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Daniel F. O’Brien – JFK #1
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MARTIN: The following interview is with Daniel F. O'Brien of Cambridge, long-time funeral director in this area and well known in political circles. The date, December 1, 1964. The interviewer is Ed Martin of Senator [Edward M.] Kennedy's staff.

Dan, your memory of Jack Kennedy goes right back to the early beginnings of his political life. Do you remember the first time you ran across him and the occasion of it?

O'BRIEN: My memory of my first meeting with Jack Kennedy was brought about by John [J.] Droney in bringing Jack Kennedy here to interest me in Kennedy's candidacy for Congress. And I might say that in no uncertain terms or words did I accept Jack Kennedy, whom I thought knew nothing whatsoever about politics and, furthermore, knew nothing whatsoever about the district that he was trying to represent—our district, comprised of East Boston, Charlestown, the North End, the West End, and the City of Cambridge. The result was that maybe he went out with a different thought of what loyalty might mean to an individual who is running for public office.

MARTIN: Dan, when he came into your office that day in early '46, what did he look like? What kind of a fellow was he?

O'BRIEN: Jack Kennedy looked to me like a boy just out of school who had no experience politically, and I say again I don't think he even knew where the district
was, that he had to have a guide to bring him around to the various places where he might meet individuals who were going to be of some value to him. My loyalty was to Mike Neville. Mike had been my friend since we were kids together. Mike had come up the rough way and not having the wealth or the so-called necessary funds to put on a campaign that we felt he was entitled to. The Kennedys pulled no punches in the fight. We didn't have the resources to even begin to compete with them between the Reader's Digest, Liberty Magazine, Look, Life, and the various other sources of information that are available to the general public. We couldn't touch those things, and it wasn't very long before we knew that our battle was a lost cause.

MARTIN: Well, Dan, did he explain to you that first morning why he was running, why he wanted to be Congressman?

O'BRIEN: He made no explanation, made no explanation at all, just that he was a candidate from a phony address on Bowdoin Street. And that I knew, so that I just couldn't accept him regardless of the fact that we knew we didn't have the resources to put something over, or put Neville over. Let me put it that way. That's what we were trying to do. The result was that he made inroads into our friends who were susceptible to money—and that's putting it rather coldly—money that we could not compete with.

MARTIN: Dan, at that first meeting with him, did you think, when you got a quick look at this young guy with a big mop of hair, did you think that he had a shot at this job?

O'BRIEN: I know that anybody has a shot at it that wants to come in. I can go in and I can run down in East Squeedunk for the particular office of Congressman. I don't have to be a native down there and I don't have to be a resident down there, but I still can go out and run there if I've got the wherewithal to finance a decent fight against whoever the incumbent, or the aspirant might happen to be.

MARTIN: Well, Dan, there were others beside young Jack Kennedy and Mike Neville in this fight. Gradually as the campaign moved along, weren't there several other candidates?
O'BRIEN: No, there were not. Neville had the decided edge, and he had the support of friends that he had made in all of his years in the State House as a representative, a leader of the Democratic forces in the House of Representatives. Mike had made friends throughout the whole district, and here's a boy walks in and takes over, simply because of the fact that he's got the one thing that we lacked, which was the resources to conduct a real fight.

MARTIN: Well, Dan, wasn't there a woman named [Catherine] Falvey and John Cotter and a few others that were in that campaign?

O'BRIEN: They were really of no consequence. We knew how far they could go, and they didn't have the contacts that Neville had.

MARTIN: The big fight then, was between young Kennedy and Neville?

O'BRIEN: That's right. As it afterwards developed that's what the real fight was, and the only place we carried was our own city—even against all the efforts of the Kennedys.

MARTIN: What kind of a campaign did Mike put on?

O'BRIEN: He put on the best that he possibly could, and you had to know Neville to realize the resourcefulness of a fellow without capital. Mike Neville down through the years gave away what he should have saved politically. He gave away his talent free to most of his constituency, because of the fact that they didn't have the money to hire attorneys that might fight their battles whatever they may happen to be. And the result was that Neville was a very generous, very generous fellow. Generous to a fault, as a matter of fact. The poor fellow has gone to his reward now, but he was a broken-hearted individual. And I say that literally, because I know the disappointment that he got from those who were in power and in office when he was not entitled to those responses from the very men that he had supported all his life.
MARTIN: Well, what did they do? They just drifted over to the Kennedy organization?

O'BRIEN: They drifted over to money. They drifted over because they were bought, and not understanding that Neville, who was loyal to his few friends—and they could come in and be purchased and they were purchased by all manner of means.

MARTIN: Well, you know, Dan, that was a peculiar campaign inasmuch as they had changed the primary date.

O'BRIEN: Yes, there was a change.

MARTIN: June 18th was the day of the primary.

O'BRIEN: It was early in the summer.

MARTIN: Yes. So that shortened up any type of campaign. It limited them to about three or four months, actually.

O'BRIEN: From June to September, and then the election was in November.

MARTIN: But actually, once you get by the primary in this district . . .

O'BRIEN: In this district there's no fight, once you get by the primary, it's a Democratic district and will be.

MARTIN: What happened to Mike Neville afterwards? Did he ever go after another political office?

O'BRIEN: By appointment yes, and was disappointed in those two requests also, when he never should have been disappointed by the powers that be, because he had earned the recognition that he didn't get.

MARTIN: Dan, after this congressional campaign, did you ever have any contact otherwise with the then Congressman Kennedy down through his early years in Washington?
O'BRIEN: Yes. Before the contest took place, Neville and I went to Washington to interview his father to see if we couldn't interest him in Mike Neville and give Jack Kennedy a shot later on. And he coldly sat back in his chair and he said, "Why you fellows are crazy. My son will be President in 1960." And it came about that he was President in 1960.

MARTIN: Did you think so at the time?

O'BRIEN: No. I did not---did not.

MARTIN: Later on, then, there was a justifiable bitterness that existed after this campaign, but eventually did you ...

O'BRIEN: I've never been bitter towards a fellow that's ambitious. As a matter of fact, I've given my resources to a great many, appreciated in some instances and unappreciated in others. I never had any desire to hold a public office, even though the people of the district were good enough to elect me their Senator. And maybe with a little bit of ego, I could say that I would be Senator yet, if I wanted to continue to be a politician instead of trying to run a legitimate business, which I consider mine.

MARTIN: Dan, did you know Joseph [P.] Kennedy, Jr.? Did you ever meet him?

O'BRIEN: No, I don't think I ever did, other than that one time I met the father. That was the only time I ever met any of the Kennedys.

MARTIN: Because I think, at one time, he was a delegate to the National Convention.

O'BRIEN: National Convention. He was. And I have been a delegate since 1928.

MARTIN: Well, Dan, what type of a congressman do you think young John Kennedy made?
O'BRIEN: John Kennedy made one of the best congressmen and one of the most aggressive congressmen that we ever had representing the district. It was a job to a lot of other people. He was a dedicated servant, and there isn't any question in my mind about it. You have to admire the young man for the efforts that he put in to doing things for people in the district.

MARTIN: Did you participate at all in the Senate fight in 1952 when young Kennedy took on [Henry Cabot] Lodge?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I did. I did.

MARTIN: In what way, Dan?

O'BRIEN: I was Kennedy.

MARTIN: Did you work for him then?

O'BRIEN: Yes, indeed I did. Naturally, I suppose, because I felt that he was our true representative, and not having any ties with the other side at all, I naturally became Kennedy and did all in the world that I could for him. As a matter of fact, I think I manned the polls here for him.

MARTIN: Dan, there was some feeling even among the Kennedy workers, at that time, just prior to his announcement, that he should have taken a shot at governor.

O'BRIEN: I think his aspirations were much higher than being governor. Governor means nothing here in the State of Massachusetts, because his hands are tied to a certain extent by what we call the Governor's Council, but that's another story and I don't think that Jack Kennedy wanted to put up with that, and I don't think that he was a fellow that would sit back and take what other governors have taken from the individuals that he has to contend with.

MARTIN: Dan, during the first Senate term of Jack Kennedy, do you recall the occasion when he refused to sign the [James M.] Curley pardon?
O'BRIEN: Yes, I do. I recall it very, very well, and I thought he made a hell of a mistake politically when he refused to sign that Curley pardon because if there was one fellow who was entitled to a pardon, it was Curley, who had done so much for the people that he represented here in that particular congressional district, which was the congressional district that Jack Kennedy was then representing. They were Curley-ites in that district, and it was the Curley-ites who elected Jack Kennedy. I say that sincerely, without fear of interference from Curley. Curley never told me not to be Kennedy, and I was as close to Curley as anybody ever was in the district. The result was that I went along with Jack Kennedy in all of his fights they even had afterwards: Curley never interfered in the fight. Curley, unfortunately, was blunt very many times when he probably should have been a little more subtle in his answers—another man who died with a broken heart, but that's neither here nor there in politics.

MARTIN: Dan, I'd like to get this point clear. Did Mike Neville, after his defeat, carry any bitterness toward the Kennedys?

O'BRIEN: Mike never never carried bitterness to anybody, whether he was defeated or won, and he was a very successful attorney. But Mike had a penchant for doing too many things for nothing. And then people got to expect that "no pay" and still get service from him in whatever they might need legally. Mike was a hundred per cent Democrat. Mike even refused a judgeship from a Republican governor. You may believe that or not. That's a far-fetched statement. Governor [Christian A.] Herter offered Mike Neville the judgeship in the East Cambridge District Court, and his answer to him was, "I can't take it from a Republican."

MARTIN: But he wasn't bitter toward Jack Kennedy?

O'BRIEN: No, he was not.

MARTIN: Dan, in 1956, were you out at the Convention in which Jack Kennedy came close to being the vice presidential candidate?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I was. And I was Kennedy.
MARTIN: In the light of subsequent events, do you think it was wise, fortunate, rather, that he didn't make it that time?

O'BRIEN: No, I do not. I think it would have been another stepping stone to what he was trying to achieve. I said earlier that he was a dedicated servant. Money didn't enter the picture as far as Jack Kennedy was concerned because he had all those resources and he didn't need any more, and whatever he got, he got legally and honestly. In politics, some reason or other, a man is tabbed with being a thief whether he is or not. And that's an unfortunate situation that has been brought about, in my opinion, by propaganda that has been printed by various individuals and passed out hither and thither wherever they could drop it. The result is that every man in public life today, today over and above every other day, and this is December 1, 1964, is now tabbed as being a thief, or a chiseler. Newspapers came out calling us chiselers. I never was in position to get a pension; I never was in on a junket paid for by the State of Massachusetts; I never went to a dinner that was paid for by the state through a committee; and the result was that a newspaperman took a shot and called the whole legislature chiselers. That came up at a particular recess meeting of the legislature. And the Boston Post, at that particular time, run by John Fox, printed it right on the first page—Mr. [James] Colbert, by-line: "Legislators Are Chiseler." So on the matter of personal privilege, I got up that morning and I took Mr. Colbert over the coals and the Boston Post because I was no chiseler, and there were forty of us in that body, and I don't know about a few others that might have chiseled these things. I do know that on one particular junket that Mr. Colbert was the secretary on, for twenty-five hundred dollars, plus the expenses, that spareribs don’t cost twenty-one dollars a box at one o'clock in the morning, so that, therefore, there must have been something else in the spareribs, and it might have been a fluid.

MARTIN: Dan, in 1960, when he went for the presidency, you were out at that Convention, too, and that was quite a thing.

O'BRIEN: Yes, I was.
MARTIN: Dan, also what kind of a president do you think Jack Kennedy made?

O'BRIEN: I think he made one of the most wonderful presidents we have ever had. I admired him. I admired him for his honesty, his integrity. Whether he was right or wrong on many questions, he stood up and took whatever there was to take—the results of his stand on any question. I had to admire the young man, because he had what you have to love—honesty, integrity, and the guts to stand up and take whatever the results might happen to be.

MARTIN: Dan, the presidency was a long cry from the young college student and veteran fresh out of the service. As you say, you couldn't see any of those qualities in him the first day he walked in your office. But, Dan, he had in his rather short life, he had something like eighteen years in his political association with Massachusetts from congressman to president.

O'BRIEN: '46 to 1964.

MARTIN: What kind of an impact, Dan, in your background as a political figure here, would you say the Kennedy name had on Massachusetts politics? What did it do for Massachusetts if it accomplished anything?

O'BRIEN: Well, it did accomplish a lot. There's no question about it because the Kennedys got into power. And Joe Kennedy, a resourceful man, no question about that. He has proved it in his dealings with the various individuals that he came in contact with down through the years. And coming from a tenement district, as he did come from, to become probably one of the most—richest man in the world today, it showed resourcefulness and ability. There was no question about it. I suppose money begets money. If you've got it to invest and you know when and where to invest it, you are bound to win, and Joe Kennedy had that ability and those contacts that were available to him with the friendships he had made all over the world. And I find no fault with that. I think that what he got he got honestly and because of the fact that his contacts were valuable. In other words, I might meet you someday and say, "Here's an opportunity for you to make a hundred million dollars," and, if you've
got the money to do it with, there's no question but what you're going to do it.

I can remember Joe Kennedy who had a contract with a young man from our own city here in the person of the Honorable John Burns, another young man who came out of Harvard, the son of a motorman. And John Burns, because of his contacts through Harvard and the contacts he made in the world when he came out--and the only man in the history of the State of Massachusetts to ever resign from a judge in the Superior Court--John Burns could see no future in the political life, and he went into private business. The result was that John became probably one of the most influential men in the State of Massachusetts next door to Joe Kennedy, if he had continued to live. As a matter of fact, I think Joe Kennedy was the gentleman who made John Burns a member of the Securities Commission. I'm almost positive that Joe Kennedy did that for John Burns.

MARTIN: Dan, what do you think President Kennedy accomplished or failed to accomplish in behalf of his own party in this state?

O'BRIEN: I think that he accomplished the bringing about of a great many people who are Democratic but still independent and won't take dictation from certain individuals. Jack Kennedy had the faculty of being able to bring them together. Others have the faculty of not injuring a fellow, but putting him on his high horse and making him do things that he wouldn't do under ordinary circumstances.

MARTIN: Dan, what do you think will always remain perhaps the most vivid recollection of President Kennedy?

O'BRIEN: The most vivid thing, I think, was the fact that he stood up to Castro, Cuba, and Khrushchev, and all the rest of them in the Cuba crisis. That, to my mind, really showed his mettle. When we were on the brink of war, he still didn't stop even though he knew that it was going to involve us in an open war with the communist governments of the world, and probably we'd all be wiped out. But, nevertheless, he stood up in his shoes, and they backed off.

The next thing, I'm going to take this note again. Only this morning a young man walked in here with a paper to be notarized. He wanted to join the Peace Corps, and he had to have these papers notarized before they would accept him; a Harvard
student, and his name was Somerville. A peculiar thing: I'm signing his paper from Cambridge, and his name is Somerville. And I said to him, "For a bright-looking, intelligent fellow, what do you want to do this for?" He said, "Probably I'm a dedicated boy. I think I'd like to travel the world and at the same time be able to do some good in some of the illiterate, foreign countries that I will be sent to." To me that Peace Corps is a wonderful, wonderful group if they're ever appreciated for the little that they get out of it, other than thirty dollars a month and experience. And I think that's what they get, isn't it, thirty dollars?

MARTIN: Dan, given a similar set of circumstances, do you think the meteoric rise of the young Jack Kennedy from a congressman in this district all the way to the presidency could ever be duplicated now, or ten years from now?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I think that we will have just as bright young men come forward, if they get the opportunity. But the trouble with it is--yes, I can say this, that Ted Kennedy can duplicate Jack's efforts and still be a better president than Jack was because I think that Ted has much more personality than Jack ever had. I say that honestly and sincerely, and I mean it. Ted Kennedy has something that wins you. He's not a liberal, and he's a fellow that knows more about the world today than Jack knew when he started because Ted has had the experience of being in Congress and being a Senator. It helps. No question about it, the experience that he has gathered, on top of the friendships that he will make in the future. Ted Kennedy, in my book, is the best of the Kennedys today.

MARTIN: This interview has been with Daniel F. O'Brien, longtime funeral director in Cambridge and a long-time political figure in Massachusetts. The date, December 1, 1964. The interviewer, Ed Martin, of Senator Kennedy's staff.