ku Klux Klan] issue was very strong. Of course that hurt the party in 1924.

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MCCORMACK: Dave Walsh was in the figure, and there were a number of them. Of course, I didn't mean much to them because I was a new man, a young fellow. But they were running for mayor and Congress and other offices, for governor and United States senator, so part of my public life crossed theirs or theirs crossed mine. Most of them preceded me in public life, but their public life continued while I was in my early years of public life. So that I had an excellent opportunity of observing. But the way I conducted the '26 fight, a losing fight, but the way I conducted the '26 fight, a losing fight, but the way I conducted when I'd meet people who frankly told me they couldn't vote for me because they were a friend of Gallivan or he'd done a favor for them or some member of their family, and the way I handled it at the time, and in '28 that was the reserve that I had that enabled me, because I had serious competition. There were nine running, and seven were running from South Boston, two from Dorchester. The two from Dorchester were the strongest: Eddie Sullivan [Edward M. Sullivan] (you don't remember him, do you?), amazing; he was one of the most eloquent speakers I ever met in the journeys through life—and Billy Hennessy [William I. Hennessy] who was in the Senate. He had served with me in one term in the Senate, and he was still in the Senate. And they were the ones; if I wasn't nominated some one of them would have been nominated. And the political writers would all predict it would be a close fight, would be about 1,000 or 1,500 votes cover the first three men, and I'd always be third. I won that fight by about 6,000 in the primary which was a major victory.

STERN: A very substantial margin, yes.

MCCORMACK: And there were only about 39,000 or 40,000 votes cast that year. So that the '26 fight was a very crucial fight for me, because the manner in which I conducted it in defeat laid the foundation for my winning when Gallivan died.

STERN: Can you give me any specific recollections of the '28 campaign when Governor Smith [Alfred E. Smith] came here and the great rally at Boston Arena, that kind of thing?

MCCORMACK: Oh, it was highly emotional. Smith, of course, was the favorite. I remember Jim Curley as the delegate from Puerto Rico¹, was it?

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STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: And he was with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and he had himself elected as a delegate from Puerto Rico at the convention, and it created a lot of emotion, and to me it created a lot of humor. There was a lot of humor involved in it, too. But it was an intense fight. There was no question that Smith would carry Massachusetts.

STERN: He carried it largely because he did so well in Boston.

MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: He carried Boston by almost 100,000 votes.

MCCORMACK: Yes, that's true.

STERN: And then carried the state by about 17,000 which was fairly close...

MCCORMACK: It was.

STERN: ...but it was a great margin in Boston. It carried him through. Clearly, '28 was the turning point, though, in the history of the Democratic party, though, in this state, because from that point on the figures began to reverse in the legislature.

MCCORMACK: Oh yes. While we had a noticeable and a marked minority in the legislature, we could talk, and we were talking the things that appealed to us and appealed to the people. We were selling the people the fact that the Democratic party is a party of the people, and it still is, in the people's mind, the party of the people today. And you read about our Republican friends going to try and conduct this and that kind of a campaign, but the thing they get into is marked down in the people's mind and is held pretty broadly and pretty generally that the Democratic party is the party of the people. That's what we were selling, and we commenced to make progress in different districts; if they were Republican would elect a Democrat. And we commenced to advance and increase. I can remember when Tom O'Neill [Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Jr.] was in the legislature. He was minority leader. He is now the Speaker of the House of Representatives in Congress. We had gained in strength

¹ James Curley was a delegate from Puerto Rico at the 1932 Democratic Convention.

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to the point where I felt we could make a tally of the House, make it Democratic, if we conducted the right kind of a campaign. The convention was up in Springfield that year—I don't remember the year now, but it was in the '30s sometime, and I met Tom—accidentally we met each other in the corridor. In the course of talk, I said, "You can be the next Speaker of the House, Tom, if you do what you should do." And we talked it over. I said, "I'm satisfied that there are enough districts in Massachusetts that we are letting go by default, and if you pick out a good candidate in there to be the Democratic nominee, they can win. And then the Democrats are going to take the House, and you'll be the next Speaker. But in order to do that you've got to pick the districts to make the fight in where you think we have a good chance of the party winning, and you've got to try and handpick a good candidate. And in order to induce him to run you've got to have a fund to help him in his campaign." I said, "You've got to raise a campaign fund to help the Democrats who are running for the legislature, for the House and the Senate." And I said, "You've got to start and you could do it and you go into districts where we've made progress in recent years, and the closeness is such where if you pick a good candidate you're liable to win, carry the district, and you can induce him to be a candidate, the best candidate, by financial aid, you've got to have a fund." So I pulled out my checkbook, and I wrote a check for \$500. I said, "Here, here's the first donation." Five hundred dollars I gave him. I didn't have much, but I still had my love of the Democratic party. I think we carried the House then by five or six votes.

STERN: That was '34, then.

MCCORMACK: '34.

STERN: That was the year that the Democrats first took control of the legislature.

MCCORMACK: And it just happened that I felt for several years, two or three years prior to that we had a good chance of carrying the House if we did the things we should do. And I happened to actually meet Tom O'Neill, and he was minority leader, at the convention in Springfield, and having talked and gabbed with him and put the bee in his mind; and he did a good job, and I think we carried the House by four or five votes, somewhere around that. And he was the first Democratic leader, the first Democratic Speaker in the House.

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STERN: And within a decade those figures had finally been reversed.

MCCORMACK: Oh, they've been reversed. Now we have more than two to one.

STERN: That's right. Exactly the opposite of when you first entered politics. I wonder if you can recall particularly your early years in Congress,

especially the years when Franklin Roosevelt became president. I know that I've been reading about some of your very extensive efforts in the early days, of a hundred days, and in terms of the legislation that was passed. Those must have been extraordinary days.

MCCORMACK: And they were. When President Roosevelt succeeded President Hoover [Herbert Clark Hoover] the country was in despair. That might be one word that would describe it. The people had a pretty widespread lack of confidence in the leadership on the national level. President Hoover was a good man, but he failed to grasp the leadership necessary for an industrial country such as we were and pretty well advanced as a great industrial nation. We've advanced more since. But he had failed to grasp the leadership necessary to give to our people in the midst of a great depression. And Roosevelt came across the horizon, and he dramatized—particularly impressed upon the people—the word “dramatized” is not the proper word to use; it looks like it's a theater. Politics is a theater, but it's more than that. It concerns the future of all our citizens no matter what they feel; whether they're Democrats or Republicans or independents they have their views as an individual of whether or not they've got a job, about their family, their responsibilities to their families and so forth and so on. And he—then his bank holiday. He made a tremendous impression upon the people, and the important work in the restoration of confidence in the minds of the people that we had the leadership in the White House and in Washington, that it would be for the best interests of the people of our country. And then it was on a domestic level. That was before Hitler [Adolph Hitler] came across the horizon. He came across the horizon several years later.

STERN: Did you support Governor Roosevelt initially in '32?

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MCCORMACK: I supported him in all his program. I believed in his social security, minimum wage, unemployment compensation, low-cost housing, all of those great progressive measures I believed in. And I was very active in the fight on the floor, I remember. That was even several years, eight or ten years, before I was elected majority leader, because I had sort of developed an influence particularly among the members from the North. They had respect for me, and I could wield an influence among them in particular and among a few from the South. In those days we were faced with the coalition where we could always rely on 95 to 98 percent of the Republican members to vote against anything Roosevelt recommended, and thirty-five to forty members from the South who were elected as Democrats actually were Republican-policy minded. And they had a coalition. Now we could stand thirty-five division; if we got to forty, we were in trouble. We were in the five vote zone, whether we'd win or lose by five votes.

STERN: I was particularly struck the other day by some of the accounts of your efforts in 1940 and in '41, getting through the extension of the draft and arming American merchant ships. Some of these were enacted by just a handful of votes, and clearly the majority leader...

MCCORMACK: You're speaking about the draft, extension of the Selective Service Act, the draft. I've been asked the most important bill by people that I've ever had to act upon while I was in Congress, which covers forty-two years and three months, because I was elected for an unexpired term and the next regular term when I was first elected. And I've said that the most important bill was the Selective Service Act because of the closeness of the vote that had passed the House and the time it came up. Now it came up in September, 1941, as I remember.

STERN: That's right.

MCCORMACK: The country was essentially isolationist. None of our business was happening over there. We have nothing to do with it. And the country was essentially isolationist. And we couldn't do anything in connection with strengthening our national defenses, get anything through Congress. Hitler had come across the horizon around the middle 1930s, and the effect in America

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was to make our country essentially isolationist. We were just opposed to entering any conflict, no matter what it was.

STERN: Obviously, a lot of it had to do with disillusionment concerning World War I.

MCCORMACK: Well, you see, we were over here geographically but they overlooked the fact--the America of the earlier days geographically was one thing, but America as we became a great industrial nation—brought responsibilities internationally. We couldn't sit back and rely upon our geographical location as a safety valve or a refuge of safety, so to speak. And the country was intensely isolationist. And the bill came up, and it passed the House 203 to 202.

STERN: One vote. One of Roosevelt's biographers gives you most of the credit for having gotten that vote together.

MCCORMACK: Well, I was leader.

STERN: You were the majority leader, right?

MCCORMACK: I was the leader at the time, and....

STERN: It couldn't have been much closer.

MCCORMACK: No, and the leader of the party in the Congress, particularly in the House—the best way I can describe it is he's like a field general in

command of armies. He's the field general of his party in the House. And in those days on domestic matters we always could rely on 95 percent or 98 percent of the Republicans voting against anything progressive. With thirty-five to forty, if we got to forty-five we were licked. But we managed to hold it on all the legislation, the progressive legislation, that Roosevelt recommended, and we were able to get it through.

STERN: And the votes were also, as I recall, very close on arming American merchant ships...

MCCORMACK: Oh, yes.

STERN: ...and also on lend-lease—it was also a very, very close fight. And those were the three key...

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MCCORMACK: Lend-lease I introduced.

STERN: Yes, right. That wasn't quite as close, but...

MCCORMACK: No, but there was a lot of emotionalism. Here's the first copy of the lend-lease bill [Lend Lease Act of 1941]. You want to look?

STERN: Yes, I see. It's very impressive.

MCCORMACK: It particularly concerned Americans of Irish blood, which I am; and this was a bill to keep England in the war. Well, I wanted England kept in the war, to be perfectly frank. I didn't want England defeated by Hitler. I'll be frank with you; I didn't know when we were going to be drawn in, but I felt that the circumstances of the world situation was such that sooner or later we were going to be drawn into the war. And if England was defeated, why it would have a disastrous adverse effect on our own institutions of government, because while Hitler wouldn't be able to take over our government, he'd be able to impose conditions upon us which would be very embarrassing and onerous, to say the least.

STERN: And this was President Roosevelt's position, too.

MCCORMACK: You mentioned lend-lease bill. This refreshed my memory. I introduced the bill.

STERN: If we can go back a few years to '34 when you headed the McCormack-Dickstein [Samuel Dickstein] committee, apparently you uncovered a great deal of evidence of Nazi and Nazi-type activities in this country.

MCCORMACK: I was drafted to be chairman of that committee. They had a group of storm troopers, Hitlerites, who were in New York, particularly in New York. They'd goose-step around, and they were getting big headlines in the papers, and there was some, to a small extent, out and around Chicago area, but it was in New York. A fellow by the name of Fritz Kuhn was the head of it, as I remember. He used to come out; the name came to mind.

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STERN: He was eventually deported.

MCCORMACK: I'm not surprised to hear that. I don't remember that. Sam Dickstein was a member of the House, and he was a very fine fellow. He was on the floor very frequently calling for an investigation of these Hitler groups, the storm trooper groups, the Nazi groups in the country, and particularly in New York. And it got to a point where the leadership in the House could not stop a resolution and an investigating committee being appointed. So when they reached that conclusion, they called me in and told me they wanted me to be chairman. It was the last thing in the world I wanted to be chairman of, but I'm a soldier. And I said, "I'll be chairman only if Sam Dickstein is appointed to the committee next to me." Because Dickstein was the one who brought about the circumstances in the House where the leadership felt that they had to appoint an investigating committee. And that committee did a lot of good work. As a result of our work Hitler ordered the Nazi groups in America to be terminated. That's one thing we did. But we found that prominent public relations firms in America were indirectly in the employ of the Hitler government, advising them, for example, on what kind of speeches members of the Hitler ministry might make that would be favorably received over here, but which in no way meant a departure from their policy in Germany, the Hitler policy.

STERN: And these people would be paid, also.

MCCORMACK: And as a result of that came the foreign agent registration act [Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938]. (You've run across that, haven't you?)

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: We at public hearings in New York City.... One of the public relations firms of America who was probably the outstanding public relations firm in America, one of the foremost throughout the country, had a contract with the German dye trust. Instead of making it directly with the Hitler government, the Nazi government, they made it indirectly with the German dye trust, to advise the Hitler government on matters on which members of the German ministry or Hitler himself could make speeches where the people of America would think there was a change in Hitler policy when there wasn't. And it was propaganda.

And there was a fellow who was a public relations firm for the railways, American railways—I forget his name. He was in the employ, indirectly, of the Hitler government with another company over there. I remember we wanted to get the... Most of the evidence you get is leaks. Well, I wanted to have leaks verified by actual evidence, by the best evidence. So in the case of the public relations firm, the number one in the country, I requested that our investigators be given the opportunity to go and look over their files and their papers, and they refused. And I said, “Well, I’m sorry. We’ll have to subpoena them, and they’ll have to go down to Washington,” because the only place in those days, in ’34, where an investigating committee could have hearings outside of Washington, and if there was complete resistance, they would judge them in contempt, would then hold the hearings in Washington. If you held the hearing in any city throughout the country, you couldn’t adjudge anybody in contempt. So when I made the threat—it was a threat—but the observation that if you don’t want to let our investigators go up and look over your papers without disturbing your business and so forth, we’d have to subpoena the whole thing down in Washington, and that was something I wouldn’t want to do but you’re going to force me to do it. And when we did that they allowed them to go up, and we found the evidence.

STERN: Apparently substantiated a lot of the....

MCCORMACK: Yes, and as a result of it we recommended the Foreign Agents Registration Act which is a very important bill, has been utilized by our country and it will be utilized in the future.

STERN: Is there anything you might want to say about your relationship with Speaker Rayburn [Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn] which was, I know, a long and positive one?

MCCORMACK: Before I come to that, there was a lot of emotionalism, naturally, in those years. I value my reputation, and I value the reputation of every other person for them to value their reputation; and I knew that charges were made, floating around, against this and that person that they were a Communist. Just because they had different views on education and so forth and so on some people would just charge them with being a Communist. So I held a meeting of my committee before we had any dealings

or investigations, and I had them accept a set of rules that would protect the person’s reputation.

STERN: I see.

MCCORMACK: I wasn’t going to let the committee of which I was chairman to be used

as an instrument of destruction of a person who was a good American.

I might differ with their view on different public questions, but just as good an American as I or anyone else. I wasn't going to have my committee used as a source of means, intentionally or unintentionally, as a source of destruction of anybody's character or reputation. And there were a lot of names hurled around who were Communists. I never even summoned them to appear before the committee, because I wouldn't dignify them because I knew they were not Communists. And the only reason I had to dignify them was on rumor, and I wasn't one of that kind anyway. But I wouldn't do it anyway, under any conditions. My viewpoint of life and the importance it means to every other person, their character and reputation. So we had no evidence at all; it was hearsay. I had the committee adopt the rule that hearsay evidence would not be admissible, which was then very rare. But I felt that under the circumstances it was justified in the intense emotion that existed at the time throughout the country; and it was well we did, because once in a while somebody would slip in some hearsay evidence. As chairman, I'd say to the reporter, "Strike that out. That's hearsay evidence." We wanted the best evidence.

STERN: And you did uncover a lot of it, as I remember.

MCCORMACK: And we did. Everything was just.... In other words, when I had the committee adopt that rule, it was the same thing as having a rule adopted that the evidence had to meet the test of admissibility in a courtroom. One of the weaknesses of a lot of investigations is hearsay evidence is admitted, slips in somewhere. Well, I had very strong views on it, and there was no hearsay evidence admitted in any of the hearings of the committee we had that conducted the 1934 investigation.

STERN: What you learned as the chairman of the committee, I would assume, certainly influences your strong support in later years for things like lend-lease and....

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MCCORMACK: Well, on lend-lease, that was a hangover from the long period of Cromwell [Oliver Cromwell] and the period of persecution of the people of Ireland. And if it was in 1834 and I was chairman of a committee, I wouldn't have done it. But in 1934 I wanted England to keep alive, because if England was defeated it would be adverse to the national interests of my own country. And I'm an American first; I'm of Irish origin second. And I assume that everybody else, no matter what their racial origin is, what the country or the land of the birth of their forebears, but above all we're Americans. And it was in the national interest of America to keep England alive. And I introduced the lend-lease bill.

STERN: Speaker Rayburn, of course, was a strong supporter too at this time.

MCCORMACK: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. Rayburn and I—he was Speaker for an aggregate of

about sixteen and a half years, and I was majority leader for that same period less a month. I was elected leader in the caucus about a month after he was elected speaker. And in the aggregate he was speaker about sixteen and a half years, and I was majority leader about the same period of time together. Within the twenty-year period there were two Republican Congresses, the 80th and the 83rd Congresses. And when they happened Rayburn went from Speaker down to minority leader, and I went to minority whip. And Sam Rayburn was one of the greatest Americans I ever met. He was not as progressive as I was. He was on the progressive side, but he was a loyal Democrat.

STERN: He was very loyal to President Roosevelt.

MCCORMACK: Oh, a loyal Democrat; no more loyal a Democrat than Sam Rayburn—Lord have mercy on his soul—and he and I were more than colleagues. We were close friends that admired each other. And I had a lot of influence upon him in connection with enabling him, because of his respect for me and his friendship for me, to support progressive legislation that otherwise he might not have supported. We had a relationship that will always be treasured in my mind as long as I live. And I can't say any more than that.

STERN: I can recall one incident, perhaps, that you might remember. In 1943 when Speaker Rayburn had his sixtieth birthday and President Roosevelt called him to the White House and you had gone with

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him on the assumption that there would be something he wanted to discuss with the leadership, but when the President was ready he asked Mr. Rayburn to come in alone and the Speaker said, "I have no secrets from John McCormack." But as it turned out, this was all a surprise birthday party. Do you recall that?

MCCORMACK: Yes, I do.

STERN: And a number of people have taken...

MCCORMACK: Now to give you an illustration, he had one of the finest minds—he was austere, bald headed, and looked austere, and a lot of members were afraid. He had a heart of gold. I remember on occasion, I'd speak to him on a birthday anniversary. I'd take the floor, make some remarks, would call him "the man with the heart of gold." And he had a heart of gold. But he was a great American, and our relationship—it had been written that the closest relationship in the history of the country of Speaker and Leader was Rayburn and McCormack.

STERN: From the evidence that I've seen, it's very clear, particularly during the war period and during the Truman [Harry S. Truman] administration. You clearly worked hand in hand...

MCCORMACK: Oh, we did.

STERN: ...on supporting the administration.

MCCORMACK: I can remember when—an illustration on the progressive side. I'd drop up to his office every day about ten-thirty or eleven o'clock to discuss what's coming up in the House. He'd want to know; I'd want to know. Just to gab, and discussed if we had a tight bill who we might be able to get to vote for it or get a live pair, and so forth and so on. Because a live pair is half a loaf.

STERN: Yes, I understand.

MCCORMACK: He told me that—I didn't know—he said, "I've just gotten a message from Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], John, recommending an increase in the minimum wage from seventy-five to ninety cents an hour. That was right down my alley. I said, "It's

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wonderful, Sam. We've got to make it a dollar." Now if I said, "A dollar fifteen," he might rebel a little, and if we made it a dollar fifteen, Eisenhower might have vetoed it. So we made it a dollar. But that gives an illustration where if I'd shot at him, "We'll go to a dollar, Sam," from ninety cents, he might rebel. A little bit too progressive for him. But he went along with the dollar. If I went a dollar fifteen, he would rebel probably, see. So I had to use judgment and wisdom, and so forth, whatever you want to call it. I said, "We have to have a Democratic flavor in this bill. The Democratic flavor is ten cents more than Eisenhower recommended." [Laughter]

A lot of inside work done down there, in all legislative bodies, is now seen. There's a lot of history made on the personal contacts.

STERN: Yes. I'm sure it is. You had regular meetings—I was reading one biography of President Roosevelt which recalled that each Monday morning...

MCCORMACK: Yes, we would meet with President Roosevelt when Congress was in session about once a week. Now if there was some occasion when he was out making a speech, we'd meet within a few days afterwards for that meeting. We'd never go beyond ten days. And the same way with Harry Truman and John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]. And when the president was of the other party, like Eisenhower, the Democratic leadership did meet with his leaders. But then once very two or three months there might be some matter of national interest arise where the leadership of both parties in both branches—the President would invite them down to get their opinion on some matter, and usually that matter concerned the national interest of our country. And we'd have the same thing happen when Eisenhower was in. The most striking thing in Eisenhower

was the Lebanon situation. We got word that Russia was going to send some divisions into Lebanon at that time, some Russian divisions. The President called a meeting of the leadership of both parties, because a matter of international affairs, that really transcended partisan politics. That concerned the national interest of the country, and you look at it differently. I looked at matters concerning world affairs differently than I did domestic affairs. On domestic affairs we had party policy; on world affairs. On domestic affairs we had party policy; on world affairs it was national interest of our country that decided the policy. So occasionally a president who was a Republican would have some matter involving

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the national interest arise, and the leadership of the Democrats and Republicans in both branches would be called down. And then in the case of a Republican, the same thing. And we had it with Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] too, when he'd invite the Democratic leadership down where a matter of national interest was to be discussed and acted upon.

STERN: You also, I gather, played an important role in getting a national emergency declared in 1950...

MCCORMACK: Oh, yes.

STERN: ...at the time of the Chinese move across the border in Korea. You helped to persuade President Truman...

MCCORMACK: Oh, sure.

STERN: ...on the necessity of a national emergency. You obviously had a very close relationship with both...

MCCORMACK: I was very close with FDR and with Harry Truman. John Kennedy and I were very close, despite the newspaper writing about my nephew [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.] running against Ted [Edward Moore Kennedy] for the Senate. That never made any difference with me. I was Speaker during the—I was elected Speaker in '62 when Rayburn died, and I was Speaker for nine years until '71, which, incidentally, is the longest continuous (the word "continuous" is important) in the history of our country that anyone has been Speaker of the House of Representatives. Oh, a little sentimental to me!

STERN: Well, Rayburn's was broken up by the 80th Congress.

MCCORMACK: He had broken service.

STERN: There are some accounts of the 1948 election which say that you were interested in being vice-president. Is there any substance to that?

MCCORMACK: Yes, there was quite a move. As I remember, the convention that year (I say this with some reservations) was down at the resort in New Jersey...

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STERN: Atlantic City? [Actually Philadelphia]

MCCORMACK: Atlantic City. My recollection. And there was a tremendous move to nominate me for vice-president. Whitney [Alexander F. Whitney], the head of the Railroad Trainmen [Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen], powerful labor leader—he and I were good friends—he announced for me. I had about five hundred votes pledged to me without being a candidate. I got a call from Harry Truman, and in the course of it he mentioned Alben Barkley's name. I said, "Do you want Alben Barkley as the vice-president, Mr. President?" I wanted to get out, and I said, "If you do," I said, "I'm not a candidate. My name is bartered around," I said, "and I've got a lot of delegates pledged to me, but I'm not a candidate. And if you want Alben Barkley, I'm with him." I had decided a number of years prior to that that my political career was in the House. My desire was to render public service. I had served on full term in the House when I was elected to the Ways and Means Committee, and the Ways and Means Committee had to be elected in those days in a Democratic caucus because the Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee also constituted the Democratic Committee on Committees. They did until recent years; a few years ago they changed that, and that was as a result of the Cannon [Joseph G. Cannon] revolt. (You've read about it?)

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: Speaker Cannon of the House, about the turn of the century, he made conditions so oppressive that they revolted against him, and each party formed a committee to make their committee assignments that they're entitled to. I realized that I could render as much service in the House as I could in the Senate, or of the public service that I wanted. I never was interested in being governor or mayor. The question was one of public service with me, and I was concerned with the hopes and aspirations of the average person. What could I do to get legislation enacted into law that would be consistent—would benefit—that the conditions called for at the time, the poor, the sick, the affected, the underprivileged, those discriminated against? Those were the people who were uppermost in my mind, and they are today, if I was still in public life, and as a citizen they are uppermost in my mind today. So when I was elected to the Ways and Means Committee, I realized that I was the first Democrat elected with only one full-time service.

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Until the time I retired there were only two others that were elected. One was Wilbur Mills [Wilbur D. Mills]; the other, Jim Burke [James A. Burke] from Quincy, Massachusetts. So that with me, it was a question of public service. I knew there were millions of persons

throughout the country who had their hopes and their ambitions, and legislation passed by the Congress benefited them one way or the other. And the House has to pass on upon legislation the same as the Senate; I never was interested in the Senate, strange to say.

STERN: I assume, though, that if President Truman had asked you to run, you'd have done it as a Democrat.

MCCORMACK: I don't know whether I would or not, to be frank with you. I'd have had a lot of difficulty in saying no, I'll be frank with you; but I'd got myself so wedded to the House, and I knew the next step for me would be Speaker if my party was in control, because I had, some years prior to that, broken across the South where there were ties of friendship and respect and so forth. So I knew that I was in line and hoping that it would never happen—that Rayburn would die—but knowing that life passes, time passes. So that I had become wedded to the House, and I'm very happy that I did, that I could render the maximum public service that I had the ambition to render to the people of our country in the House as well as I could in the Senate.

STERN: I'd like to turn to your relationship with President Kennedy, and perhaps starting back when he was first elected to Congress or even before he was elected to Congress. Did you know him at all before he went to Congress?

MCCORMACK: I knew him, yes, but I didn't know him very well. I knew his father very well, Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy]. Joe and I were good friends, and I was with Joe for the Congress.

STERN: That was a tough race, with ten competing candidates.

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MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: Many feel that he wouldn't have won, given the fact, the nature of the district, he wouldn't have been elected without all that competition to dilute the vote.

What kind of a congressman do you remember him being? Some of his biographers claim that he was extremely independent. Do you have any recollection in particular of the '52 election? I know that some say that you helped him a great deal, particularly campaigning in the Jewish wards of the city where there was a feeling that Senator Lodge's [Henry Cabot Lodge]...

MCCORMACK: Oh yes. I campaigned for Kennedy, yes. In Ward 14, when Roosevelt ran I think he got—I'll just recollect to give you an idea—he got about 32,000 votes, and I got 31,900. The Republican on those ward would get about 1,400 votes; the Republican running against me got about 1,600 votes. Then on the

regular Democrats for Governor and so forth it came down to about 14,000 to 8,000. They loved Roosevelt, and they loved me, I'm happy to say. They were a bulwark of strength for me, Ward 14 was.

STERN: Apparently you helped a great deal in that election where....

MCCORMACK: No question about it.

STERN: A lot has been written about the 1956 year which, obviously, was a turning point in Senator Kennedy's career, both about the battle here in Massachusetts over the state chairmanship...

MCCORMACK: Yes, there was Bill Burke [William H. Burke, Jr.] and Kennedy was behind....

STERN: Lynch [John M. Lynch], Pat Lynch.

MCCORMACK: Pat Lynch. Pat Lynch was a good friend of mind and a mighty good fellow. Bill Burke had been chairman, and he'd been a very good chairman, and I had recommended him for collector of the port. He was collector of the port while the Democrats were in, and he went out when the Republicans—I can't go into the niceties, what he was, but he was out. He was not collector of the port, and he wanted to go back as chairman, and he called in to see me.

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I said, "What do you want to go back for, Bill?" I tried to talk him out of, and not apologizing, either. But he had done so many favors for me. He appointed so many friends of mine in the service, the customs service. At that time they didn't have civil service covering them, as I remember. But he insisted, and I couldn't say no. He didn't ask me to do any particular work for him, but I was with him, sure. It was a close fight. Pat Lynch was perfectly satisfactory to me. But I remember well I tried to talk Bill Burke out of the running. I said, "You've been chairman already, Bill. And you've been tremendously successful in the elections, state and local and federal elections. Why don't you rest upon your record? You go back there and you're only going to diminish it in all probabilities." But he insisted, so I was with him.

[INTERRUPTION ON TAPE]

STERN: Edward [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.] who did a tape for the Kennedy Library some years ago feels that the whole issue was very much exaggerated...

MCCORMACK: It was exaggerated.

STERN: ...and it was not really a terribly important struggle, and certainly not in terms of you and Senator Kennedy.

MCCORMACK: This fight for the chairmanship between Burke and Lynch, so far as a fight between Kennedy and McCormack was completely exaggerated.

STERN: I know that Senator Kennedy campaigned extensively with Edward McCormack in '56 when he was running for attorney general...

MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: ...traveled all around the state with him, and, apparently, to some degree the reason was to bury the notion of a feud between the families.

MCCORMACK: Well, there was never a feud. I was with the President and I was Speaker. I was leading the fights of his bills up in the House, in the Congress, never any though in my mind—well, I couldn't be John McCormack and be otherwise.

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STERN: Do you have any recollections of the '56 convention and how close Senator Kennedy came to becoming vice-president...

MCCORMACK: Yes, he came very close. He got quite a few southern delegations voting for him in whole or in part. And Texas voted for him solidly.

STERN: Edward McCormack claims that you helped to swing Texas...

MCCORMACK: Oh, sure.

STERN: ...as well as New York.

MCCORMACK: Well, and the whole South. Without regard to the North, whatever influence I might have in the North, my influence was very strong in the South. Some of the delegations in part went for him for vice-president, and some went entirely. But Texas went entirely, because I remember after, I think, Missouri shifted its vote from Kennedy to Kefauver [Estes Kefauver], if I'm not mistaken, I was accused by the press of having Rayburn recognize Missouri. I didn't know where Missouri was seated in the '56 convention as we're talking now. It was Kentucky that I sent word up to Rayburn to recognize, because Kentucky had told me that they were going to shift their vote to Kennedy, and they did.

STERN: Edward McCormack recalled a conversation he had with Averell

Harriman [William Averell Harriman]...

MCCORMACK: Averell?

STERN: ...who specifically states that you recommended him for the votes he could control in New York...

MCCORMACK: I recommended him what?

STERN: ...that the votes in New York that he had some influence over be cast for Senator Kennedy.

MCCORMACK: Sure.

STERN: And likewise in Texas.

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MCCORMACK: Well, I went to the New York delegation, to those I knew personally, and we split the New York delegation. But it was Missouri that shifted, I remember; but it was Kentucky that I... There was an awful turmoil, and Rayburn was up in the—where the presiding officer, the platform, where he was located. And they were milling around down below, and they couldn't hear. And I told Joe Feeney [Joseph Feeney] who was one of my secretaries, "Go up and tell Sam Rayburn to recognize Kentucky." In some way there was confusion, and he recognized Missouri.

[INTERRUPTION ON TAPE]

John Kennedy was very popular in Massachusetts. What the hell, his [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.] opponent was Ted, but the factor was the President. Because as I said to myself, "What the hell, if I didn't know Eddie McCormack or Ted Kennedy, but I admired the both of them, and I was inclined to vote for McCormack, and I admired the President the way I did, I'd end up voting for Ted Kennedy. Because if Ted was defeated it would eventually ensue that the President was defeated in his own state, got a rebuke in his own state.

STERN: That's right. One of President Kennedy's biographers mentioned the fact that at your legislative meetings you often used to kid each other about the whole thing and that neither of you took it very seriously.

MCCORMACK: We never took it seriously.

STERN: He quotes President Kennedy as saying to you one day, "John, they're writing about us again..."

MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: ...and that sort of thing. The press exaggerated the whole thing.

MCCORMACK: Oh, it was a manufactured thing. As a matter of fact, I wanted Eddie to run for governor. I'm not a damn fool. I may be now at my age, but I wasn't when I was clear thinking. I try to be clear thinking now. I wanted him to run for governor.

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STERN: He mentioned in his tape that he deliberately didn't run for governor in 1960 because he took a gamble. These are his own words. He said that he gambled in '60 on the assumption that Senator Kennedy was going to be on the national ticket and therefore there would be a Senate vacancy in '62. But, of course, he hadn't counted on the developments as they occurred. He was sure, as a matter of fact, he said, that he could have been elected governor in '60...

MCCORMACK: Oh, it was ripe for him.

STERN: Joe Ward [Joseph D. Ward] was a weak candidate.

MCCORMACK: It was ripe for him, and Kennedy would have been thrilled. Joe Kennedy and I were very close, not that we had any close associations, just simply a climate of friendship existed for years between us. I can remember when John... The only time I ever for a request from Joe Kennedy for anything was when John was running for the nomination for president. I got a call from Joe Kennedy, and he asked me to speak to Pat Brown [Edmund G. Brown] for John and to Charlie Buckley [Charles A. Buckley]. He was the leader of the Democratic organization in, I think, Bronx or some of those parts of New York City. One of the leaders; he was an outstanding fellow, a young one, among the Democratic party, and he meant some votes. And Billy Green [William Joseph Green, Jr.] from Philadelphia. He was chairman of the Democratic city committee of Philadelphia. And I spoke to the three of them.

STERN: Do you have any particular recollections of the '60 convention, particularly the vice-presidential—of the question of selecting Senator Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. Because a number of the...

MCCORMACK: Oh, yes, I was...

STERN: ...accounts indicate that you did a lot to head off...

MCCORMACK: I did.

STERN: ...a potential revolt by liberal Democrats against the Johnson

nomination.

MCCORMACK: I did, I did. Yes, if you want to ask me a question, I'll go on the record. Am I on the record?

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STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: All right. What's your question?

STERN: Well, I'm particularly interested in what you can tell me about...

MCCORMACK: 1960.

STERN: ...the '60 convention.

MCCORMACK: Well, I was satisfied that John Kennedy would get the nomination. I just had a strong feeling. And prior to the convention, his father Joe... (Is that recorded?)

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: ...had called me to speak to three different persons that I have mentioned, and I called them up. And Pat Brown told me at that time he couldn't make a definite commitment because he had to do what he could to control the delegation. And California is a strange state politically in many respects, and anyone has difficulties there which I appreciated; but I knew when I hung up he was with John. He unmistakably conveyed to me that he was with John personally. Congressman (was it Buckley that I mentioned?)

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: From New York, yes. He was a leader of the Democratic organization in the Bronx. And he was an important figure in a convention. And I tried to reach him for a couple weeks, and he wasn't down in the House. We didn't run across one another, and one day there was a teller's vote, and when I got through I was down digging up votes down in the restaurants to vote the way Rayburn and I wanted. I was one of the last to go through the teller's votes, and (that's a vote where you take by tellers; you march through—instead of having a roll call, they demand tellers) as I got through Charley Buckley was learning over the back of the House. He had just voted prior to me, and I put my arm around his shoulder just about to break in to giving him the come-on and speaking to him about John Kennedy, and a little page came up, one of the page boys came up and said,

“Congressman Buckley, there’s a so-and-so, a newspaper man from a Chicago paper,” (I don’t know whether it was the *Tribune* [*Chicago Daily Tribune*] or not, but it was a Chicago paper) “wants to see you, and he’s out in the lobby.” And Charley turned to me and said, “I suppose the SOB,” (he’s a fellow that’s cursing and it would sound beautiful, and you wouldn’t be offensive, and of it) he said, “I suppose the SOB wants to find out who I’m with for president, and I’m going to go out and tell him whom I’m for. I’m with Kennedy.” I didn’t have to ask him. [Laughter] So then I had the problem of trying to stop him, because Kennedy might want him to announce later. So I said, “Do you know this fellow?” “I don’t know who the so and so and so and so is.” I said, “Well, what do you want to give a—this is a feature story. This is something big,” I said, “if you announce for Kennedy.” I said, “You must have some friend in the newspaper. You may not have a newspaper up there in New York you like so much, but you must have some friend on there, some newspaper man you like. Why not give him the story. Give him the benefit of it.”

And I wanted to get him over to his office so that I could get to John Kennedy and tell him so that John Kennedy could call him up and thank him for what I told him. And I did. He didn’t go out. So I rushed into the telephone booth there in the room and I got a hold of John. He was over on the Senate floor, and I got him, and I told him the story. Now I don’t know what he did after that, but that’s how Buckley....

Now Billy Green—I met him one day, when the House was in session, and I happened to run across him about ten minutes before the House met and we sat down on the sofa outside the House. In ’56 he and his boys were with Kefauver for vice-president against Kennedy. And the next morning, I met him going to church. Mrs. McCormack [Harriet McCormack] and I were going to mass. And he and a couple of other boys who were communicants of the Catholic Church—it was a holy day of obligation—were going to mass. And I remember turning to three of them, and I said, “Are you fellows going to receive communion this morning? After what you did last night, if you’re not, you ought to.” [Laughter] I was ribbing them. So now come to ’60, and I’m sitting on the sofa, and I said, “Billy, have you got to go to confession this year?” “Oh,” he said, “I’m all right.”

I’m with Kennedy.”

[Laughter]

STERN: Did you think that the selection of Senator Johnson was a good idea for vice-president?

MCCORMACK: Well, now I’m coming to that. So when I reported to Joe, I said to Joe that Lyndon Johnson was the best man to be the running mate. And Joe said, “Well, he won’t take the nomination.”

STERN: You’re taking about Joe Kennedy now?

MCCORMACK: Yes, Joe Kennedy. Joe called me up about talking to these three members, these three persons, and making a report to him.

STERN: Right.

MCCORMACK: And then I told him I thought Lyndon Johnson was the best man to be the running mate for John, when John's nominated. And he said, "Well, Lyndon's campaigning throughout the country, he and Sam Rayburn, telling the whole country that he won't take the nomination." I said, "Of course they're telling them that. They're saying that, but," I said, "when you talk about Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn, you're talking about two men who are responsible men, Joe. And one thing is certain. A responsible man makes the responsible decision at the right time. And they mean what they say, that they'll not take the nomination today. But if John offers it to them, Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn are such responsible men they'll realize the duty to the party is such, and they'll accept."

So when John was nominated I was handling his fight on the floor. I was chairman of the Democratic delegation that year. And we had a meeting. At the meeting he designated me to handle his fight on the floor of the House², and Ribicoff [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff] was also interested so I handled it so that there was no conflict between Ribicoff and myself. I suppose John Kennedy wanted me because of my knowledge of parliamentary law in case any parliamentary question arose. And then, in addition to that I had developed an awful lot of friendships throughout the country among the delegates who were there. And when he was nominated, I telephoned

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him to recommend that he appear before the convention and express his thanks, not make a normal acceptance speech which could be later, but psychologically it would be to his advantage to appear before the convention. And he did, as you know.

At that time I told him about Johnson, that he'd be the best one. He thought the same thing. He said the same thing, "He said he won't take it." I said, "Well, the same think, when you're talking about Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn, we're talking about two men of responsibility with responsible minds. And they will make the decision that responsible minds call for at the time." And knowing the men as I did, I was confident that Johnson would make the responsible decision, as he did handle it. But I said, "You have to ask him." And he did. So I had quite a—well I'd say that's a little bit more than minor part.

I was designated by John Kennedy at the caucus of the delegation to handle his fight on the floor. I knew that Ribicoff was handling some of it. So they didn't have to tell me. I did my work in a manner where it didn't conflict in any way with Ribicoff's work to create any conflicts. So that I was the one that suggested to both Joe—at different times when I reported to Joe of my talks with the three he asked me to call up and talk to and later after John was nominated and before he selected his choice.

² Mr. McCormack clearly meant "convention" here.

STERN: You apparently helped to keep Michigan and Minnesota and California from offering an alternative choice of vice-president; they were discontented, at least initially.

MCCORMACK: Oh, sure, very much. They were among the liberal forces, you know. They're wonderful people, but they have progressive minds.

STERN: Can you tell me something about the period, particularly the first year, of the Kennedy administration when the President missed on a number of his key legislative proposals, very, very close votes—minimum wage, the education bill, Medicare? Why did he seem to not be able to command any substantial support in Congress? As a matter of fact, some people claim that he essentially was bogged down at the time of his death and this it was President Johnson who broke the...

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MCCORMACK: Well, I always considered that the Kennedy-Johnson... Kennedy's first term and his assassination was about 14 months left in his first term—I considered that was the Kennedy-Johnson era. And I considered that Johnson's second, his term when he was elected, as a continuation of the Kennedy-Johnson period. I considered them both, because Johnson was carrying out Kennedy's recommendations. And he did it very successfully.

STERN: Do you think that had the President lived he might have been able to get through some of this legislation?

MCCORMACK: Yes, he would have, because when a president makes recommendations to Congress some of them are for the first year, some of them have in mind enactment the second year, third, and fourth year. He gives a four-year program to Congress. So it isn't necessarily everything he recommends is in the first year.

STERN: He apparently was looking forward to running in '64 against Senator Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater].

MCCORMACK: He what?

STERN: President Kennedy apparently was looking forward to running against Senator Goldwater...

MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: ...on the assumption that he would then win a substantial mandate and probably a stronger Democratic Congress.

MCCORMACK: I considered that Kennedy—when the President was in there, he was very successful. As a matter of fact, when a president goes up and gives his message on the state of the union to the Congress at the outset of his term, some of them—particularly his first term—some of his recommendations have in mind enactment the first year, some the second year, some the third year, some the fourth year; because his message on the state of the union is for a four-year term in the main. So the president doesn't expect to get all of his recommendations enacted in his first year or his second year even.

STERN: He did have trouble, though...

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MCCORMACK: Yes.

STERN: ...particularly with the southern conservatives.

MCCORMACK: Yes, we had that coalition. We have the coalition there existing, and....

STERN: Do you recall particularly the minimum wage struggle where apparently you counseled him to compromise and drop certain people from coverage in order to get the amount raised? As I recall, it was the laundry women. And he agreed with you that that was necessary, and then it failed on the floor by a very, very small margin, despite that compromise.

MCCORMACK: My recollection now of it is very faint, very faint, so faint that I haven't got an intelligent recollection of it.

STERN: Do you have an recollection of the federal aid to education struggle? Apparently...

MCCORMACK: Oh, we had a struggle on that, yes.

STERN: Apparently you differed with the President on that issue.

MCCORMACK: Well, the difference was on public schools.

STERN: Right.

MCCORMACK: But there was no marked difference; there was no confrontation, not by any means. It was simply, as far as I was concerned, my position was that there was something that could be done for private schools. Something should be done, and they have later, and they still talk about doing...

STERN: You advocated loans, as I recall.

MCCORMACK: Yes, such things could be done—have been done. But the separation of church and state should not be carried to the point of the complete exclusion of private schools. My position was more academic. Now, not many clashed with the President. He had his views, and I had my views. But I talked to the legislation he recommended; it was pending up in the House.

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STERN: How would you assess John Kennedy, particularly in the light of what has happened in the last decade—the disillusionment that so many Americans feel with the office, the President...

MCCORMACK: President John Kennedy had a mind that was deathless, a mind of confidence. I can remember at the Cuban confrontation, he displayed the highest type of leadership that could be displayed by any man. And it took a lot of vision and courage. And he had the leadership of both branches down, Republican and Democrat. Now we had known that there was something that was obvious we were playing with Castro [Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz] down there, but it was only within a day or two prior to our meeting being called that they had got definite evidence from the photographs from planes above...

STERN: Right.

MCCORMACK: ...of the installations being build. And President Kennedy had left no doubt in the minds of anyone who was there that he was not going to backtrack at all, that he was not going to stand for any Soviet injection into the building of installations that could project missiles—intermediary, at the time, that's all—and to project them into different parts of the United States. And he made it clear to us—and to the credit of everyone who was there, both Democrat and Republican, House and Senate, we unanimously supported him. Because that was a matter that concerned the national interest of our country and was transcendent of party politics. And every man who was there represented leadership on the Republican and Democratic party and the House and the Senate, and they unanimously supported him and agreed with him in this position that he took.

STERN: Do you recall him then as being very...

MCCORMACK: That was in confrontation with Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev].

STERN: Do you recall him then as being a very strong and active...

MCCORMACK: Strong. Yes. Strong president. Strong president. Man of confidence, which is vitally important to have in the president, a man who, as I term, occupying the White House. People understand that. The president of the United States. It's got to be for the best interest of our country. Particularly in terms of international stress, there's got to be a man who possesses a mind of confidence.

STERN: I think that one could fairly say that there's been a great deal of disillusionment in the last ten years, let's say, particularly, of course, with the Nixon administration; and a lot of people no longer feel the way they did about the presidency.

MCCORMACK: That's true. A lot of people don't feel about government as such. Now, you read about polls. Polls are taken of the Congress, a very low poll, about 16 to 18 percent. That isn't really representative of the feeling of the people of the congressional districts, because if you took a poll of how the people of each congressional district felt about their congressmen, it would go 55 to 80 percent. When they poll, most of the people have a high regard for their member of Congress, but for Congress itself, with the press playing, the newspapers playing the way they do, writing what they do—and they go along the line of least resistance. The line of least resistance is a very easy line to follow. And they have a low opinion of Congress, but that doesn't mean that they have a low opinion of their congressmen, whether a member of the House or member of the Senate.

STERN: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your own relationship with President Kennedy, either before he was president or...

MCCORMACK: Well, we were very friendly. I took an active interest in his campaign for Congress. I was very glad to see him run, and I took an active interest in his campaign at the convention for vice-president. The newspapers played up something different, but that's their fault, not mine. I took a leading interest in his campaign against Lodge. He and I were very friendly. And I'm very friendly with Ted Kennedy. I admire Ted Kennedy very much. He [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.] made a speech in which he referred to Edward Moore Kennedy. That was unnecessary. If that's his name—and the press picked it up, about putting his middle name in there and it was an intended reflection, and so forth. I

imagine he was just doing a little tickle, but it tickled the wrong way. It tickled adverse to him. [Slight interruption] station as attorney general. He'd run for governor, the limits where he might have advanced were, and we could look back, were unlimited. He might have been vice-president, been in line.

STERN: He himself does say that he gambled in 1960, and that he should have run for governor.

MCCORMACK: Strike that off, will you. This is off now, isn't it?

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: Will you someday tell me who those goddamn ultraliberals were whose advice you followed rather than mine? Ultraliberal atmosphere. [Laugh] Now I'm not a liberal; I'm a progressive. I used to look at some of the boys who were always afraid of themselves calling liberals, and I could say, used to kid them and say, "Well, I could walk into any group that you liberals or ultraliberals are gathered in and I could take one look and say, "Will, I've got as good a liberal voting record or progressive voting record or whatever you want to call it as any one of you and better than some of you. Because I saw Udall [Stewart L. Udall] quit on 14-B where his vote—he was only licked by about four votes." Those things I don't forget. I know what the meaning of public opinion and pressure is. I've seen it. It takes a lot of guts to vote against public opinion. It took a lot of guts for me to vote against his bill when I did, not that I'm boasting about myself, but there was a reason. (Now take it off. I don't want to ____).

At that time we had a chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House, Sol Bloom of New York, a wonderful gent, a member, a dedicated member, a great American. And whenever any legislation came out of his committee, Hamilton Fish [Hamilton Fish III] and Dewey Short [Dewey J. Short] and them would be down, and a lot of the House fellows: the *Bloom* bill. And out to the country would go the Jew bill, don't you see? Now I know you don't misunderstand my state of mind. And Roosevelt wanted to get away from____, and he wanted to have it go to some other committee than Foreign Affairs, because he knew that when he made a recommendation that the chairman of the committee introduced the bill. It's the custom, if he's for it; if not, the next ranking member if he's for it introduces the bill. And Sol Bloom was a million percent right, a man of guts and courage and of energy. I admired him very much. (Sol, in the hereafter, as you are, I hope you hear me. I admired you very much.) And—this is off, is it?

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: And Roosevelt wanted to [Interruption on tape] that's what he wanted to do. And we had a couple of meetings, and at the second or third meeting I said, "Well, Mr. President...." He wanted to refer to the defense committee, Armed Services Committee. Well, I knew it couldn't be under the rules of the House. The rules of the Senate have more flexibility on reference than the House, and I knew that Sam Rayburn was a man who would do his duty. He'd refer it where the rules said, and I wouldn't.... And so I said to him, "Well, Mr. President, I'll introduce the bill in the House if Alben Barkley [Alben W. Barkley] (I think he was vice-president at the time. No, was leader; he was leader at the time.) will introduce it in the Senate." The Senate can send it to any committee they want to and the House, whatever committee the House refers it to,

knowing it would go to Foreign Affairs. That would be the McCormack bill. And that was really what he.... It was no reflection on Sol Bloom, but they wanted to get away from “the Bloom bill.” They’d get up and raise their hands up to the heavens, as high as they could; and out to the country would go, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah. That’s why I suggested that I introduce it, but I said, “I don’t want to introduce it unless Alben Barkley introduces it in the Senate. And I’m going to tell Sol Bloom so he’ll know, because he’s too honorable a man.” And I did. I knew Sol Bloom was a big man, and he’d understand. I told him. I said, “I’m not going to introduce the bill in the House, unless the leader of the Senate introduces the bill, too. I’m not going to insult my friend Sol Bloom who’s a great American and a great legislator.” That’s how it came about. Roosevelt wanted to get away from calling it the Bloom bill. That was no reflection on Sol.

STERN: Yes, I understand. Particularly in the atmosphere of the late ‘30S.

MCCORMACK: That’s so, and fortunately for me I introduced it as—the parliamentarian numbers the bills as they’re introduced—and fortunately I introduced it as about 1768 or something, and the parliamentarian put on 1776. So it became known as 1776! I’m goddamn glad it did!

STERN: It was a very, very important bill. Are there any other points you might like to raise, particularly about your relationship with President Kennedy or...

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[PLEASE NOTE: Page 35a was included as an addition to the original transcript; original pagination has been maintained before and after page 35a]

MCCORMACK: All I can say is that despite what the press has carried in the past, that the relationship between President Kennedy and myself and the Kennedys were most pleasant and friendly. Naturally, during the campaign they were for Ted and I was for my nephew. But there was no interference with the friendship and the respect, and there never was any carry-over on my part and never any carry-over on the President’s part. And Joe Kennedy and I were close friends until he died.

STERN: I think most of the accounts.... Your nephew, as I said, when he spoke for the Library also came to that conclusion. He said he thought that the accounts were very much over exaggerated and that your own cooperation with President Kennedy was not affected.

MCCORMACK: No, not in the least, not in the least. It would be a goddamn poor individual who was—in a position of responsibility, and I think I could find myself not guilty of that without anybody saying that I’m trying to exaggerate for my own benefit.

STERN: Are there any other major events....

MCCORMACK: Oh, there are a lot of major events.

STERN: ...that you can give me any personal recollection of? For example, you were, as I recall, present when President Truman was sworn in after the sudden death of President Roosevelt—present at the White House, as I recall.

MCCORMACK: Yes. Oh, oh, that's interesting. Sam Rayburn had a room downstairs underneath the House that the press labeled as the "Department of Education." Again, blown up. He called members down to educate them. He never did that at all. He sometimes called someone down to have a talk with him, but not to educate them in a sense. Because

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you're not saying to any member, "You do this." You might get away on one vote; you're going to lose other votes. A member's elected in his own right. You talk to them, friendship, and party allegiance, and so forth and so on; but he used to have it for little social gatherings. And he never took a drink while Congress was in session. (Have you got this on? It's all right.) Sam Rayburn—and I admired him for it—in all the years that I knew him, he never drank to excess, but he never took a drink while Congress was in session. He would always wait until after Congress had adjourned, whether it was two or three or four o'clock in the morning or two or three or four o'clock in the afternoon—a light session. And he had a room downstairs where he'd meet with some friends and just gab, and, of course, the office was always open to me, the majority leader.

So one day I went in there, and he told me that Harry Truman was dropping up, so I went down there. I arrived there a few minutes before Truman arrived, and when Truman arrived, Sam said, "The White House is trying to get you, Harry. They're very anxious, trying to get you." And Truman picked up the telephone, and I'm just accidentally standing alongside of him, and it's only a little room. Everybody knows what's going on. And Truman talked with the secretary who was trying to get him. He was Roosevelt's chief secretary at the time—I forget his name, but if I heard it I'd remember it very easily.

STERN: I think it was Steve Early [Stephen T. Early].

MCCORMACK: I think it was maybe Early, but one of his chief secretaries, a male. And I was there. Truman talked. I didn't know what they were saying, but I could see his face whiten a little. I didn't attach any importance to it; afterwards I did. And when he got through, he said to us, "I've got to get down to the White House right away," he said, "and don't tell anybody of this tall." That's all. Well, when he was sworn in we were all down there, don't you see. We all knew shortly afterwards, and so we knew that the talk related.... So I was present when Truman was first notified by the White House that Roosevelt had died. (Now that's on, isn't it?)

STERN: Yes.

MCCORMACK: (That's on.) [Squeal on tape] Yes, I can recall something on President Kennedy's death. I was having lunch in the House restaurant, and one of the few times that I can remember in all the years I was down

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there, I was having lunch alone, because I usually had somebody down from up the state or up the district, and I'd invite him down to lunch, or I'd have some member have lunch over me. And I was alone, and two newspapermen came over and see me and told me that they had heard there was a strong rumor around that President Kennedy had been shot and killed, and the rumor was that Johnson was seen going into the hospital holding his arm with one hand. That threw back to when he was in the hospital prior to it for a long period of time with a heart condition, bad heart condition. And the inference is that Johnson was shot or has had a heart attack.

And then they came back in about five minutes later and they told me, they confirmed it, they told me that the President was shot and dead, killed, and Johnson was seen going into the hospital holding his arm, a throw-back to the days several years before when he was in the hospital for a long period of time with a severe heart attack. The line of succession was the President, the Vice-president, and the Speaker, John McCormack, who was Speaker at the time. I dunno—haha....

STERN: That must have been a great shock for you, that realization. It must have made you, I imagine.... You had some sort of an agreement, didn't you, with President Johnson about...

MCCORMACK: Yes, we had some kind of a written agreement...

STERN: Right.

MCCORMACK: ...I don't know where it is. I suppose it's in his papers some place—what I was to do in case he became disabled. In case of death was different. He didn't want to have the country in a situation like it was when Wilson was president. And we had an agreement.

STERN: It must have been with some relief that you saw Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] inaugurated in 1965, knowing that the vice-presidency had been filled.

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MCCORMACK: Oh, yes. But I was next in the line of direct—the Speaker is second in the line, anyway. Now it's avoided because the vice-presidential

nomination recommends somebody to fill in, to be the vice-president for the remainder of the term, which is a good thing, good step forward. The election process—there's something to the talk about election process. I've felt for many years that the President should be nominated and elected throughout the country by the voters, but I realize—and I know there's a re-agitation of it now.

STERN: Yes, there is.

MCCORMACK: I don't think the small states would agree to it, because that would place a half dozen big populated states in a position of controlling the election pretty well, and the small states in population would lose a lot of their effectiveness, and there are enough small states to prevent an amendment of the constitution going through if they organize. It's being re-agitated now. I don't look for anything, but it's the sound thing to do. There's no reason why the people of the country as a whole shouldn't nominate the President and elect him direct instead of through the electoral process.

Truman was a man of decisive mind. He could make decisions that—the decisions you make today are today, but they operate for tomorrow, the future. And it's pretty hard to look into the future and see what conditions are going to arise. Every time I sat in an interview with the President where we were discussing a decision concerning international affairs I offered a little prayer to the Supreme Being that I'd be guided right in making my contribution. I'm humble enough to admit it. Because the decisions of the day are the action of tomorrow. Who knows what tomorrow's going to develop and what the action will be.

Now in '48 or thereabouts, '48 or '49, I think it was '48, there was a tremendous agitation against the H-bomb, in and out of Congress. Just like there was great agitation during the period of intense isolation before Pearl Harbor in and out of Congress against America getting involved in any way. And the pressure was upon Truman to make the decision not to go ahead with our doing research work and experimenting upon that H-bomb. We had found out that the Soviet Union was doing it. The iniquitous CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] found

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that out, and if we wiped out the CIA we'd have to establish another agency to do the work, because international spying, unfortunately, is a way of modern life in the national interests of countries, and in the national interest of our country, in particular.

So the pressure was mainly upon Truman not to make the decision, and the argument was: well, we know the Russians are working on it. They can't perfect it; it's impossible. Let them throw their money down the drain if they want to. Why should we waste our money? And Truman made the decision to go ahead. Now he had a commission of nine scientists to advise him on matters concerning the field of science, and eight of them met in Washington before he made his decision. One of them was over in Europe. And the eight of them unanimously voted to recommend to urge the President not to go ahead. This is his commission on science, scientists. And he made the decision to go ahead. Good thing for this country he did, because if he said "no" that would have enabled the Soviets to have

preempted the field for all time. And if they perfected the missile as they did, they weren't going to give us four or five years to catch up with them. Not by a damn sight.

That's the thing that I watch very much—what are they doing now? I don't know. When I was down in Washington I'd be on a position to find out—without being nosy. I don't want to be nosy. And I'd be in a position to find out as Speaker, and without being nosy. But Truman did a great service to our country when he made the decision to go ahead on the H-bomb.

STERN: As I recall, you, as House majority leader in the early '40s, were informed of the work that was going on in the Manhattan Project [Manhattan Engineer District], and you helped to get the money appropriated from Congress. Congress didn't know what it was for.

MCCORMACK: Exactly. That was in '44; that's the A-bomb.

STERN: That's right. The A-bomb.

MCCORMACK: That was in '44. I'm glad you asked the question, because it would be of interest to what you have in mind of getting the word of one who was a part of the living history. It's important; I can realize that.

Sam Rayburn met me in a corridor, and he said, "John, will you

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be at the office tomorrow at ten o'clock? Joe Martin [Joseph William Martin, Jr.] will be there. General George Marshall [George C. Marshall] and Henry Stimson [Henry L. Stimson] want to see us to take a matter up with us." He didn't tell me what the matter was so I assumed it was to get some bill out of the Armed Services Committee that they wanted or to get an appropriation that they wanted out of the Appropriations Committee. So we were there at ten o'clock; and Marshall and Stimson were there, and they tell an amazing story. They told us that we had found out—again, the iniquitous CIA³ had found it out; they didn't tell us the CIA did, but they did—that Hitler was working on a missile or a bomb, that he started before we did, that we did not know how many installations or research laboratories he had, that we did not know how far advanced he was, but if he perfected it before we did, we could lose the war overnight.

They really didn't come up to tell us that. They came up because they had to get an appropriation through Congress to keep the Manhattan Project going, and they told us we had to do it in a manner where the Hitler government would not know that we are working on this missile or bomb. That meant that we couldn't let members of Congress know.

Well, a few weeks later, they came back to us in a hurry-up call. They were down before the subcommittee on appropriations. When you're on a committee for years, you sense things, and then they told us they were getting close to the point where they were going to ask the direct question, and if they did, they'd give a truthful answer. Imagine men of that

³ Mr. McCormack here means "OSS."

type—would have to, likely to. They wanted our advice. I remember I advised them—we've got to take that subcommittee into our confidence. We've got to take a gamble on that. And that's what we did. And they were up there because we had to get \$2 billion appropriated in the next two fiscal years to keep this mysterious place intact—we later found out it was called Manhattan Project. I didn't know where it was, didn't know anything about it. I had heard rumblings about something, but nothing—I never was nosy. I never wanted to know too much that concerned secrets, involved secrecy, unless they wanted to tell it to me, my duty.

But we found out, we had discovered that Hitler started experimenting on a missile. As they said, if he perfected before we did could lose the war overnight. And they

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came up to us because they had to. They didn't come up to tell us that. They had to come up to tell us to get the money appropriated to keep this place going that we were working on, which I later found out was called Manhattan Project. And Roosevelt had started it out of blanket funds appropriated to him as president, which Congress does in time of war—I don't know if it was fifty million or a hundred million a year—that he can use in any way he thinks might further the war from our angle without accounting to it to Congress. And it got so big—this was so big—he couldn't carry it on, so we had to do it. That's the reason they came to us. It was tough, but we did our duty.

STERN: And the money, of course, was appropriated.

MCCORMACK: Exactly. And was appropriated in a matter where the Hitler government couldn't have the least idea it was being appropriated by padding up appropriations for military items with a hidden transferability clause—very hidden. I couldn't discover a hidden.... Unless I was aware of it, I didn't know where it was myself. That's rather an interesting story.

STERN: Apparently, when Vice-president Truman became president, he himself was not aware of the...

MCCORMACK: No. That's what I understand.

STERN: ...of the project. He had to be informed by...

MCCORMACK: That was one of the top, top secrets. The only reason they had to come to us was that they had to have money appropriated without the Hitler government knowing it. That was tossing it on our laps. And they had nothing else they could do, but we were leaders, Speaker, and Joe Martin was a great American. Ah, again, that shows an illustration of how big men in Congress view domestic matters differently from international angles. When the time of a crisis on an international level big-minded men, broad-minded men will not let partisan politics interfere with their judgment as to what is for the national interest of our country.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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