

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #4: Kennedy and Johnson (Tuesday, September 5, 1989) Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



Senator Smathers with John F. Kennedy and Senator Stuart Symington, 1960
Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: We talked last week about the 1950s, and throughout most of that period the Democrats and Republicans in the Senate were pretty evenly divided, until the 1958 election when the Democrats won a big sweep. I wanted to know whether or not it was easier to work with a small majority or a large majority? Did things change much after the 1958 election?

Smathers: I don't think they changed a great deal. [Johnson](#) still ran it all very much as he had been doing. I suspect that in some ways Johnson wasn't as interested in a large majority as other people might be, because I think he was the kind of man who could persuade a lot of Republicans to do that which he wanted them to do. He was almost as persuasive with the Republicans as he was with the Democrats, that is, the senators. I know that there were a number of Republican senators who thought more highly of Johnson than they did even their own leadership. I don't want to particularly name any names, in fact I can't remember off the top of my head, but I do know that was a fact. So, just the mere fact that we the Democrats picked up more votes I don't think had any great material effect on Johnson, or the legislative program.

Ritchie: I wondered if party discipline was harder to maintain when you had a large majority.

Smathers: Well, it would seem so, and actually I'm sure that it is, and in most cases yes, but I can't over-emphasize the uniqueness of Lyndon Johnson as a leader. Johnson spent almost as much time, and in my view as much time talking with Republicans as he did with Democrats. He got what he got done not on the basis of Republican versus Democratic platforms. He could sell them on the idea that this needed to be done for everybody's benefit. He was not a particularly partisan fellow. I know that [Barry Goldwater](#) thought a great deal of Lyndon Johnson, and Johnson could get his vote on lots of things, and nobody else would have ever thought about trying to get Goldwater, no other Democrat would have thought about getting Barry Goldwater to vote with them. But Johnson could. He was a unique leader, and he was a leader of the whole Senate, and the whole Senate knew it. So, back to the point that you raised, the fact that we picked up a lot of Democrats I don't think made a great deal of difference.

Ritchie: You mentioned previously how close Johnson was to [Eisenhower](#), and how much Eisenhower relied on Johnson. When that new Congress came back in 1959 one of the first things they did was to turn down

page 76

Lewis Strauss to be Secretary of Commerce. I wondered if you could tell me the background of that. Was that something of a declaration of war with the Eisenhower administration?

Smathers: I don't think so. I have a feeling that probably Eisenhower wasn't greatly in favor of this fellow anyway, and that they had to send a name over, and they sent a name over, and for some reason one of the Democratic senators didn't like the fellow, and didn't think he would be good, and thought they might make an issue out of it, so it was easily done. On those types of nominations, during the eighteen years that I was there I don't remember a real bitter fight with respect to a presidential nomination. Now, since then, in recent years, with this Republican administration and the people that [Ronald Reagan](#) has sent over there have been continuous fights about that. Because I think Reagan was much more partisan as a president than was Eisenhower, certainly much more so than Eisenhower. I guess if you went on to follow it, Reagan was probably as partisan a president as we have had since possibly the days of [Harry Truman](#), who was a great Democrat, and talked about it, and went down the Democratic line solidly all the time.

But Eisenhower was above politics. When he sent somebody over there, why you either liked him or you didn't like him, and it didn't make a great deal of difference to Eisenhower. I don't ever remember hearing about Eisenhower putting pressure on anybody really to vote for anything, except some of the major appropriations bills, particularly the military appropriation bill. As I look back, I don't think those things were really that important.

Ritchie: In that period, 1959 and 1960, there were a lot of members of the U.S. Senate who were positioning themselves to run for president. It seemed like the Senate was the main battleground.

Smathers: That's right. It was the undergraduate school for potential presidents. Of course, [Hubert](#) got into it, Hubert was well known. [Kennedy](#) got into it, he was well known. There was Johnson, who was well known. Then you had the second degree of [McGovern](#)'s and [McCarthy](#)'s and fellows like that who really in those days nobody ever gave very serious consideration to as a presidential candidate. They were nice enough fellows and had great personalities and that sort of thing, but they were not looked upon as any heavyweights insofar as the Senate activities were concerned.

Ritchie: How did you see the 1960 campaign shaping up, from the point of view of a senator?

Smathers: Well, Kennedy started out early on and his father had made up his own mind that he was going to spend a lot of money, if that was what it would take, to see that Jack had a real run at the presidency. He was the fellow who first utilized the polling system. In those days nobody really ran polls. I don't ever recollect seeing any large number of polls, even in magazines, *Newsweek*, or *Time*, or the *Saturday Evening Post*, or whatever, it was very rare

page 77

that you would see a poll by anybody. Pollsters had not come into their own. Joe Kennedy already had the pollsters, though. He started that with the Merchandise Mart out in Chicago, by sending out through his advertising agency, they developed some sort of a polling system as to what it was that people liked. What was it they would buy. He started out as a pollster actually in the merchandise business, and much before anybody ever thought about it in politics. But then he's the fellow that began to understand that running these sort of inventories as to what people were thinking, in addition to what they would buy from the Merchandise Mart, which sold most everything as you know. He began to use it to find out what were the political issues they were interested in. He had the big advantage of running polls for his son Jack Kennedy long before people in general knew that polls were ever being taken.

I recollect that I kept telling Jack that "you don't have a chance to beat [Henry Cabot Lodge](#)," [in 1952]. He would say, "Yes, I'm going to beat Henry Cabot Lodge; and here's what percent I'm going to beat him." I said, "You've got to be crazy, man, you can't do it." And lo and behold, he did it. And then he got ready-- I don't think they ran a poll on the vice presidential contest in 1956. I don't think they had a poll on that at all. But I do know that in 1960, when the race began to get started, that Jack Kennedy had the insight as to what were the issues in these various states in which he ran in the primaries. And he would beat Hubert

Humphrey where he had actually no business beating Hubert Humphrey. But he knew just exactly what were the issues. In Wisconsin, he knew exactly what the issues were. When he went to Maryland to beat [Danny Brewster](#), who was a very popular senator, but the Kennedy group had run a poll and they knew what the issues were and they had run Jack Kennedy on a very secret basis against Danny Brewster, and figured that he could win.

They ran a poll in West Virginia, and this was when Kennedy let me get myself suckered into making a lot of bets and a lot of big statements that there's no way that Jack Kennedy, a Catholic, would beat Hubert Humphrey in a highly unionized state like West Virginia, a highly anti-Catholic state like West Virginia, no way that Kennedy would win. Yet Kennedy won. He had exactly the right issues, he knew how far to go on everything, and he won.

Now, we had a primary in Florida, this is a rather interesting story, it was going to happen the first Tuesday in May. Kennedy decided that he wanted to run in Florida. At the same time, Johnson also decided that he would now bestir himself and he felt that he had a lot of friends in Florida, which he did, and that he would run in that Democratic primary down there against Kennedy. He felt as though he could win, but he did not have the benefit, necessarily, of a poll. But Kennedy was very confident. I didn't know what he had. This poll business only became clear later, after this Florida primary was the first time I really began to understand how Kennedy was doing all these things by virtue of the polls. I did not know about those polls prior to the Florida primary.

page 78

Anyway, so here I was caught between Johnson on the one side, who was my leader, I was his whip, and here was my dear friend, personal friend, Kennedy, and they're going to go into my state and ruin it. What am I going to do? All of my friends are going to say: "Who do we vote for?" Obviously the Catholic votes would go for Jack, and the West Florida people would vote for Johnson, and they'd divide the state very much. So I said, "I don't want you guys to run." I went to Johnson and I said, "Now, Lyndon, I don't want you to run." He said, "I think I can beat him, if you'll help me." I said, "Here I am, I'm a close friend of both of you. I've worked for you, on your team, and yet Jack Kennedy is personally my best friend here in the Senate. So the only thing that I can finally do is I'm going to run myself and keep you guys out. Because I don't think either one of you think you can beat me in my own state." I think that was true. Kennedy beat them in Indiana, he beat them in Maryland, he beat them in Wisconsin, and so on. But to make a long story short, I decided that I was going to run, and I announced that I was going to run for president in Florida, I would be the favorite son from Florida, and that would stop Johnson and Kennedy from dividing up the state.

Johnson was pleased with that, he didn't really want to run anyway, but Kennedy kept after me: "You've got to back out, you've got to back out." So let's say the day

is now February, the election was going to be the first Tuesday in May. If you're going to file, the filing date expires on let's say February the 16th, or whatever the date was, I've forgotten. I had filed, Kennedy had also filed, and so here we were getting ready to run against each other. I didn't know anything about the polls. I said, "Now, Jack, I think I can beat you." He said, "I don't want to run against you." I said, "Well, I don't want you to." To make a long story short, he kept after me to withdraw. "I want you to withdraw. I want you to withdraw."

The day came on the 16th you had until twelve o'clock to withdraw. I got a call from Evelyn Lincoln, Kennedy's secretary, who said, "Senator Kennedy would like to see you." So I went over to his office, and he was sitting there. He said, "Old pal"--he was always starting off that way--"old pal, you've got to do me this favor. You're my best friend, you were in my wedding, and you've got to withdraw. I can win, easy. I'm going to get the nomination. But I don't want to run against you. It's now a quarter of eleven, and you've got until twelve o'clock. I've got a fellow in Tallahassee, in the capital, in the secretary of state's office, waiting to withdraw your name." He said, "You've got to do this for me." I said, "Well, I can't do it. I'm not going to do it." Well, it went back and forth, and finally he got mad and said, "Damn it to hell, what kind of friend are you?" And so and so. I said, "Look, I'm not going to stand here and take all this abuse, so I'm going to go out. I'm leaving. I'm just sorry. If you're going to run, we're going to have a hell of a race, that's all I can say. But I don't want you down there dividing our state. What I will do is after the first ballot, I will instruct my delegates they can go for whomever they want to vote for, either you or Lyndon. You've got Grant Stockdale, who will be on my slate"--you had to put in a slate already--"and he loves you as you know, and he'll be making big speeches for you. Scotty Peek and some of these kids will be

page 79

probably for Lyndon, but you're going to have fine representation and I think possibly you would get the majority of our delegates, after the first ballot. But I'm going to run." "Oh, no, that won't do it."

Anyway, so I left. I got a call in about fifteen minutes, said, "Would you come back over, Jack wants to see you again." So I came back over, and there was about fifteen minutes before you could call and withdraw your name. He said, "Old pal, you've just got to do this." Then he'd rant and raved and raised hell and cussed me out. He said, "Well, son of a bitch, you are the worst guy." I said, "Well, I can't do it." It got to be twelve o'clock. "Okay, I'm in it. We'll have a good race." And I walked out. I said, "I'll see you on the battlefield." I got about as far as Evelyn's office, and Kennedy hollered, "George, come back here, I want to show you something." I came back in, and he said, "You really are a no damn good friend. You really ought to have gotten out of this thing, I could win easy." But he said, "I don't know that I can run against you." I said, "Well, did you file?" He said, "I didn't file." I said, "Okay, well then that makes it easier." He said, "I'm going to

show you something, come around here." And he pulled out his drawer, and here it was, Joe had run a poll of him against me in Florida. And I would have beaten him. He showed me that, and I said, "Now look at that, there's my buddy, bullshitting me, trying to get me out of a deal." He'd run this poll. "I didn't think you could win against me down there, but I didn't know. But look at that." "No," he said, "you were pretty good, but I want to tell you something, you're not as good a friend as I thought you were." I said, "Well, you're probably going to get it anyway," which as a matter of fact he did. When we released the delegates, on the second ballot he got them all. But that was very interesting that he had run that poll even against me, his good friend, to see whether he could win. And I'm sure that if the poll had indicated he would have beaten me, he would have gone ahead and run. So that was an interesting insight into the Kennedy mind.

Ritchie: You were very close to Kennedy all during the years he was in the Senate. What was your impression of him as a senator?

Smathers: He was not an outstanding senator. You have to remember this much that, when you say that, he really was not well much of the time. He never let you talk about that fact, when I say that, he did not want people to talk about that. He did not want to have that written up. He did not want to let people know that he was absent from the Senate, which he was a lot. But he had this very serious back operation, a very serious painful back. It bothered him even while he was president. Several times when I went over to visit him in the White House in the bedroom there he could hardly get out of bed. So he had these problems. While he did from time to time make some brilliant speech about something or other, usually about some foreign relations matter, but he was not what you would call a really effective senator. He was not very senior, neither one of us were very senior at that point in time on the committees. On a scale of one to ten I'd have to give him about a six or a seven at most, as a senator.

page 80

I thought he became a much better speaker. I've never seen anybody--I've said this many, many times to many people--I have never seen anybody in my life develop like Jack Kennedy did as a personality, and as a speaker, and as an attractive person, over the last seven, eight years of his life. I mean, it was just a miracle transformation. He studied all the time, he was that kind of fellow. He took a rapid reading course, and he wanted me to take it. I should have taken it with him. He said, "You don't have time to read all this stuff, but we ought to be reading all this business. You've got to learn how to read rapidly." You skip certain lines and you do certain things, but you get the sense of it. He was in that course for about six weeks, and as I say he wanted me to do it. I should have done it, I didn't do it. But he was still basically thinking about being a writer. He was good at it. He loved to surround himself with people who were good writers. But as a senator he was not in the top echelon at all, in my judgment, as an effective senator.

Ritchie: How early on did you have a sense that he was running for president?

Smathers: Let's see. In 1956 I went to the convention in Chicago. That was the first convention I'd ever gone to. Senator Holland and I were the heads of the Florida delegation. At that time, Adlai Stevenson had pretty well locked up the nomination for the presidency. [Kefauver](#) had tried to beat him, take it away from him in several primaries, but Adlai had won all of the primaries and beat Kefauver. I think maybe Kefauver had won one, I don't remember what state it was, but he won one or two. We get to the convention and it's pretty clear that Stevenson is going to get the nomination. Then the question was: who was Adlai going to put the finger on to be his vice president. Well, it was fairly well agreed that Kefauver was going to withdraw and not run against Adlai Stevenson for the presidency, but he suddenly decided he wanted to be vice president. Now that happened let's say on the night before the nominations were to start. I didn't think that was too exciting or anything. I thought maybe Kefauver probably would get the nomination for vice president, and there was nobody else particularly pushing for it, maybe a governor or two, but I don't think that there was anybody too serious. I thought that would be an easy way to resolve the fight which had been going on between Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson, which had been dividing the Democrats in all these states where they had run against each other. So if they both appeared on the same ticket that would be an amicable solution to this problem, and put the Democrats all on the same side.

I'm in the hotel there in Chicago, which is right next to the stockyards where the convention was being held. Kennedy was staying there. A lot of other people. I was not particularly aware that Kennedy was there, I just knew that he said he was going to the convention with his group, and I knew I was going, since I was the chairman of our Florida delegation. Along about one o'clock in the morning, my phone rings. The nomination is the next morning for vice president. The phone rings and it's Jack Kennedy. "Old pal, you've got to do me a favor." This was always his opening line. "I said, "My God, man, it's

page 81

one o'clock in the morning. What's up?" He said, "You've got to nominate me for vice president." I said, "For vice president! You're running for vice president?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "My God, when did you decide that? You know Kefauver has got it locked up." He said, "No he hasn't. Adlai Stevenson is not going to anoint him, or say that he wants him. Adlai Stevenson made an announcement at nine o'clock tonight that he was throwing the convention open for anybody to be vice president whom the convention nominated and elected." He said, "So I'm running." I said, "You've got to be kidding." He said, "No, I'm running."

He said, "I've got thirty minutes, ten minutes each for three speakers. I want you to go down there and nominate me, be one of them." I said, "My God, man, you don't want to get me. I'm a redneck southerner. I'm down in the South, I'd

probably hurt you." He said, "I know, that's all right, you're my friend, you'll do it. I've got to have it." I said, "Why don't you get [John McCormack](#) from Massachusetts, the majority leader of the House, get him to do it?" He said, "Well, I've tried to get him, but he doesn't answer the phone." I said, "Well get [Abe Ribicoff](#)." He said, "Abe Ribicoff doesn't answer either. The only fellow who's answered has been you." He said, "You've got to do it." I said, "Well, let me just say this, I don't know what the hell I'll say, but I'll go down there and say something." He said, "You may have to take all the thirty minutes." I said, "Do you have anybody who can get me out of this?" He said, "No, it's too late." Here it is two o'clock now in the morning and the thing starts at ten in the morning.

So I went down there about nine thirty and I'm trying to think about what I'm going to say about Jack Kennedy, why he ought to be vice president. When the time comes, [Sam Rayburn](#) opens the convention and I go out there and here are all these twelve thousand people or so sitting out there. I had never really seen that big a crowd in one place before in my life. Later on I saw some big crowds--the one Billy Graham had me introduce him to one time was the biggest crowd I ever saw--but this the biggest crowd I'd ever seen inside of a building. I never had been in a situation where the rostrum would go up and down, just by touching a button. Nobody explained any of this to me before I went out there. And they had teleprompters over here which the speaker could see but the crowd couldn't see. Every now and then something would come up they'd have a note, they'd almost write the speaker a note: your time has expired, go sit down, and this sort of thing. I never had seen anything like that. So I went out to make my speech and oh, my God, I didn't know but the rostrum kept going up and down and I thought, "I'm getting sick."

All of a sudden I had this terrible sharp pain in my back. I thought, "I'm having a heart attack!" I was out here trying to tell about Jack Kennedy and PT Boat 109 and what a great courageous young American he was, and how he had risked his life blood for the benefit of this great country we all were enjoying, and all this business, and I couldn't really think of anything he had done except he was very strongly for education. He had helped sponsor some of Fulbright's bills and one thing or another. All of a sudden I had this very

sharp pain in my back, and I thought "I'm having a heart attack right here in front of fifteen thousand people." And I was sick, the rostrum was going up and down like this. What in the hell is going on here? I'm going to die right here on live television. About that time, I heard a voice saying, "McCormack is here! McCormack is here!" And I looked around, and here was Sam Rayburn who had taken the gavel, the great big gavel, and reversed it and had pointed it, sticking me in the back. That's where my heart attack was coming from, the sharp pain was Rayburn trying to get me to shut up and get off so that McCormack could come on. McCormack came on, and then Ribicoff came on, and so he was

nominated. And he got quite a large number of votes on the first ballot, but it was pretty evident that we couldn't have gotten any more. I think that's when Jack decided, "I could really be president with a little more planning." That's when Joe and Jack decided that they ought to do that.

We went out that day, when we lost and Kefauver got the nomination, we all went over to the steakhouse which was right behind the convention center, where Jackie was staying. The Kennedys had a whole suite over there. And Jackie cried, she was very disappointed, and Eunice was crying some. I don't remember seeing [Teddy](#) or anybody like that, he was so young at that point. He was not in the Senate or the House or anything like that, just a nice young guy going, I guess, to the University of Virginia at that point. But anyway, Jackie said, "Why don't you and Jack take a trip to the Mediterranean? He wants to go." And I agreed to go with him. I actually did not go, but in certain memos I see where it's recorded that he and I went to the Mediterranean and went out on a boat in the Mediterranean and stayed for ten or twelve days, and a lot of things were supposed to have happened. Actually, I didn't go on that trip. What really happened was that I couldn't go, and I got a good friend of mine whom Jack really loved, named Bill Thompson, and Bill Thompson went in my place, and Teddy joined them, and they sailed up and down the Mediterranean for a week and a half or so.

Ritchie: Was that the occasion when you had to contact Kennedy to come back?

Smathers: Well, that was the occasion, yes, when we had to bring him back. Jackie got sick.

Ritchie: She had a miscarriage.

Smathers: It turned out to be a miscarriage. She was very emotional, you know, and you couldn't tell just why. When you stop to think about it, she was very pregnant. But anyway, I got him to come back. I told him "you ought to come back," which he did. But nobody had actually told the guy a lot about it. So he came back, and Thompson came back with him. They had really a great time, but I was not on the trip. Although I notice that some of the records have me as being on the trip, I didn't go. So, let's see, where were we now?

page 83

Ritchie: I wondered about someone like Kennedy running for president, does that affect a senator's relations with the rest of the Senate, when the senators look upon you as a presidential candidate?

Smathers: Oh, I think so. You know, it's a funny thing about it. You remember how Truman said when he first got to be senator, he said to himself, "How is it that an inexperienced guy like me whose been a haberdasher and a county judge,

can suddenly find himself a United States senator?" He said, "You know, that's what I thought, and I was so humbled. But after I had been there about six months, and listened to these guys, I kept looking around and wondering, how in the hell did these other guys get here?"

I think what happens is that when a fellow begins to talk about being a presidential candidate, that you look at him a little differently. The first thing you know is he's got a lot of nerve, he's got a lot of guts, because it's not easy to stick your neck out, and it takes some guts to do that. George McGovern, I recollect very distinctly one day we were down in the Senate bath, and we had gone into the steam room together, and we were sitting there sweating, which was what I did three times a week, and I think McGovern did that about three or four times a week. A lot of fellows went there regularly. [Jennings Randolph](#) never missed a day, [Jack Javits](#) never missed a day, [Strom Thurmond](#) never missed a day, [John Stennis](#) never missed a day. You'd go down there and take a little exercise, and you'd always tell your constituents that you were in some very important committee meeting. I went there fairly regularly, because they had marvelous massagers. I never had a massage till I went to the Senate, but they had some great guys there, who had come over from Sweden to become the massagers at the Senate bath.

Anyway, I was in the Senate sweat room one day, sweating before I was going to take a swim and then get a rub-down, and George McGovern came in and sat down beside me, and started sweating, and we started talking. He said, "You know, I'm not in good shape out in my state." He said, "You know what I'm going to have to do to get reelected to the Senate?" I said, "No, George, what are you going to have to do?" See, his state. . . one thing that the senators do is they look at each other's state and figure: do they have a hard state or an easy state? We all looked at South Dakota and figured hell, they don't have as many people in the whole state, Jack Kennedy would say, as they've got in greater Boston. I look at South Dakota and think, gee, a bunch of Indians out there, a few nice people, farmers, but it's not a big state, doesn't have a lot of people. I've got more people in Dade County, which is the Miami-Coral Gables district. I've got more people in my congressional district than they've got in their whole state. You think pretty much in those terms.

Anyway, here was George, a sweet, nice guy, everybody liked George, and he said he had real trouble. I said, "Well, George, what are you going to do about it?" He said, "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to run for president." "What?" "I'm going to run for president." He said, "If I start running for president, my people in my state will think I'm so important that they should

let me go ahead and try to be president. They've never had a president from South Dakota. That may save me, but otherwise I'm in deep trouble." And you

know what? That's exactly what that guy did. He said he was going to run for president, and that got him renominated in the Democratic party and nobody offered to run against him who amounted to anything in the Republicans, so he won reelection easy, and actually he got on his way to thinking seriously about becoming president. And eventually, as we know, got a nomination. But he did that originally to get himself reelected to the Senate.

So you ask me what do people think about fellows who are going to run for president? Well, there are all kinds of reasons. It increases your respect for them in the sense that they've got plenty of nerve, plenty of guts to want to do it, because it's obviously a very difficult assignment to give yourself. It requires money, it requires time, it requires giving up your family life, it requires all kinds of sacrifices and you're really got to want to do it, have a burning desire to do it to be successful at it. So when a guy says he wants to run, on the one hand you kind of look at him and laugh, and think he ain't got a chance, what the hell's the guy thinking about. But on the other hand, I've got to admire his guts.

That's the way I was with Jack. He wanted to run, but I kept thinking Joe put him up to it. Then after the vice president thing two years went by, he didn't mention anything about being president. Then '60 comes up and he begins to run. In the interim I don't ever remember him ever saying anything to me, or any of his good friends which were my good friends, about the fact that he's going to run for president. But apparently he had been thinking some about it. I know Joe had, definitely. Joe was determined that one of his kids was going to be president.

Ritchie: What were Kennedy's relations with Lyndon Johnson during the '50s?

Smathers: They abided each other, but they didn't like each other really. Jack Kennedy didn't really like Lyndon. He thought he was a little bit uncouth and somewhat of an oaf. I know Jack Kennedy admired Lyndon's drive. I know he admired Lyndon's cunning. I know he admired Lyndon's dedication. But as a personality, he wasn't a Kennedy-type at all. And if it had not been for the strange set of circumstances where Kennedy had to take Johnson as vice president, why he would have never done it. At the convention he had to take Johnson, or his polling had showed him that he couldn't win without Johnson. And that's a fact, he would not have won because he would not have carried Texas. He only won, you know, by a very, very small majority over Nixon. If Illinois had changed, 12,000 votes in Illinois, Kennedy would have lost it, Nixon would have been elected president in '60.

But you asked the question, how did he like Lyndon? He didn't really like Lyndon, and Lyndon really didn't like Jack. They had come from totally different backgrounds. Kennedy an affluent, eastern top-college, Harvard, prep

schools, everything, Johnson down there in the backwoods of Texas, went to some little school nobody ever heard of, had to work his way up, had a CCC job, that sort of thing. He came from an entirely different background. That's why I say, Johnson when he passed all this social legislation, to help people, to help the blacks, to help education, give people an opportunity to borrow money to go to school, it came from Johnson's heart. He had been there. He knew what it was. Kennedy was for it, but it was strictly an intellectual matter of being fair with him, it wasn't a burning need that it had to be done because there was so much frustration with these poor people. No, they didn't like each other too well.

As a matter of fact, after they got elected in '60, I was over at the White House a couple of times and Kennedy would say to me: "I cannot stand Johnson's damn long face. He just comes in, sits at the cabinet meetings with his face all screwed up, never says anything. He looks so sad." He said, "I don't know what to do about him. I've tried to do everything we could to make him happy--I've put him up front whenever I can." But he said, "You've seen him, George, you know him, he doesn't even open his mouth." Here was a guy who was dominating everything three or four years ago. I said, "Well, Jack, you know what you ought to do with him, you ought to send him on a trip." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Send him off on an around-the-world trip." I didn't mention India, it ended up with him going to India, but I said, "You ought to send him on a trip so that he can get all of the fanfare and all of the attention and all of the smoke-blowing will be directed at him, build up his ego again, let him have a great time." He said, "You know, that's a damn good idea, I'm going to do that." And sure enough, Jack Kennedy, by virtue of my having suggested it to him, he sent Johnson on that trip to India. And Johnson had a wonderful time, got all that smoke blown at him, and ended up bringing some kind of bull back. He loved it. It was a very successful trip all the way around.

It was the first time Johnson had done anything about foreign affairs. He was really not much into foreign affairs at all. He was strictly a domestic guy: school books, farms, labor unions, taxes, this sort of thing. Hardly ever talked about foreign affairs till he went on that trip.

Another thing he did was, I never quite will ever forgive Johnson for it, he talked Kennedy into making the vice president the head of the satellite program, the head of exploring space. And the first thing that Johnson did, which I will never forgive him, was he took half of what we had at Cape Kennedy--we called it Cape Canaveral at that time--and moved it over to Texas. That's the first damn thing Johnson did. He and I had a big argument about it, big fight. Senator [Holland](#) was outraged, and I was too, and Johnson tried to act like he didn't know, that the generals and all these other people wanted it over there. It never has made sense to have a big operation at Cape Canaveral and another great big operation in Texas. But that's what we got, and we got that because Kennedy allowed Johnson to become the theoretical head of the space program. Johnson moved half of that thing out of Cape Canaveral over there! So the only thing we have in Cape Canaveral now, we shoot it off, it lands in California of

course, but all the intricate reporting, and all the information is siphoned into Texas. Anyway, that's how that came about.

Ritchie: In the period when Kennedy was overtly running for president, Johnson was apparently just beginning to think about it. What was it that spurred Johnson into the race?

Smathers: Well, Johnson kept thinking to himself--I know that he thought to himself--how and the hell is it that this guy Kennedy, who cannot carry my glove when it comes to being a senator, and getting legislation through the Congress, and really getting things done, why should this guy be president of the United States when here is Lyndon Johnson who has run the government in point of fact for the last four to six years? Why shouldn't he be it? I think he just kept thinking along those lines to the point where he began to have some of his buddies promote him for the presidency, and he got to thinking more and more about it. Then of course in the meantime he'd had a heart attack, which set him back, but it did not diminish his ambition. It did not curtail that ambition very much. But it slowed him down, and I know that the reason that he finally gave up the idea of being president and accepted to be on the ticket as vice president is because Lady Bird Johnson actually made him do that.

I recollect that at the convention, we were all in the same building, Johnson, Kennedy, I had my favorite-son headquarters there too. On one afternoon, Sam Rayburn, [Bob Kerr](#), George Smathers, John Connally, and I think [Harry Byrd](#) was there, I don't know exactly, but anyway I know that group was there, and probably I think George Brown, Johnson's friend from Texas was there. It was decided, it was just agreed that Johnson should not take the vice presidency even if offered to him. We were not necessarily saying that, but Johnson was pretty much saying that himself. Frankly, Johnson said, I do distinctly remember him saying, "Well, I would much rather be majority leader of the Senate than vice president, because as majority leader of the Senate the president has to deal with me on a personal basis almost every day, about whether or not his program gets through the Congress. So why do I want to take an empty, nothing job like vice president?" That was in effect what he said, and what everybody agreed with.

That's one of the reasons why Kennedy wanted Johnson, to get him out of the majority leadership, so that he wouldn't have to kiss Johnson's ass every day to try to get his legislation through the Congress. If he got him over as vice president, he's got him out of the way. That was one of the reasons that he wanted Johnson; the other reason was that he knew from his own polls that he had to have Johnson to even make a showing in some of the southern states and particularly carrying Texas. He could not carry Texas unless Johnson was on the ticket, and he had to have Texas. So it was an intellectual thing as far as Kennedy

was concerned as to why he would take Johnson, because he didn't like Johnson. [Bobby](#) couldn't stand Lyndon Johnson. But intellectually he said he

page 87

knew he had to have him, and offered it to him. That's what brought about these discussions.

In the morning we were there about nine o'clock in the morning in his hotel suite and it was pretty much agreed--I've talked to John Connally since then, and John remembers it pretty much like I do, that there was no way Johnson was going to take it. Lo and behold, I get a call from Kennedy like at four o'clock in the afternoon, and he says "Come on up here." So I went up to his room, and he said, "Well, you know who's going to be vice president?" I said, "[Stuart Symington](#)." I was trying to get him to pick Symington. He said, "Oh, no, Lyndon." I said, "You're crazy, man, no way." He said, "It's all settled." I said, "There is no way, Jack. We were down there talking to Lyndon Johnson just hours ago and he flat said he was not going to take it." He said, "You're just not up to speed, George. You're as usual behind times." He said, "We've got television in this hotel, and Johnson's going to make a statement at four o'clock." About that time, Bobby came in the room and said it was all set, we helped Johnson write his acceptance speech. I said, "I can't believe it." Sure enough, we turned the television on and here was Johnson saying, "I'm proud now to be running with my dear friend, and we're going to win," and so on, and so, "this great guy from Massachusetts, Jack Kennedy." There it was!

What happened, I don't ever know, but Bob Kerr told me later that Lady Bird went to Lyndon and said something to the effect: "Now Lyndon, you have had two heart attacks. Being majority leader is too tough a job. You've got the responsibility of passing all the legislation. You work day and night at that job. But if you got elected vice president, it's a ceremonial job mostly." You sit there and preside over the Senate, which they don't ever do, they do that once a month if there's a tie and that's all. The rest of the time you just attend funerals and meet visiting dignitaries, and that's it. "That's the job that you've got to take, because your health will not permit otherwise." And she, as I understand it from Bob Kerr, I never heard this from her--as a matter of fact I'm going to see her in about two weeks and I'm going to ask her about that--but anyway, she's credited with having made Johnson take the vice presidency. So, there it is. All right. What else do we want to talk about?

Ritchie: After Johnson became vice president there was a brief movement to try to make him the presiding officer of the Democratic caucus, and a lot of senators rebelled against the idea of Johnson in that post.

Smathers: I'd say so. Johnson didn't want to leave the Senate. You remember, what happened was, instead of having an office downtown in the vice president's

normal place, which was in the old State Department building where they had a regular office for the vice president, and they had a little office for the vice president always up at the Senate so he could come up there in the event of a tie, and preside and break the tie. Theoretically, he's supposed to be the [presiding officer](#), but as you know from observation he's hardly ever, if ever there, except when he's called on to break a tie, or there's some visiting dignitary whom he has to introduce to the Senate. So what happened was that

page 88

Johnson immediately said, "I want to keep my old office," which was the biggest, best office there in the Capitol. Johnson wanted to be vice president, but he still wanted to be majority leader, and that didn't set too well with some of the senators. They said, no, Johnson just can't keep doing it. "You're now vice president, so be vice president and quit trying to be majority leader." That's the reason there was a little flap about that. He wanted to maintain the same offices and maintain all the things that he had as majority leader in the Senate and still have all the things that the vice president had, all the perquisites that went with the vice president's job. Johnson loved those little perquisite things.

Ritchie: Did he ever express any unhappiness to you about being vice president?

Smathers: No, he never really just said "I'm not happy with being vice president." He was just grouching about something all the time. He didn't say, "I don't like the job," he was always grouching about something that was going on that he really didn't approve of. He didn't like the way Kennedy was handling this, and he didn't particularly like the way Kennedy was handling that. He would say, "Well, I don't think that's the way to do it." And it was pretty evident, see Kennedy had all his group around him, who had grown up with him, and none of those guys liked Johnson. Johnson just never fit into that group. If Kennedy had lived and run again in '64, I think Johnson would have come back and be senator again, I don't think he would have been vice president again. I think by mutual agreement they would have said the hell with it, it was not satisfactory in either camp.

Ritchie: Why was it, do you think, that Kennedy had such poor relations with Congress when he was president? His programs just didn't seem to get anywhere.

Smathers: Well, I think the first reason was that [Mansfield](#) was the majority leader. There's not a nicer guy alive than Mansfield, but Mansfield was a fellow who was never a strong, hardnosed, you-gotta-do-it-or-else-we'll-get-even leader. He wasn't one of those guys at all, like Johnson was. Kennedy had a lot of good ideas, but very little legislation if any passed while he was president. He just was not an effective president as far as getting legislation through the Congress, or as a domestic president. He did the Alliance for Progress, and student exchange programs, and in foreign affairs he was good. As far as any of the domestic

programs that he initiated, I don't think they went anywhere. I remember we'd go to breakfast with him every Tuesday morning. Larry O'Brien was the big guy at that time, the legislative man for Kennedy. Larry was good, but other than the routine things we just couldn't seem to get anything going. Why? Without Johnson we just didn't have strong enough leadership.

Ritchie: I wondered if some of the old-time chairmen, who had been there when Kennedy was a junior senator, didn't take him that seriously when he became president.

page 89

Smathers: I think that had a lot to do with it. It was hard for them to look at this young guy, who had suddenly been plummeted all the way up the ladder to the highest job in the land, and he had really never cut the mustard as a member of the House of Representatives or as a senator. That's a little harsh, I don't mean it like that, but he had not been an outstanding senator at all. So it was hard for the fellows who were older and been there a long time. They just suddenly went and did their own thing. You know, if it wasn't their idea, they didn't want to pass it. And they wouldn't pass it. I think that Kennedy made this mistake, looking back at it, that he had Kenny O'Donnell, and he had Larry O'Brien, and he had Dave Powers, and he had four or five guys like that, and then he had some intellectuals. [Robert] McNamara was a guy who was not a part of the Washington scene until Kennedy brought him in as having been the genius at Ford Motor Company and a great businessman.

Some of the guys that Kennedy pulled in there were not politically savvy fellows, so it was hard for the Kennedy people to get things through the legislature. Bobby was attorney general, and God, everybody knew Bobby as just a guy who had been the counsel for the [McClellan](#) Committee, that's really all he had ever done. He was a big [Joe McCarthy](#) fan, and now here he was, all of a sudden he's now attorney general, but that didn't cut a lot of mustard with people. So Kennedy had a hard time.

I think Kennedy would have overcome it, because I think Kennedy had demonstrated in his life over and over again that he could figure out ways to finally overcome all the obstacles that confronted him. He was just beginning, really, to get going, at the time he was assassinated. So I think he would have been different, but I think that in the short space of time he was there he didn't have a running start, like Johnson would have had. And in a way Johnson did have. Johnson picked up his programs, and then when Johnson became president in his own right more civil rights legislation, more poor folks legislation was passed during that time than had ever been passed. And it was done under Johnson.

Ritchie: One of the committees that gave Kennedy the most trouble was the Finance Committee.

Smathers: Yeah.

Ritchie: On issues like Medicare and others. It seemed like Bob Kerr was an obstacle that Kennedy really couldn't get around.

Smathers: You're right. Nobody could get around Bob Kerr on the Finance Committee really. We would try to do it, but he was a very smart fellow, and he controlled Harry Byrd pretty well. When I say controlled I don't mean it in any sort of an unethical way, but intellectually Bob Kerr was the brightest fellow that I ever served with on the Finance Committee. The two brightest guys ever were [Russell Long](#) and Bob Kerr, but Russell Long had no experience in business, and Bob Kerr had all the experience in business, and was

page 90

a bright guy on top of it. Russell Long is a great dreamer and a great thinker, and the smartest guy I ever served with on the committee. I was on the committee twelve years and nobody ever came close to the ideas that Long would come up with. ESOP today is enormously important in this country, and that was Russell Long's baby, he put that through. He put through a lot of other things too, he put through your presidential charge-off on your income tax, for the presidential campaign, which meant that the contributors were not quite as important to the presidential campaign as they would have been had taxpayers not themselves all given a dollar. But Bob Kerr was smart, and it was hard to get anything through the Finance Committee, unless Bob Kerr agreed with it.

Ritchie: Why was it that Kennedy seemed so unable to deal with some of these people? Was it that he wouldn't bring himself down to their level?

Smathers: No, Kennedy would let himself down. Kennedy was a likable, charming guy, and everybody liked him. I never took Kennedy anywhere that people didn't like him. I took him out and introduced him to the people that cooked at my house, and the fellows that worked in the yard, and Kennedy would shake hands and couldn't be nicer. He liked people. But he had this aura, of Joe Kennedy the rich ambassador who had the control of all the scotch in the United States, who also had the Chicago Merchandise Mart, who had the RKO movies and all this other stuff, and Kennedy grew up in this atmosphere of Harvard, and great affluence, and it just sort of overwhelmed people. They'd say, oh, my God, this is this rich, good-looking Kennedy guy. Kennedy would be charming, but you still thought that about him. People didn't look at him as a guy who they felt was sincerely interested in really helping them improve their conditions. I think that he was, but it was hard for him to get it over, whereas Johnson could talk about it. He grew up down in Texas, he knew what it was to work for the CCC.

Ritchie: Well, when you were a senator and Kennedy was president, you voted against his programs on a number of occasions. Was he ever able successfully to change your vote?

Smathers: Well, not successfully. He called me up to the White House one day. I'd been down making a speech, I had to run again in '62, and Kennedy wasn't too popular then. I went down and made a speech to the Florida citrus convention, and I separated myself somewhat from Kennedy, even though everybody knew we were friends. I said, "Well, I have not voted with the president on this, I have not voted on that, and the reason I didn't vote for them was I didn't think it would work this way, and so on, and so and so." The *Tampa Times* carried a pretty strong story the next morning on that, which inferred that I was separating myself from Kennedy, because I was preparing to run for reelection in Florida and Kennedy wasn't too popular in Florida at that time. I don't know that was totally untrue, or true. There's a little bit of truth in it, because Kennedy was not that popular in Florida in early 1962.

page 91

I made that speech in Winterhaven, Florida, and the Tampa paper carried it the next morning. I flew to Washington the night after I'd made the speech, I hadn't even seen the Tampa paper. I got a call to come to the White House, that the president wanted to see me. I went over there and he was up in his bedroom. He and Jackie slept in different rooms. I went to his bedroom, and he had on a bathrobe, I'll never forget it, he had been taking an afternoon nap. When I got in there somebody had just waked him up. I think it was Dave Powers, or he was just getting up. It was about three o'clock, I guess, in the afternoon. I had arrived here in Washington about two o'clock. The president wants to see you, I went right over there.

I go up to the bedroom, he's getting up, puts on the bathrobe, and he said, "What the hell kind of friend are you?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "You took my jock off." I remember that expression so well, "You cut my jock off." I said, "What do you mean?" He said "damn" one more time, and said, "Look." He reached into his bathrobe pocket and he pulled out this thing from the *Tampa Tribune*, which I hadn't seen, which was in the Tampa morning paper. How in the hell he got it up here that fast I don't know. "Look at it there! Smathers says that he does not agree with President Kennedy. What the hell kind of a supporter are you of mine?" Oh, he was furious. He just gave me hell. I said, "Look, Jack, I've got to run, and you're not that popular down there in Florida at the moment, and I don't agree with some of these things that you're doing." Well, anyway, we had a real knock-down, drag-out argument. I didn't hardly get to argue too much, but he was really furious. He was pissed off no end. He told me that, and he was sort of mad for about another two or three weeks, till something came up where he kind of needed my vote again, and he called me and we made up. But I had

separated myself from him, somewhat, figuring that. . . well, some of the things he was for, I was not for. I can't remember specifically at the moment what it was.

Ritchie: Well, you had reservations against Medicare.

Smathers: But I finally voted for Medicare. Senator Holland and I voted for that.

Ritchie: Wasn't that under Johnson?

Smathers: Was that when Johnson proposed it later? Okay, well, you have it right. I have forgotten. But I know that at one point I voted for, Senator Holland and I voted for it. See, the doctors had been a great support for me back in 1950 when I had beaten Pepper. I felt some sympathy with the doctors, and I was not for what we call socialized medicine at that point in time. I never was, and I'm not today, not socialized medicine. But I recognized the fact that we have to have some kind of program which will take care of people who are frankly unable to take care of themselves. You just can't turn those people out, we've got to take care of them. But it never had been explained to me how we were going to do that.

page 92

Ritchie: As a senator, how would you describe the difference between when President Kennedy wanted you to vote for a bill, and when President Johnson wanted you to vote for a bill?

Smathers: Well, there was a great deal of difference. What Kennedy would do, he would have Larry O'Brien, Kenny O'Donnell, and Pierre Salinger, and people like that call you and ask you this. Kennedy was not a hands-on person like Johnson. Kennedy was in a way embarrassed, I don't know if this is the right word, but Kennedy was reluctant to ask people to do things. Johnson had grown up asking people to do things. Kennedy didn't like to ask people to do things. He had never asked people to do anything in his life except vote for him, that's the first time he ever asked anybody to do anything. The rest of the time he had been able to do whatever he wanted to do, or his family had been able to do everything they wanted to do for themselves. They didn't have to ask anybody anything. But when you're president, you've got to ask people to help you. If you don't come and ask them, why they're not going to help you.

I recall telling Jack Kennedy one time, this really did happen to me, after I ran for Congress we had a meeting of our people, maybe fifty or seventy-five good friends from the Junior Chamber of Commerce, they had a banquet and they had me. Somebody got up and said, "Well, we all of us voted for George except Tommy Thompson." "Well, Tommy," I said later, "you didn't vote for me?" Everybody kind of laughed. He said, "No, George, I didn't." I said, "Tommy, my God, we

were on the same high school football team, you were quarterback, I was the halfback. Golly, I can't believe it. I saw you all the time, you were in our group." He said, "George, let me tell you something, you never asked me to vote for you." And that taught me a great lesson. If you want people to do something, you've got to ask them to do it.

Johnson had no hesitancy about asking people to do anything he wanted them to do. Kennedy was like me at some point in my life, it was a little embarrassing to ask people to do things. It might have been a little inconvenient for them, or to put up money or something. Wouldn't do it. Well, you had to learn how to do it. He had to learn how to do it. I did too. Johnson had been asking from the time he was about eight years old, I think. So Johnson would call up these people and say, "I'm expecting you to help me on this. If you've got any problems, tell me what they are now and maybe we can resolve them. But I'm counting on you, old pal." He'd call Republicans and Democrats and say things just exactly like that. "I'm counting on you. Man, you've got to help me." Kennedy couldn't do that. Eisenhower couldn't do that. I don't think Truman did that too well. I don't know what other presidents would do that like Johnson, but that was why Johnson got things done.

He would pick up the phone and call you himself, he wouldn't have all these assistants call you. That's why he was always working. He was the hardest-working guy that ever served over there. He was on that telephone constantly to somebody, calling people like me, and getting us to call people. If he'd call

somebody and the guy was absent, or couldn't be reached, he'd say to me, "Now, you go tell him I called him first. This is what I want him to do. You just take it from there. Ask him." That was the big difference, that's why Johnson was effective. Now that I've been out in the business world and tried to run an automobile dealership, tried to run a law firm, I've learned that you can't be a successful business man unless you're a hands-on fellow. You've got to know what the hell's going on. Johnson knew what was going on all the time. He knew all the departments. He stayed in touch with all the departments. That's why he was effective.

Ritchie: One of the most important votes I think you gave to Kennedy when you were a senator was on the Telstar Communications Satellite bill. There was a liberal filibuster against the bill, [Paul Douglas](#) and [Wayne Morse](#) and others were filibustering. And you and Senator Holland voted for cloture on the filibusters.

Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: You were the first two southern senators I think ever to vote for cloture; got quite a bit of publicity at the time.

Smathers: Did it?

Ritchie: I wondered what the story was behind that.

Smathers: Well, I'm sure we thought the program was good. See, Senator Holland and I were not the deep southerners, as were the guys from Georgia and Alabama, South Carolina, Arkansas. We had it some better in the sense that we had a more liberal constituency, we were not the Deep South guys. And I'm sure we thought it was the right thing to do. I didn't mind voting for cloture, even though as a southerner you were supposed never to vote for cloture so that they would never apply it to you in trying to fight off a civil rights bill. But in those days it began to be pretty evident that the civil rights bill that we had been filibustering against previously. . . that day was gone, that day had passed. The time had come to begin to move into the twentieth century with respect to letting the blacks have the vote. Holland and I sponsored an anti-poll tax bill, which was a minor thing, but which on the other hand it was one of those impediments to the black vote, which we voted to eliminate. We're glad we did, it didn't hurt us in Florida particularly. Some people didn't like it, sure, but most of the people recognized that blacks were entitled to vote.

Ritchie: That break in the cloture ranks was cited in '64 when they were trying to break the filibuster, that was the first time that a cloture motion had been enacted. What was interesting too was that a lot of other southern senators never showed up at all, people like Harry Byrd and others.

Smathers: Yes, they didn't even show.

page 94

Ritchie: I figured there had to be a lot of persuading to get some of those people not to go down to vote at all.

Smathers: Was Kennedy president then?

Ritchie: Yes.

Smathers: That had something to do with it too, I wanted to help Kennedy. I probably got Senator Holland to vote for it, to kind of protect me.

Ritchie: I assume with the space industry in Florida it was a logical issue for you.

Smathers: Sure. We had to begin to move forward and did. The space industry in Florida was big, we knew it was going to be enormous. All right. Well, brother Ritchie, what do you think? Have we had a pretty good session?

Ritchie: A very good session, and this time I can tell the machine is working.

[End of Interview #4]