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Addendum Photograph of Matthew A. Reese, Jr.
Oral History Interview

with

Mr. Matthew A. Reese, Jr.

Washington, D.C.
October 24, 1964

By William L. Young
For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: This interview is with Mr. Matthew A. Reese, Jr., and is being recorded at the Democratic National Headquarters in Washington, D.C., October 24, 1964. Mr. Reese, when did you first become interested in President Kennedy as a presidential possibility?

REESE: Early in 1959, or maybe late 1958, when the candidates were first being talked of. I had had no contact with the Senator, except that I had met him on the Capitol steps, probably in '55, when he was just recovering from his operation. He just looked like a winner to me, and he had a great attractiveness as a candidate. As someone who has been interested in politics, I was naturally attracted to him.

Then, I received a card in the mail, asking which candidate I was for. This was, I guess, in mid '59 or the fall of '59. It caused me to reflect a little. I decided on the basis of what I knew of the candidates and of their chances that Senator Kennedy was the person I would support. This was not necessarily out of
devotion to the man, because at that time I had very little feeling except admiration. But I had equal admiration for Hubert Humphrey, Adlai Stevenson, Lyndon Johnson and some of the others. It looked to me like he was a winner and would make a great candidate and a great President. So I checked his name on this card and mailed it back to the committee that had sent it. This was the reason I was picked to do a little early volunteer work for the Senator.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, what was your role then during the Kennedy primary in West Virginia?

REESE: I mentioned volunteer work. I was called by Robert McDonough in Parkersburg. We had met on a couple of occasions, and he asked me to set up a day for Ted Kennedy, who was coming in on a survey of the possibilities there. I set this day up for Ted. Then, I went along with maybe thirty-five or forty others, who were invited to a meeting in Parkersburg, where I met Bob Kennedy. I was greatly attracted to him. At this meeting, they asked my opinion, and I said that the Senator ought to come into West Virginia.

Shortly thereafter I was asked to go to work for him on a paid basis. I started in late 1959 or January '60. I traveled the state, or most of the state, organizing Kennedy-for-President clubs or organizations.

I found that it was really very easy. I was a little surprised, because I thought it would be more difficult. I
think that a lot of people were sort of like I was. They wanted to go with someone that looked like a winner. These were politicians, sometimes the top politicians in the county, sometimes the secondary leadership. But we organized eventually. Now I didn't do all of this, but I did a great deal of it, I guess, forty-five of the fifty-five counties in West Virginia.

After these organizations were set up, I went to Charleston and was given the title of Executive Director of West Virginians for Kennedy. I did a great deal of liaison work between the out-of-state leadership: Bobby Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, Larry O'Brien, Ken O'Donnell, and between them and the organizations which I and others had set up. This was the part that I played in the West Virginia primary.

YOUNG: Did you have any feelings at the beginning, that if Kennedy came into the primary he might meet a good bit of resistance on the issue of religion?

REESE: Yes, I think I did, although I was never really as fearful of that issue as were some. I don't think that many of the West Virginians who supported Kennedy were as fearful as people from outside the state. I have a feeling that if you're honorable with the electorate, they'll be honorable with you. I didn't think the people of West Virginia would vote against John Kennedy on the basis of religion. And I was right, because they didn't. I never really was concerned about it.
I was more concerned about the powerful personality of Hubert Humphrey, who deserved support in West Virginia. I think we did a superior organizational job. Of course, President Kennedy had that "special grace" that endeared him to people. When I went into the campaign, Kennedy was just another man who, I thought, had a good chance to win. It wasn't very long until I was dedicated to the man. He had that ability to get the dedication out of people who were close to him.

YOUNG: You mentioned that you anticipated some difficulty in organizing clubs, that actually it was an easier job than you anticipated. Do you think that this same magnetic personality was responsible? Or why were people so willing at the beginning to work with you?

REESE: I think that partly it was because of his magnetic personality. John Kennedy had spent a great deal of time in West Virginia. He had been available for four years for speaking engagements. He had been in all parts of the state to this little meeting or that big meeting. So they already knew him. I think that politicians like to involve themselves in campaigns, like to be for somebody. We were there first with an attractive candidate.

I talked with a lot of people that I had met in other campaigns or in working with the Young Democrats. They knew and trusted me. They were anxious to get started in supporting somebody. They were a lot like I was; they weren't dedicated to the man at that time. They, like I, became dedicated a little later. It was easy, because they were ready to go and we were
there asking them to go. So they began, and it was very successful as a matter of fact. I don't know if that makes a great deal of sense, but this is the way I feel about it. I think that they were just ready to go with somebody.

We got there first with an attractive candidate, and they decided to go with us. Once they got into it a little bit, they felt committed and gave their effort and time and energy for the candidate.

YOUNG: In the beginning it was not an ideological battle between Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey?

REESE: In my opinion, no. It was not an ideological battle. I don't know if it ever became an ideological battle. Most of the people in West Virginia felt kindly towards both Senator Kennedy and Senator Humphrey. But Senator Kennedy had that special plus, and, in addition, he looked like a winner. People are attracted to the aura of success.

YOUNG: There was a general feeling, at that time then, that Governor Stevenson would not receive the Democratic nomination for the third time.

REESE: Yes, I think that in West Virginia this was the feeling.

YOUNG: This is just a technical question. You mentioned that you were responsible for organizing in about forty-four of the fifty-five counties. Is there any pattern in the counties that you did not have organizations in?

REESE: The only counties we didn't have organizations in were counties that were very sparsely populated. It wasn't that we couldn't get an
organization there; it was that we just didn't have time to finish it. They weren't of great importance from the standpoint of the vote. As a consequence, we didn't bother. We ran out of time before we could get to them. We organized in counties as sparsely populated as Pocahontas for instance. You know there are a few people there, but we had some good Kennedy leaders in public office.

YOUNG: Would you go over the list of the factors which you think are most important in working for Senator Kennedy's victory in the primary election, and in doing this would you say something about Senator Humphrey's program, and lack of program; compare the two in terms of effectiveness, technique, campaign promises and that sort of thing?

REESE: In the first place, I think we had a better organization. We had more people. We had better intelligence about what was and what needed to be done. We had no problem with money from the standpoint of buying those things that were necessary to buy, staff time, automobiles, printing and that sort of thing. This contributed to the success, although I found that they were not as loose with their money as I have heard some people say they were. A great deal of money was spent, but not nearly as much as some people have said.

I think the fact that we were there early and got commitments from some of the county and city and town leadership helped us a great deal. When Senator Humphrey had people go in, we already had many of the leaders tied up.
Then, of course, I think the most important element was Senator Kennedy's appeal. He came in and hit the religious issue square in the face. He came in and talked straight. He worked hard. We succeeded as a result of this.

I don't think Senator Humphrey's campaign was run as well. I know that he had difficulty with money. He probably had poorer advice than Senator Kennedy did. I don't think his people from West Virginia knew as much as Kennedy's people about the way you win elections in the state. I think that Senator Kennedy had a greater appeal to a greater number of volunteers. There was a real dedication, especially toward the end and especially when Senator Kennedy looked as though he were in an underdog position. This always makes the volunteers more dedicated, and work harder. We did have this over Senator Humphrey, I believe.

I remember then that Senator Humphrey's travels around the state were not as well planned. His people did not advance him as well. There was too little effort to build crowds. For instance, we always tried to have a band to attract people.

There were techniques that we used to support the President's appearances, techniques that Humphrey's people didn't try. Now, I don't know whether this was because they didn't know or they couldn't get the volunteer response or they didn't have enough money. I think it is probably a combination of all.

I know that I learned a great deal in campaign techniques from the Kennedy leadership. For instance, we talked about having a reception for the Senator and Mrs. Kennedy in Huntington, my hometown. They asked me how many people we could get. I said
we could get 600 or 700. They went in there with a very carefully designed plan and invited thousands of people to a reception and had over 5,000 people. I wouldn't have thought this was possible. The fire marshall finally said he wouldn't let anybody else in.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, could you suggest anything else that you learned. I'm curious as to why you dropped only 500 and they settled for 5,000. Do you feel that Huntington is not just that politically minded a town?

REESE: No. I had had a lot of experience there in arranging for the political crowds. Now, I'm sure that if we did it the way I had always done it in Huntington that, even with the personality of the President and the attractiveness of the President and his wife, there would not have been this sort of turnout. In West Virginia we send out notices that there is going to be a meeting -- I always did. We'd get on the phone and call all the people that we knew. We'd put it in the newspaper. I'm sure there would not have been nearly as many come. You know maybe 500 to 1,000.

The Kennedy's asked that there be twenty-four women to serve on a committee to meet them. They were asked to bring all their lists of club memberships, PTAs, Christmas card lists. They'd sit down and send out panel cards of invitation. You know "West Virginians for Kennedy cordially invites you to meet the Senator and Mrs. Kennedy at such-and-such a place". It was a formal invitation. They had a monstrous response. I don't know how many
they sent out, maybe 15,000 cards, and they got 5,000 people to come. I would never have thought of this.

YOUNG: Did they check to avoid duplication?

REESE: Yes. They had a file system. And these women — my wife was one of them — worked very hard on this project. The cross-checking and filing was something new to us. I've used it since in many states and it has always worked, but not as well. It works better with a personality that people want to see, but even with someone who doesn't have this glamour you can get great crowds by just using this technique.

YOUNG: Did you invite Republicans too?

REESE: Yes. I think at first they tried to check against the registration list, because this was a primary, but then they thought, "If we win this, we're going into the general. There's no reason why we can't have these people here." The cost was very little. I think that Helen Keyes told me one time that they got it to where it only cost nineteen cents per person — I may be wrong on that, but it was very low — for the whole business: the room, the mailing, the cookies, the tea. It was only nineteen cents per person.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, you've had the unique experience of being active at the state level and then seeing politics at the national level. You made a statement a few minutes ago that interested me very much. What are the factors about West Virginia politics that make politic­ing there unique as opposed to the other states? Or, to put it
RESE: West Virginians, particularly in the southern and central areas of the state, enjoy politics greatly. They have a good record of getting out to vote. It's a joy. They treat it as a game, a contest. People are vitally interested, not only in the issues, but just in the election. It's an exciting thing in their life. And some people have pretty drab lives in those areas; some of these towns are pretty drab and unexciting. So, I think this is a characteristic of West Virginia that is unique.

We also have in West Virginia slating at a primary. In every county, of course, there are factions within the party. Sometimes these factions aren't pure and don't stay together all the time. But one group gets together for a particular group of candidates and try to build the slate (in the '60 campaign from the President on down to the Justice of the Peace). The slate lists the candidates the group is for. Sometimes, the group is the county committee; sometimes, it is the people who wish they were the county committee (Laughter) - the 'ins', the 'outs', and sometimes it's intermixed. But historically West Virginians have gotten used to aligning themselves with certain groups and supporting the slated candidates of these groups. The workers that are recruited through volunteer means or that are paid will support this slate. I think that the President won so handily in West Virginia because we very carefully aligned ourselves with the successful slates. The fact is
that his great personal magnitude, particularly toward the end, helped the candidates on the slates probably more than they helped him.

There was a gubernatorial race, and Governor (William W.) Barron and Hulett Smith were the leading opponents. In some areas, we would be with the Smith people, and in other areas with the Barron people. It wasn't a state-wide decision; it was a county as to which group you would go with. In some of these cases, we would supply material, staff, and money to go in with other candidates in West Virginia. This is traditional too. They call it a "kitty". Each candidate is expected to put a little money into this "kitty" to hire workers and cars on election day. We participated in this as well.

I think that a lot of people thought that since our level of education in West Virginia wasn't as high as in other areas, and since we are a border state, with a great many southern mountain sort of people in the state that the religious issue would cause Kennedy to lose the election. But I think that they forgot the independence of these West Virginians. I know I sound a little romantic, but I think that they are great people. They showed the world that the fact that this man was a Catholic was of very little importance. If he had only been a Catholic, he would have been defeated, but he was much more than a Catholic. As a consequence, this was not an important element in the election. Actually, it may have helped us in some areas.
YOUNG: In terms of slating them, you didn't make a distinction between liberal and conservative slates. Or did this distinction exist in any areas?

REESE: Very little. I think that the people in West Virginia politically (in the Democratic party) are pretty liberal. We have conservatives, but I don't think a conservative governor has won for a number of years. In a county the people that control the political apparatus and the political activity are, generally, not issue oriented, particularly when the candidates are as close on the issues as Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy were. I think that had it been someone very conservative against someone liberal there would have been a break, and I think the liberal would have won overwhelmingly. But between Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy there was not much difference. So it didn't fall into a liberal-conservative confrontation.

YOUNG: I heard that one explanation of this slating in West Virginia was the fact that in West Virginia we do have a terribly long ballot. Would you agree with this and also, whether you agree or disagree, would you indicate any other reasons for this slating?

REESE: Yes. This is one reason. I think that slating was in the hands of a pretty reactionary crew before Roosevelt and the New Deal. I think that the slating may have grown out -- I'm not a political historian; I don't know as much about this as I would like to -- of the trend toward unionism, of labor organizations in the '30s. People got together to fight the big coal operators and naturally went together
a great deal politically too. They would agree and disagree. I think possibly the slates developed out of this.

Sometimes, they are very effective. Usually, one slate wins over the other because there is great activity in behalf of that slate. It is not like a labor endorsement, in that members of labor unions don't necessarily follow the endorsement.

It is very powerful in certain counties. Now, in Cabell County, where I come from, it isn't a powerful thing. But we still slate. It's traditional. We found that candidates can be elected by slating. So those people who will support a slate are a valuable group. It allows the candidates to pool their resources, and it allows better discipline, I think, over candidates which oftentimes is very good unless it goes too far, and then I think it's bad.

YOUNG: In your experience with the volunteers in West Virginia did you notice the volunteers for Kennedy coming from any particular class or religious background or did you draw pretty much from the middle class cross section?

REESE: I think that the fact that the President was a Catholic and the fact that that was such an issue brought a lot of very talented, very able volunteers to the political arena. A friend of mine in Huntington told me that he wasn't working so hard for Kennedy because Kennedy was Catholic. He said, "I'm working hard for Kennedy because I'm a Catholic." It was important to him.

But it is really large numbers when you come to volunteers. I'm sure that in no county were there more Catholics than non-Catholics volunteering for Kennedy. A great deal of the dedicated leadership
was Catholic. They had something to fight for, and when you have something to fight for, you usually are pretty effective. Especially later in the campaign, there was a great outpouring.

YOUNG: Thank you very much for the approach to the unique factor of West Virginian politics. This is something that is mentioned, but very seldom discussed. Can you add anything to that? This runs in my mind and perhaps you would add something else: that geography itself necessitates the paid automobile, the paid poll worker, and so on, simply to get people to the polls. Could you comment on that and anything else.

REESE: From the standpoint of paid workers and automobiles, and so forth, I think that it is the politicians' fault. It has become traditional, and I think it is sad that it has. I have seen people who have hoped for a job after the election be paid for their work on election day. I think it's a sad commentary that we have to do this, but no one has the courage to buck it. There are a lot of people who would never help a Republican, but would not help a Democrat unless they are paid. We've done this by depending on money more than inspiration in West Virginia. If anyone ever had the courage to stop it, we would be much better off. The people of West Virginia would respond without having to be paid on election day. But it's traditional; it's expected. All of us are practical when we say, "Let's worry about this election; this one we've got to win. Let's go ahead and raise the money somehow to take care of it."

YOUNG: "We'll talk about the philosophy of it next time."
REESE: Yes. Then again, it gives the local leaders power; you know, the power of election day patronage. They keep their organization with them by parcelling out money. Now, most of this money is put to good use. People do work. Some of it is put in people's pockets, and they sit on their front porches for the day, but I don't think that a great deal of it is. I don't think there is nearly as much money spent in elections in West Virginia as people would have us believe, but I'm not an authority on that either.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, could you turn to something else for a minute and talk about Senator Kennedy's relationship with organized labor, rank and file, and labor leadership. Compare and contrast this with Senator Humphrey's relationship with the same group.

REESE: Labor was cool to President Kennedy during the West Virginia primary. They gave him no support that I know of. This disturbed us a great deal.

Labor before the primary was turned toward Humphrey more than Kennedy. They found themselves in a dilemma out of which they could not find their way. Here were two people that had supported liberal measures since the beginning of their congressional careers. It was difficult to make a choice. Truly, their hearts were with Humphrey, but they did very little to support him. But after three or four years of reflection, I feel they probably did the only thing they could do.

YOUNG: Would you comment on special interest groups other than organized labor. The thing that comes to mind, of course, is is there a Negro Democratic vote in West Virginia? Does it exist? If so, did the Senator work effectively with it?
REESE: Yes. There is a Negro Democratic vote in West Virginia, especially in Mercer and McDowell Counties. They are pretty heavily Negro. We worked effectively there. There was a special group. Marjorie Lawson, a Negro, who is now a federal district judge, worked there for us.

We organized it very carefully. We gave it a great deal of attention -- organization, staff -- and also the President gave it attention. It was successful; the Negroes responded. Here again, what is right and what is wrong? Here were two men who had supported civil rights. You know you can't fault Senator Humphrey on anything in this area. So you would think that the Negro vote would split reasonably between the two. This wasn't the case. Kennedy got the Negro vote very heavily. I think it was due primarily to the organizational work we did there and we had the Negro leadership with us.

YOUNG: Who were your representatives to the Negro community?

REESE: I have great ignorance in this area. I mentioned Marjorie Lawson. And there was a Negro Leader, William Lonesome . . .

YOUNG: I've interviewed him.

REESE: . . . that I had some relationship with, but this was sort of a little separate task force. I had very little contact with them.

YOUNG: Can you think of any other special groups in West Virginia that I haven't mentioned that some special appeal was made to?

REESE: The only thing we haven't mentioned -- we haven't called them a special group -- was the political type of which there are great numbers in West Virginia. We take our politics seriously -- as I've said before. The political type is not necessarily the top leadership in the county, but the secondary leadership. The precinct
leadership was with us in greater numbers. I think this was the reason for our success organizationally. You must understand that the top state-wide leadership in West Virginia was not involved in this primary very deeply. This was the reason they had to come to a county politician with some state-wide contacts like me. Had the top state leadership been available, they wouldn't have gotten Matt Reese to help them on this campaign. But the top leadership was very skittish and didn't want to settle down and never did settle down until after the primary, as a matter of fact, until after the convention.

YOUNG: How do you interpret all this hostility on the part of the leading Democrats of the state?

REESE: They were scared of the religious issue. I was in a conference with one of our top candidates after the Convention. We got into the religious problem. I finally had to say, "But, sir, we cannot change the candidate's -- (meaning the Senator's) -- religion." You know they were still scared of it even after it was demonstrated that the people supported him in spite of his religion. Many of the elected candidates and top leadership were for Humphrey, maybe not because of Humphrey, but because it was a Stop-Kennedy thing. I think they were very sincere about it. They thought that this young man, because of his youth and his religion, couldn't win the presidency and wouldn't help the local ticket. This is what the state or local candidate wants. He wants somebody at the top of the ticket that is going to get him votes. They were truly convinced
that this wouldn't happen, and, as a consequence, they stayed clear of it. I don't think that they gave Humphrey much help; I think they would rather have seen Humphrey win than Kennedy. Now, of course, the President is revered, and he has earned the respect of West Virginia politicians and leadership. At that time he certainly wasn't.

YOUNG: Was some of the Humphrey support also indirectly support for Senator Lyndon Johnson at that time?

REESE: Certainly. I think Senator Byrd, our senior Senator from West Virginia, was very frank in his support of Senator Johnson. There were some others. The National Committeeman was, I think, supporting Senator Johnson. There was also wide support for Adlai Stevenson who was greatly loved by West Virginians. There certainly wasn't a universal acceptance of Senator Kennedy or anybody else; everybody had to be contended with. I think the state leadership was opposed to Kennedy because they wanted somebody else, but they weren't agreed upon who this somebody else was.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, you've covered the details of West Virginia political life pretty carefully. I wonder if we might turn to a little lighter subject. Could you give me any ancedotal material and human interest information with respect to the amount of time you did spend with both Senator Kennedy and his wife?

REESE: There were several things that happened which illustrates the type man that the President was and also Mrs. Kennedy. I had opportunities in West Virginia primarily and some since I've been in Washington
to have a little personal contact with the Kennedys. I'll say that I've enjoyed it a great deal. They were certainly engaging, entertaining people, very human. I knew all three of the boys better than the girls, although I have met all of the sisters and also the Ambassador and Mrs. Rose Kennedy. I was able to feel a rapport with all of them, even with our different backgrounds. Here is a family that is very accomplished with great wealth, excellent schools, a lot of travel, etc., and yet I always felt comfortable around them. My background certainly is a great deal different from theirs. I wasn't real crazy about some of the people who were friends of theirs, and didn't feel comfortable with them, because they had a little bit of phoniness about them. But this family to the individual was without any sham or phoniness. They were what they were. They liked you or didn't like you.

One time during the primary campaign the President had laryngitis very badly. You remember during the primaries and early in the campaign that he had trouble with his voice fairly regularly. Later the president actually had a voice coach come in and show him how to project, so that he wouldn't get hoarse.

One time in West Virginia Kennedy was scheduled for a series of campaign appearances. I was called about midnight the day before and was told the Senator's voice was gone. They wanted me to give a speech for him the next day. I didn't know the schedule. I thought it was one talk. I thought that a speech would be prepared, and I could read it or look at it and add my own words.
They told me to meet the plane, the Caroline, at 6 a.m. at the Charleston airport. I got there at 6 o'clock with great difficulty, because I'm not an early riser. The plane was an hour late and when it got in, the President was still in bed on the plane. We had to go from the plane to the hotel. He had to shave. We got a very late start on the campaign day.

The first chance I had to talk about what we were going to do was in the car driving down to Madison in Boone County. The Senator was sitting in the front seat with the driver, and I was sitting in the backseat with Dave Powers. I asked Dave, "Where is the speech?" He said, "What speech?" I said, "The speech that I'm to give for the Senator. He said, "Well, there isn't any speech."

I said, "What in the world? Dave, I'm not a platform speaker. What do you want me to do?" The Senator in the front seat was listening to this conversation. He had a yellow pad. He took a pencil and wrote down some of the things that he wanted me to say and passed it back. (And I still have some of these notes. I value very highly now the notes he wrote to me.) At any rate, I couldn't read it. He didn't have a very clear handwriting. So I gave the note to Dave and said, "Dave, what does this say?"

He said, "Hell, I don't know. I never could read his writing."

Finally, the Senator was able to get across to me some of the things we might say.

These were quick stops, small groups with a local councilman or Democratic leader. It was traveling in Boone County, in Cabin
Creek around Kanawha. You know, we'd go three miles and stop, and three more miles and stop in front of the courthouse in a little West Virginia town or just out in the meadow someplace where people were congregating. I spoke for the Senator. They'd introduce him. He'd come up. Then I'd come in and make some remark for him like, "No, I'm not John Kennedy, but I'm here to talk for him because his voice is hurting." I'd make some reference to his heroic war experiences. I talked about his experience in Congress. I talked about his dedication to America and to the party.

I didn't do a terribly good job. I was a little awed. I could do a better job now. I hadn't at this time had a great deal of experience on the platform. I don't know if he was particularly pleased with my performance, but I did do the best I could.

We had eight or ten campaign appearances that day. The Senator had to borrow money from me that day to buy cokes which he never returned. I understand, from people who were with him, that he never carried any money. He never had a dime for a telephone. He never had a dollar for a coke or a beer.

We stopped for lunch someplace in Kanawha County at a restaurant. When he left the restaurant, he had a little dixie cup with a brownish liquid in it. I frankly thought it was a drink - a bourbon or a scotch drink. He just sipped on it very slowly much of the afternoon. I didn't pay a great deal of attention to it. We had stopped someplace and when we got back in the car, the Senator took his yellow pad out and wrote something on the page.
I couldn't read it. He wrote it again the way he thought was clearer. And I still couldn't read it. He was exasperated by this time, so he took the yellow pad back and very forcefully printed "H-o-n-e-y". I thought what in the hell is he talking about—honey. I said, "I like you too, Senator" which he chuckled over. He had honey in the cup which he was using to try to soothe his throat. He had misplaced it and wanted to know where it was.

We did have a long day. I was never more tired in my life. Unfortunately, I didn't have much of a chance to talk with him, but I was in his company. This was the first time I had been around him for an extensive period, but I did notice one thing that I found later was rather typical. He had his hand on his leg, and he kept patting his leg or the back of the car seat. He was impatient. I think he would have liked to go instantly from place to place. Going from one place to another made him impatient. He wanted to get the day successfully completed. It was a great day for me, and I'll remember it always.

Another time in West Virginia, I picked Mrs. Kennedy up at the airport and carried her in the car to a high school in South Charleston where we were to meet the Senator. As usual, the caravan was late, and I had the rare pleasure of being able to be with Mrs. Kennedy for an hour or so. We had a long talk. Beth Peters was with us. We talked of many things. Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Peters both had been to the same school but at different times. They talked of that.
She (Mrs. Kennedy) asked about the campaign and seemed to be very interested and very knowledgeable about it. I told her the story of the first appearance of the Senator after the campaign was officially inaugurated in Parkersburg. It was a breakfast meeting, and we had an Episcopalian minister give the invocation. It was funny because the Episcopalian wore a clerical collar. When Ken O'Donnell saw this, he said, "Why the hell did you get a Catholic for the invocation? We're trying to duck this Catholic issue as much as we can." They weren't really satisfied with the story that he was Episcopalian and not Catholic. I told Mrs. Kennedy this and she said, "Yes. I find we always run like hell when we see a priest or a nun these days." She was very warm and very interesting, and I'm sure very relieved when the Senator arrived and she was able to see him again because she said at that time she had not seen him for a week.

A third little thing was the general campaign after the Convention. I was in North Carolina. Robert, (the Senator's Brother), had sent me there to be state coordinator. An advance man had come in (the Senator appeared there September 17), and I had worked with him in planning the appearance. I had travelled with the entourage all day, but I hadn't had an opportunity to even speak to the Senator. He had my vote — let him convince some others. Since then I have travelled a great deal, and I've found when you see people outside their own environment — even people you know quite well — it surprises you at first; you don't quite know them. I didn't need
to take any of his time. It was the final stop, maybe about 9 o'clock at night. We were at the airport. I wanted to say hello, but there was quite a crowd. I was close to the stairs of the plane, but I just missed him. I didn't want to push in. So he got up to the top of the stairs of the plane, and he turned around and waved. He saw me. I know he recognized me. I could see the wheels turning in the Senator's head. Then, a very small look of recognition on his face... He came back down the stairs and said, "What in the hell are you doing here?" I thought you were in West Virginia." I told him that Bobby had sent me there. Then he wanted to know how things were going. He held up the flight another few minutes. I was very pleased that he was so thoughtful in this way. Even when you do a good job, he never told you, "That was a good job." He expected you to do a good job. If you didn't do a good job, you heard from him. Bob was different in that if you did something well, Bob told you. The President never did. After I made it into the organization, I never received a compliment from him, although I've received a chewing-out or two.

But he was very thoughtful. He asked me about my wife. It was always very flattering to me.

YOUNG: What did he chew you out about? (Laughter)

REESE: Well, it could have been a number of things. We tried to keep all of these away from him. But if he'd come into a place where the crowd was bad or the band didn't show up when it was supposed to, he'd say, "What in the hell happened? Why was it like this?"
If the organization didn't respond as he thought it should, we'd hear about it. I didn't have a great deal of contact with him, except occasionally in strategy meetings. He was the candidate and carried a full day. He didn't worry about many of the other things. He insisted that the cars be there when they should be, that everything be planned well, and when they weren't he was very upset. I've had those experiences.

But he could also be very thoughtful. We were invited to a White House reception, my wife and I. Martha had met him on several occasions in West Virginia, but had not seen him since the Inaugural. This was a few months later. We went to the reception. The President and Mrs. Kennedy came in. They came over to our group. I was with Margaret Price and some others. My wife was on the other side of the group. I don't imagine the President had seen my wife for a year. When Margaret Price said, "Mr. President, may I present..." He said, "Oh, I know Mrs. Reese." Then, he took the time to ask about the children. As I say, he never told you that you did a good job, but he showed you that he appreciated it by thoughtfulness.

You know this was the President, and I'm a guy from West Virginia who got on the back of the bandwagon. But he paid attention to his friendships. My devotion to him, I think, was reciprocated with a feeling of friendship to me. This was very pleasant because he was engaging and interesting, and I think one of the greatest of the great.

There are other stories. I'll tell one more. The first time I was in his office after he became President was shortly after the Inauguration. Bob McDonough from West Virginia and I went in. We were sitting there just sort of chatting. I said, "Mr. President, how do you like your new job?" He said, "Oh, very well. You know
it would be hell if after all I've gone through I didn't like it, wouldn't it?"

He was interesting, he was informal, he was thoughtful. It was a pleasure and an honor to work for him and to know him over these last four or five years.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, let's go to the President's new job and would you comment on the reaction in West Virginia to the Kennedy policies to the New Frontier in domestic affairs in so far as you were aware of them, in particular, the Kennedy program for Appalachia and West Virginia.

REESE: I probably won't give any very knowledgeable remarks about this. I haven't lived in West Virginia since 1960. So I don't know what the reaction has been. I've been working in Washington since before the President won the election. I do know a number of things that were done. I was involved in a few of them, and have kept track of the food stamp plan, of the ARA, and the efforts of the Labor Department there, and all the rest. I'm cognizant of the great numbers of people who were unemployed before President Kennedy and the ones who are no longer unemployed because of the things that he has done.

I do know this, though, which, I think, speaks well for the man. I have nothing but good things to say about him from my association with him. He never forgot the obligations that he made in West Virginia, the promises that he would help. I think it was an experience for him, the depressed state of humanity in some of the areas in southern and central West Virginia. He had a compassion for people. I don't think he ever got over it.
YOUNG: It was known in the government that the President was interested in West Virginia. Anything that could be done legitimately was done by the President. There was never a time until the day he died that the subject of West Virginia would not get his interest. He felt a great relationship to the state. He felt a responsibility to the state, an obligation to help the plight of the people in West Virginia. What has happened shows that he did a great deal of what he promised to do. He tried a great many other things that weren't possible to do.

Mr. Reese, you have said that you learned a great deal about politics from Kennedy and that the Senator learned a great deal about West Virginia from the primary. Even though you've been away from the state, do you think there has been any long term lesson that West Virginia has learned from this? In other words, in a final analysis, what effect did the Kennedy years have on West Virginia?

REESE: I think that West Virginia, probably more than other states, had a feeling of attachment to this man and to what he was trying to do. You know we had a hero in Franklin Roosevelt. John Kennedy ranks with him. West Virginia made a President in 1960. It gave the people in West Virginia a feeling of worth, of importance, of being in the middle of things, that they had never felt before. Had we failed John Kennedy in the state in 1960, he would very likely not have been President. I don't know what would have happened to the world. West Virginians, especially those that were active in his campaign, felt proud when they saw the Test Ban Treaty and the heroic stand he made during the Cuban missile crisis; the social legislation
that he proposed, and even today when they see things that he
started and that are now blooming. You know our prosperity didn't
just happen. He had something to do with it.

They think, just like I think, why should I be so interested
in this? Because I have a little piece of it — a little piece
of it is mine. You could have removed me, and it would have
changed things very little or you could have removed this guy or
that guy. But if you removed all of it, it might not have been.
So I've got a little piece of it. I think that all the people who
worked for Kennedy felt they had a little piece of it, and the
people who supported him by voting for him felt they had a piece
of it. West Virginia made it possible for John Kennedy. As a
consequence, what he became and what he accomplished was partly ours.
I'll never be President. I'll never shake the world. But I had
a piece of the way the world was for three and a half years, and I
want a little piece of the next four. West Virginia feels unique,
important, in the main stream of the world a little more because of
John Kennedy. It put us on the map.

YOUNG: Mr. Reese, the President of the United States wears many hats, among
them the Presidency and then being simply the head of his party,
regardless of which party he comes from. Since you had continuous
contact with the White House following the Inauguration, would you
comment on President Kennedy as a party leader?

REESE: Yes. I'd like to. The President was very vigorous in his approach
to party matters. Actually, he didn't bother with much of the detail.
I think he was wise in not doing this. He did give us inspiration
and direction. For instance, my job has been since I've been here --
I came in January, 1961 -- voter registration, to get out the vote. The President almost had a fetish about voter registration. He felt it was the way to win elections, and he directed the Chairman to emphasize always voter registration. We had a very successful voter registration in 1964. This was due to the emphasis of President Kennedy put on voter registration. Nobody cares for voter registration. It's not exciting. You don't have a victory celebration after it's over. But it's the way to win elections, and John Kennedy knew this.

He saw to it that there was money for voter registrations. He saw that attention was paid to it, about a detail. He'd have a party leader in. He'd want to know how they were doing on voter registration. Ken O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien and Bob Kennedy at Justice did most of the political activity -- Bob, of course, less than he had in the campaign, but he always kept his hand in. There was constant attention to party matters, especially by Ken O'Donnell and Larry O'Brien.

I never failed to get support to do what was needed to be done in voter registration. Sometimes, I didn't get as much as I wanted. My best ally in getting what was needed was the President of the United States, because he was most interested. He never allowed us to forget how important voter registration was. Actually, he won because of the voter registration drive that happened prior to the general election in 1960.

After he won the Convention -- I guess it was about 12:30 or 1:00 California time. Most of us on the staff out there went out and celebrated and had a drink or two. I got back in my room about 5 o'clock planning to sleep until noon. There was a note pinned on my
door for an 8 o'clock staff meeting which I had to go to. The subject of this staff meeting was voter registration. Robert was there and Billy Green. This was the most important thing on the President's mind. When I went to the DNC I was honored when they asked me to handle voter registration, because I knew how important it was to the President.

He always was active. He always was available for fundraising benefits. He enjoyed the give and take of the political arena. He knew how to use the power that he had as head of the party. He was extremely cognizant of the political implications of his activity. I heard Bobby report one time on an issue that came up. They were talking about what was right and what was wise and unwise politically. The President finally said, "We have discussed the pros and cons, and everybody seems to believe that we shouldn't do this because of the political activity, but "We're going to do it because its right." This was on the civil rights issue. This was when they were discussing it early. We discussed it very logically, what is best, but we decided on what is right. This is the essence of the man. He was politically mature and he knew what to do. But when he came to the line, what is right and what is wrong became the reason for the decision.

YOUNG: This business of voter registration with which you worked had several implications. Did you draw any distinction or did the White House draw any distinction between voter registration in normally non-southern states, and then, of course, the problem of registration in the south?
REESE: Of course, there is a distinction because, in the first place, in the northern states there's greater opportunity to register. There are greater centers of population. There's a greater ease of registration. They have neighborhood registration, both for white and for Negro.

There was the problem in the south of restrictions against Negroes, and also the party in the south oftentimes was not too anxious for registration drives.

We looked to where the President had to win in 1964 in making plans for his re-election. For instance, we selected twelve states which got his approval as the states we were going to concentrate upon. These were the twelve big states in the country.

He was interested in this, and he gave it his attention. Registration and West Virginia were two words that would command the President's attention. Fortunately, I was associated with both.

YOUNG: In other words, he was planning then on making sure that every Democrat that could possibly be registered in the northern urban states would be.

REESE: Yes. Of course, there was no discrimination against any state. It was just that you have to limit yourself as to how much you can do. If you want to pick cherries, you go where the cherries are, and if you want to win elections, you go where the electoral votes are. Of course, we picked those states — New York, Ohio, Illinois — that would win for him, and this was where we concentrated. There
were more than enough unregistered Democrats to elect him.

Here was the plan. He would persuade them. We would get them qualified and into the polls.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Mr. Matthew A. Reese, Jr. The interview has been done in the Democratic National Headquarters, Washington, D.C., October 24, 1964. The interview is by William L. Young.