

2004

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John F. Kennedy and West Virginia, 1960-1963.

Thesis Submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts,
Department of History

by

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April 27, 2004

Abstract

John F. Kennedy and West Virginia, 1960-1963

By Anthony W. Ponton

In 1960, John F. Kennedy, a wealthy New England Catholic, traveled to a rural, Protestant state to contend in an election that few thought he could win. While many scholars have examined the impact of Kennedy's victory in the West Virginia primary, few have analyzed the importance that his visit to the state in 1960 and his ensuing administration had on West Virginia. Kennedy enacted a number of policies directed specifically toward relieving the poverty that had plagued West Virginia since statehood. The Kennedy administration funded highway construction, worker training programs, and area development at levels the state had never before experienced. Kennedy's relationship with West Virginia helped create a new cultural identity of West Virginians as proud, hardworking people.

Dedication

To my parents, Kenny and Cindi.
This would not have been possible
without your love and support.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Riddell, Dr. Lutz, and Dr. Sawrey, for their help in writing this thesis. Thanks for your encouragement and criticism in this long and difficult process. I would also like to thank Dr. Maddox for helping me in the early stages of this process. I never would have considered writing a thesis had it not been for his words of encouragement.

Most importantly, I want to thank my parents Kenny and Cindi Ponton, and my grandparents, John and Hazel Smith and Charlie and Goldie Ponton, for supporting me throughout my academic career. You helped give me the moral and financial support to continue my education past high school and I never could have done it without you.

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*“Economic growth has come to resemble the Washington weather. Everyone talks about it, no one says precisely what to do about it, and our only satisfaction is that it can’t get any worse.”*¹

John F. Kennedy

*“The problem of poverty is the problem of the youth, whether they hang around at the side of a muddy road in West Virginia or on a street corner in Harlem. They can be found, differing only in number, in every city and hamlet in the United States.”*²

Robert F. Kennedy

Chapter I:

During the 1960 presidential primary, West Virginia attracted national attention as a political battlefield from which the Democrats would deliver a candidate strong enough to unite the party and successfully challenge then Vice President, and the eventual Republican presidential nominee, Richard M. Nixon. When John Fitzgerald Kennedy stunned the nation by defeating Hubert Humphrey in the West Virginia primary he helped secure his party’s nomination and paved the way for his eventual election to the presidency. While many scholars have examined the impact that the West Virginia primary had on Kennedy’s victory in the 1960 election, few have analyzed the effect that his ensuing administration had on the state.

While campaigning in West Virginia during the primary, Kennedy witnessed first hand the impoverished conditions under which some West Virginians lived. As a result of his experiences campaigning in West Virginia, John Kennedy helped to improve conditions for many West Virginians through a number of legislative measures that

¹ John F. Kennedy, “Address to a Luncheon Meeting of the National Industrial Conference Board, Washington D.C., February 13, 1961.” In *President Kennedy’s Program: Texts of All the President’s Messages to Congress; Major Speeches and Letters in the First 100 Days*. (Washington D.C: Congressional Quarterly Services, 1961), 18.

² Robert F. Kennedy, “Address, Lexington Democratic Club.” New York, February 4, 1965.

addressed the state's economic and infrastructure problems. Many of these initiatives, such as the Pilot Food Stamp Program, the Area Redevelopment Act and the Agricultural Act of 1961 were aimed specifically at West Virginia and the surrounding Appalachian region. Because of the importance of West Virginia to the Kennedy campaign in the 1960 primary, coupled with John Kennedy's direct contact with the depressed economic conditions of the state, a definable change occurred within the state that can be attributed to the policies and initiatives of President Kennedy's administration.

The 1960 primary marked one of the few times in American history that West Virginia played an instrumental role in the development and direction of a national political party. Historically, West Virginia has remained a politically passive, largely marginalized state with limited influence on the policies of the federal government. National political leaders rarely fought to include on a major party platform the specific needs of West Virginians. Because of the state's political and economic isolation, many West Virginians failed to experience the technological advancements made throughout much of the country during the early and mid-twentieth century. The ensuing Kennedy victory in the presidential election proved to be most beneficial to a state that was underdeveloped, impoverished and, under previous administrations, without the political influence necessary to bring about change. Without the importance of the 1960 West Virginia primary, Kennedy likely would never have visited the state nor would he have needed to address the needs of West Virginians as part of his campaign platform. Much had been written about various aspects of Kennedy's personal and professional life, but very little has been written about the various aspects of the Kennedy campaign in West Virginia, the impact that the state had on Kennedy's victory in the 1960 general election

or the influence that the Kennedy administration had on West Virginia in the years following the primary. This chapter will examine how historians have viewed the connection between Kennedy and West Virginia.

Considerable debate exists as to the underlying reasons for Kennedy's victory in West Virginia and the extent of West Virginia's role in the outcome of the election of 1960. The author of *The Making of the President, 1960*, Theodore White, was the first and best known analyst to describe the impact of West Virginia on the Kennedy political machine. According to White, religion was the most important campaign issue in the West Virginia primary. Kennedy had to prove to West Virginians and to the entire nation that if elected president, his loyalties would lie with the Constitution and not the Catholic Church. The well-organized Kennedy campaign traveled throughout the state and this helped to humanize Kennedy by "proving that a Catholic wears no horns."³

In *John Kennedy*, James MacGregor Burns also addressed the importance of the Catholic issue during the 1960 election, but he does not acknowledge any role that West Virginia may have played. According to Burns, a number of important figures in key states already supported Kennedy despite his religious background. This, coupled with the substantial number of Catholics in northern states who would most likely vote for Kennedy, gave him a strong enough base to contend for the Democratic nomination. Therefore, the Catholic vote could possibly offset the Protestant vote.⁴ The exclusion of

³ Ibid, 108.

⁴ James MacGregor Burns, *John Kennedy: A Political Profile*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961), 254-255.

West Virginia from Burn's analysis reflects the sharp contrast of opinions among historians in their evaluations of West Virginia's significance to the 1960 campaign.⁵

More recently, in *Kennedy vs. Humphrey: The Pivotal Battle for the Democratic Presidential Nomination*, Dan Fleming Jr. asserted, "the West Virginia primary gave Kennedy a virtual lock on the Democratic nomination." According to Fleming, the primary was a "key step toward the nomination because it eased the concern over the vote-getting capabilities of a Catholic candidate." Kennedy was able to suppress the anti-Catholic sentiment by identifying with West Virginians as a fellow American, a World War II veteran and, more importantly, as a Democrat, rather than as a Catholic. Fleming identified a number of factors that led to Kennedy's victory including the immense and impressive network of Kennedy volunteers throughout the state, Kennedy's strong support among the labor unions and the belief that Humphrey was not a strong enough candidate to win the general election.⁶

While many scholars have examined the impact of the 1960 primary from a religious perspective, others have taken a more secular approach. In *West Virginia: A History*, John Alexander Williams argued that, "religion had actually played a small role in the campaign compared with the economic issues, engaging personal style and lavish campaign expenditures."⁷ Kennedy knew how to campaign and he made himself a

⁵ Other historians have also examined the religious issue in West Virginia. In *Becoming JFK*, Vito Silvestri states that the speeches Kennedy made throughout the state showed the country that he was willing to deal with the religious issue. Because Kennedy addressed the issue so well, he made it a non-issue when West Virginians went to the polls. Vito N. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK: A Profile in Communication*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000), 103-109.

⁶ Dan Fleming, Jr., *Kennedy vs. Humphrey: The Pivotal Battle for the Democratic Nomination*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1992), 148-153, 161.

⁷ Williams, *West Virginia: A History*, 183.

more appealing candidate to West Virginians than Humphrey. It is not clear whether most West Virginians were influenced more by the religious issue or by their belief that Kennedy truly cared about their condition and wanted to help them.⁸

Some scholars have examined the connection between positive memories of former President Franklin D. Roosevelt among West Virginians and Kennedy's victory in the state. In *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Richard Reeves stated that Roosevelt's son, Franklin, Jr., played an instrumental role in the outcome of the election because his father's New Deal policies were still immensely popular among West Virginians and his own support for Kennedy showed that a well known Protestant was willing to vote for a Catholic.⁹ In *A Question of Character*, Thomas Reeves also addressed the FDR connection to Kennedy's victory by asserting that Kennedy "evoked the memory of FDR's One Hundred Days" in the minds of West Virginians.¹⁰ This connection to Roosevelt caused many West Virginians to look to Kennedy as someone who would take action if he were elected President. In *Sons & Brothers*, Richard Mahoney also stated that the Roosevelt connection helped Kennedy win West Virginia.

⁸ Other scholars have downplayed the religious issue in their interpretation of the Kennedy experience on West Virginia. Victor Laskey states that the county political bosses were not as interested in the outcome of the presidential primary as they were in keeping intact the 'slates' of candidates they believed would maintain the Democratic Party's power structure within the counties. According to Laskey, the political bosses supported Kennedy because he had the connections and the financial backing to win and they wanted his name at the top of the county slates. Victor Laskey, *J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth*. (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1963), 338-353.

⁹ Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 28-29.

¹⁰ Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy*. (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 164.

Franklin Roosevelt Jr.'s support added legitimacy to the Kennedy campaign, but he also emphasizes that the Kennedy fortune added power. According to Mahoney, Kennedy won in West Virginia because money buys votes and he could buy more than Humphrey.¹¹

Although a number of historians have examined the role that the West Virginia primary played in the eventual election of John Kennedy, few have considered the impact the 1960 primary and the ensuing Kennedy presidency had on West Virginia. John Alexander Williams stated that Kennedy “produced few concrete changes in the state during his brief presidency” but, he “set in motion some developments that had important repercussions after his death.” According to Williams, the most important aspect of the Kennedy experience in West Virginia was that it gave West Virginians a sense of pride about their role in shaping the “national destiny” and this helped lift their spirits during an economically depressing period.¹²

Scholars have largely overlooked the impact that President Kennedy’s administration had on West Virginia as a result of his experiences campaigning throughout the state. Most scholars have taken an interest in examining the President’s personal life or the complexities of his foreign policy rather than evaluating his connection to West Virginia.

¹¹ Richard D. Mahoney, *Sons & Brothers: The Days of Jack and Bobby Kennedy*. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), 52-55.

¹² Williams, *West Virginia*, 182-183

“I know of no other state, and I know this state well, whose people feel more strongly, who have a greater sense of pride in themselves, in their state and country, than the people of West Virginia.”¹

John F. Kennedy

“West Virginia rocks on a saggy front porch while her neighbors drive by in shiny new cars.”²

Roul Tunley

Chapter II:

Before 1960, it would have been nearly impossible for most West Virginians to believe that the Kennedy family would one day play a vital role in improving the conditions within their state. The cultural and economic conditions with which the Kennedy family and the typical West Virginia family lived could not have been more diametrically opposed to one another. While the Kennedy name evoked images of wealth, political power and prestige, the perception of the typical West Virginian was one of hardship and want. The Kennedys enjoyed their immense wealth while sailing on the family yacht, cavorting through Europe or relaxing at their summer home on Cape Cod. By 1960, more than one out of every six West Virginians experienced unemployment and nearly as many depended on surplus government food. While the Kennedy children received an elite education from America’s finest universities, only one out of three West Virginians had finished high school. Despite these dramatic differences, John F.

¹ John Kennedy, Remarks at the State Centennial Celebration in Charleston, West Virginia, June 20, 1963.” (*Public Papers of the Presidents; JFK, 1963*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964).

² Roul Tunley, “The Strange Case of West Virginia.” In *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 6, 1960.

Kennedy would attempt to connect these divergent worlds when he traveled to West Virginia for the 1960 presidential primary.

A number of questions arise when examining both Kennedy's and West Virginia's historical narrative. Why did West Virginia fail to develop the economic base necessary to keep pace with the rest of the country? Under what circumstances did John Kennedy begin his journey to the White House; and as President, how did his previous experiences shape his attitude toward West Virginia? More importantly, how and why did these two worlds converge in 1960? This chapter will answer these questions by examining the development of West Virginia's political and economic conditions in the early and mid-twentieth century as well as the emergence of John Kennedy's political career before the 1960 primary.

Since achieving statehood in 1863, West Virginia remained a paradox. For many living in the state before 1960, the separation between what was and what could have been seemed almost insurmountable. West Virginia ranked 15th in basic wealth, yet it was 38th in per capita income.³ Between 1950 and 1960, one out of five West Virginians earned less than the \$1000 per year. While 34.5% of Americans were part of the workforce, only 24.1% of West Virginians found employment. Of those West Virginians employed, more than 27% worked in manufacturing jobs while 22% worked in agriculture or farming and another 11% worked for the coal companies. Less than 8% of working West Virginians held technical or professional jobs.⁴

³ Harry W. Ernest and Charles H Drake, *The Lost Appalachians: Poor, Proud, Primitive*. 492.

⁴ Bureau of the Census, *Summary of the Eighteenth Census, 1960*. (New York: Arno Press, 1976), I-287, I-281, I-265.

By 1960, the landscape of many of the more depressed regions of West Virginia had changed very little since 1860. Charleston and Huntington were the only metropolitan areas as defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, and the populations of many of the county seats numbered less than 3,000. As a result, 62% of West Virginians lived in rural areas, the second highest percentage in the country.⁵

No historical narrative of West Virginia would be complete without a close examination of the vital role that coal played in the development of the unique political and economic culture that existed within the state. Mining had been an integral aspect of western Virginia's economy since the emergence of industry in the United States during the early nineteenth century. The development of salt mines and granite quarries in the early 1800s helped diversify western Virginia's economy, but as late as the 1840s coal played a relatively small role in the generation of revenue by state mining operations.⁶

After the Civil War, West Virginia business leaders attempted to shift from an agricultural to an industrial society through the development of its "vast mineral and timber resources," as the construction of railroad lines such as the Chesapeake and Ohio and the Norfolk and Western connected southern West Virginia with the Mid-Atlantic states. A relationship between coal companies and the railroads developed and a number of smaller mining operations found it increasingly difficult to compete financially. By 1900 the eighty-five small coal companies that operated in West Virginia had been consolidated into approximately five large coal corporations.⁷

⁵ Ibid, 52, 55.

⁶ James Liang, "The Early Development of the Coal Industry in the Western Counties of Virginia: 1800-1865." In *West Virginia History*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1966, 144-145.

⁷ Otis K. Rice, *West Virginia: A History*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 183-184, 186, 188-190.

By the 20th century, coal had become the driving force behind West Virginia's economy. While less than 1% of the country worked in the mining industry, more than one out of every ten West Virginians derived their livelihood directly from the coalmines.⁸ After World War II, the coal industry suffered from the effects of post-war recessions that resulted from industrial overproduction during wartime and the difficulty in shifting to a peacetime economy. Between 1950 and 1958, national bituminous coal production decreased 20.5%. Although some states such as Wyoming and Colorado suffered a 32% reduction in coal production, West Virginia experienced only a 6.3% decrease.⁹

Despite the relatively stable production numbers, 44,824 West Virginia miners lost their jobs between 1948 and 1955.¹⁰ Although the coal industry did experience a recession during this period, there is another, more plausible, reason for the drastic loss of jobs in the mining industry. According to former U.S. Congressman Ken Hechler, "the dieselization of the railroad and the mechanization of the coal industry made the West Virginia miner expendable."¹¹ Governor-elect William Wallace Barron stated during his inaugural address in 1960 that, "automation has taken a heavy toll in jobs.

⁸ Bureau of the Census, *Summary of the Eighteenth Census*, I-281.

⁹ U.S. Congress, "Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report," No. 11, March 11, 1960. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1960), 430.

¹⁰ Appalachian Power Company, "An Economic Survey of 22 Coal Producing Counties Located in Southwestern Virginia and Southern West Virginia, 1959." Box 990 JFK Library

¹¹ Ken Hechler, Tape-recorded interview with author, 12 November 2001. Hechler has led a rather illustrious life. Born in 1914 to a wealthy Long Island, New York family, Hechler moved to the state after working as a special assistant to President Harry Truman from 1949-1953. Hechler served as Congressman from West Virginia's Fourth District from 1959-1977 and as West Virginia Secretary of State from 1985-2000. He has also worked as a research director for a number of politicians and judges and as a professor of political science at Columbia University, United States Air Force Academy, and Marshall University.

Mechanization sometimes permits one machine to replace as many as 50 employees.”¹²

The coal industry became less dependent on the miner because modern techniques and equipment could extract coal more efficiently and at less cost. According to a 1959 report conducted by Appalachian Power:

“Employment has decreased as the machine had been employed to perform many repetitions formerly employed by man. This unemployment has resulted in a high rate of outmigration. Also the workers are virtually unskilled in other types of work . . . It can be anticipated that additional mechanization will take place within the coal mining industries in the near future.”¹³

The coal industry had been the lifeblood of West Virginia’s economy for more than 70 years and any negative shift in coal production or employment numbers led to a downward spiral among other industries. By 1960, Beckley suffered 30% unemployment, the highest of any area in the country. Many other towns in the southern West Virginia coal region experienced high unemployment rates. In Welch 27%, in Bluefield 22%, and in Logan 20% could not find work. Even Huntington, a metropolitan area whose economy was based primarily on manufacturing rather than coal, experienced 13% unemployment.¹⁴

The lack of employment opportunities in the coal industry led to a significant outmigration of people. Between 1950 and 1960, West Virginia suffered a 7% percent decrease in population, the highest in the nation. In comparison, between 1940 and 1950 West Virginia experienced a 4% increase in population. This rapid outmigration created severe problems for West Virginia’s already weakened tax base and helped undermine

¹² William Wallace Barron, “Inaugural Address,” January 16, 1960.

¹³ Appalachian Power Company, “Survey.” Box 989 JFK Library

¹⁴ Area Employment Expansion Committee, “Employment, Unemployment as Percentage of Labor Force in Distressed Labor Markets in the United States; by Geographic Region, November, 1959.” 38-D. Box 990 JFK Library

any attempt by the state legislature to provide meaningful relief to the people.¹⁵ Many who did stay in West Virginia lived on surplus agricultural commodities. According to Harry W. Ernest and Charles H. Drake, “seventeen percent of the state’s population depended on mollygrub as surplus government food to stay alive.”¹⁶

State political leaders recognized the need to diversify the economy so West Virginia would not be so dependent on the coal industry. A report prepared for the West Virginia State Legislature conducted by Arthur D. Little Inc. stated that, “vocational training in areas is desperately needed (because) it not only assists established industry to expand into new fields of activities, but it is an asset when attracting new industry.” According to the report, “West Virginia has become overly dependent on the coal industry... more emphasis should be placed on the development of new industry and the promotion of tourism.”¹⁷ This report represented one of the first attempts to analyze the effects of the coal industry on the health of West Virginia’s economy and the need for the diversification of industry and the implementation of education and vocational training.

West Virginians also lacked the educational opportunities enjoyed by people in other areas of the country. Because of the severe economic conditions within West Virginia, many families could not afford the cost of a private or public university education nor could they afford the financial burden of lost income that would result from a family member attending public school rather than entering the workforce. Between 1950 and 1960, only 32% of West Virginians completed high school while more than 42% of Americans earned a diploma. West Virginia lacked professionally educated

¹⁵ Bureau of the Census, *Summary of the Eighteenth Census*, 519

¹⁶ Drake, *The Lost Appalachians*, 491.

¹⁷ “Community Development Progress Report” (Arthur D. Little, Inc. 1956), 88.

citizens as well. Nearly 8% of American citizens had college degrees while only 4.2% of West Virginians had received a college education.¹⁸

Although the lack of employment and education drastically hindered West Virginia's economic development, the problem might have been rectified to some degree had the state's infrastructure been capable of supporting economic growth. By 1960, the new Eisenhower Interstate System had expanded to more than 20,000 miles of federal highway and many regions of the country had already begun to experience the economic benefits that this new transportation link could provide. West Virginia's geographic proximity to such important commercial hubs and metropolitan centers as Washington D.C., Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Louisville, and Norfolk and its central position as a potential transportation artery connecting the entire eastern seaboard should have made it an ideal location for the construction of new roads and allowed for the same degree of economic growth that other regions experienced. Despite this geographic advantage, by 1959 only a ten-mile section of highway in Wheeling and a fifty-mile section connecting Huntington with Charleston had been built with plans to construct both a highway connecting Parkersburg with Charleston and a twenty-mile section that would run through the Eastern Panhandle. With less than one hundred miles of interstate highway, West Virginia ranked 37th in the total number of interstate miles under contract. The entire central and southern region of the state had been left untouched by the economic growth spurred by the new federal highway system, and it was widely recognized that it would be very difficult and costly to construct a highway system within the state because

¹⁸ Bureau of the Census, *Eighteenth Summary of the Census, 1960*, I-419.

of the extremely mountainous terrain that had been a natural barrier since the first settlers began populating the region more than two centuries earlier.¹⁹

Although a network of primary and secondary roads connected hundreds of small West Virginia towns, many of these roads desperately needed repair and did not provide a viable infrastructure that could lure new business and industry. According to historian Christopher Monday, “The state’s roads were dangerous with many curves and resulted in high accident rates as well as slow driving times. Such conditions did not encourage driving outside one’s locality.”²⁰ The severity of West Virginia’s highway deficiency prompted Governor Cecil Underwood to ask in 1959, “Do we continue letting our road system slip further behind the progress of other states?”²¹ West Virginia’s second-rate road system prevented economic development and helped maintain the cultural isolation that existed in much of the southern and central regions of the state.

Despite its abundant resources and ideal geographic location, West Virginia was hindered by the negative influence of several major industries, most notably coal, low levels of education, and an inadequate infrastructure resulting from the unforgiving terrain in the southern and central regions of the state. According to former West Virginia Congressman John Slack, “(West Virginians) are human beings behind the often repeated and little understood phrase technologically unemployed.”²² As other states

¹⁹ State Road Commission of West Virginia, “An Enlarged Program of Highway Planning and Construction, January 1, 1959.” The statistics on highway miles came from a close examination of map one that accompanied the program report.

²⁰ Christopher R. Monday, “The West Virginia Turnpike: 88 Miles of Miracle,” In *West Virginia History*.” Vol. 11, Issue 2, August, 1997.

²¹ State Road Commission of West Virginia, “An Enlarged Program.” The quote from Governor Underwood can be found in the Report’s introduction, p 3.

²² *Charleston Gazette*, March 1960.

advanced with the new technologies of the modern world, many West Virginians continued to live behind the times. Perhaps *Saturday Evening Post* columnist Roul Tunley summed up the situation best when he wrote:

“Although West Virginia is the fourth richest in natural resource production, it has the highest unemployment rate in the country; three times the national average. Its schools rank among the lowest in the nation and its annual farm income is at the bottom of the heap... West Virginia’s young people are leaving at an alarming rate leaving behind an aging unemployed, uneducated, untrained, population.”²³

As the 1960 state primary drew near, few West Virginians had any reason to believe that a presidential election would bring any significant change.

While many in West Virginia struggled with the hardships of daily life, the Kennedys prospered both financially and politically at levels that most people could not even understand let alone ever expect to reach themselves. By 1960, the Kennedy family had become well known throughout the country for their immense influence, wealth, and prestige. Members of the immediate Kennedy family had been isolated from the lower class, blue-collar, rural conditions that existed in many parts of West Virginia and many other regions of the country since the first members of the family immigrated to the United States from Ireland in the 1840s.

Joseph Kennedy was largely responsible for elevating the family’s social and economic status to the level that many Americans associated with the Kennedy name in 1960. As Irish Catholics, the Kennedys were a minority in Boston during Joe’s childhood. By the time Joe Kennedy graduated from Harvard in 1912, Irish Catholics, although not yet treated as the equals of Protestants, were no longer the foremost targets of the religious prejudice and intolerance that had characterized the Catholic experience

²³ Roul Tunley, “The Strange Case of West Virginia.” In *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 6, 1960.

in Boston in earlier decades. Despite this ideological shift, the family's Catholicism was still a hindrance among Boston's elite, and in later years Joe Kennedy would insist that his children receive a secular education.²⁴

During the 1920s, Joe Kennedy excelled as a banker, a stock speculator and a movie producer. Kennedy avoided the financial ruin that most investors endured during the Great Depression by selling most of his stock holdings before the market collapsed. With his financial future secure, Kennedy took an active interest in Democratic Party politics. During the 1932 presidential election, Kennedy contributed his money and efforts to Franklin Roosevelt's campaign. Roosevelt thanked Kennedy for his support by appointing him Ambassador to England in 1937. By 1940, war had erupted in Europe and Ambassador Kennedy's support of appeasement and his declaration that "without question, the United States should stay out of the war,"²⁵ made him increasingly unpopular in the United States. As a result, Roosevelt removed Kennedy as ambassador in 1940, thereby ending his brief political career.²⁶ By 1960, estimates of the Kennedy fortune reached \$200 million.²⁷

When John F. Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917 his father had not yet reached the pinnacle of financial success, and John spent his early childhood living in modest upper-middle class conditions in Boston. As a young child Jack, as he came to be called, contended with the extremely competitive nature of the family. No matter what the

²⁴ Richard J. Whalen, *The Founding Father*. (New York: The New American Library of Literature, 1964), 165.

²⁵ *New York-Journal American*, February 7, 1940, 7 JFK Library Box B-22

²⁶ Whalen, *Founding Father*, 209-211.

²⁷ Parmet, *Kennedy*, 12.

family did, they had to do it together and better than anyone else, and Joe Sr. strongly encouraged this tight knit, competitive lifestyle.

At age thirteen Jack entered Choate, an elite boarding school for boys. He was at best an average student. Kennedy graduated from Choate in 1934 64th in a class of 112.²⁸ In the fall, Kennedy entered Harvard. The pattern of academic mediocrity continued through his first three years of college and he showed no particular interest in politics or campus activism.

During Kennedy's senior year at Harvard, Europe began preparing for war. During the fall semester, Jack showed an active interest in the events in Europe and he took courses in international relations. After making the Dean's List for the first time, he traveled to England to spend the winter break with his father. While in London, he recognized that the English had failed to adequately prepare for war despite the threat of a major European conflict. Jack decided to write his senior thesis on England's lack of preparedness for war. He traveled throughout Europe conducting research for his paper on the potential impact of war and the prospects for peace. World War II erupted less than two months after Kennedy returned from his travels.²⁹

Kennedy's thesis, titled "The Inevitable Result of the Conversion of the British Democracy From a Disarmament to a Rearmament Policy," not only fulfilled his final requirements for graduation but also propelled him onto a national stage as a writer despite the fact that Kennedy received only the second highest possible grade for his completed work. One professor described his paper as a poorly written but "laborious,

²⁸ Ibid, 26-28.

²⁹ Parmet, *The Struggles of John F. Kennedy*, 62-66.

interesting and intelligent discussion of an interesting question.”³⁰ Although his professors believed he had written a slightly above average paper, Joe Kennedy used his influence to get his son’s work published as a book entitled *Why England Slept*.³¹

Why England Slept was also well received by critics in both the United States and England. They were amazed that a twenty-three year old had so eloquently analyzed the complexities of current European events and was able to connect these events with possible American intervention. The book proved to be most important to Kennedy’s future endeavors because it created an image of the young man as a scholar capable of analytical thought and an understanding of foreign and domestic government policies.

After graduating from Harvard and enjoying his literary success, Kennedy attended Harvard Law School.³² When the United States entered World War II, Kennedy left Harvard to volunteer for the army, but he was rejected because of a bad back. He spent the next few months exercising to strengthen his back, and in September, 1942 he joined the United States Navy. During the first year of his service, Jack had mostly office jobs. He worked in Naval Intelligence writing reports and putting symbols on maps. Kennedy

³⁰ Henry A. Yeomans, *Report on Thesis for Distinction*, Harvard Library, MS 65-185.

³¹ In his book, Kennedy argued that leaders of democratic countries may have to assert a totalitarian ideology at times in order to maintain peace in the world. He also supported Prime Minister Chamberlain’s appeasement policy as a necessary measure to avoid war. According to Kennedy, Chamberlain was only acting out the wishes of the people and therefore England’s failure to prepare for war must be shared by the entire country and not just the leaders. John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept*. (New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc., 1940). Joe Kennedy may have had more than a fatherly interest in seeing that his son’s book was published. By the time *Why England Slept* was in print, Ambassador Kennedy’s popularity in the United States was diminished as a result of his alignment with the appeasers. Parmet writes that his son’s work helped to promote the elder Kennedy’s stance on the war. Parmet, *The Struggles of John F. Kennedy*, 72-73.

³² Laskey, *J.F.K.*, 80.

did not enjoy working behind a desk and he asked his father to help him secure an assignment with a little more action. Joe Kennedy pulled some strings with the Navy Department to get his son an assignment in a Motor Torpedo Boat squadron. By March 1943 he was commander of his own boat, the PT109.³³

On August 2, 1943, Lt. Kennedy and his crew were on a routine night patrol around the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific when a Japanese destroyer rammed their boat and split it in half. Two of Kennedy's twelve crewmembers were killed instantly and the others were thrown out of the boat. Fifteen hours later, Kennedy and the other survivors managed to swim to an island three miles from the crash site. On a swim to a nearby island, Kennedy made contacts with a tribe of locals and left a message that there were American survivors on a nearby island. After almost six days they were rescued. For his efforts Kennedy was awarded the Purple Heart and a Navy and Marine Corps Medal.³⁴

John Kennedy had the benefit of his father's fame and fortune to help him advance through life and this proved to be a most beneficial asset in his political ascent. However, he needed something that would separate him from his father's shadow and show people that he was strong enough to stand on his own two feet. The PT109 incident made Kennedy a national war hero and gave him a significant accomplishment that could

³³ Parmet, *The Struggles of John F. Kennedy*, 91-94

³⁴ Robert J. Donovan, *PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II*. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1961). Donovan was Chief of the New York Herald Tribune's Washington Bureau and was a good friend of the Kennedy family. Donovan had the benefit of both President Kennedy's blessing and assistance in writing his book. Because there have been conflicting reports concerning the events associated with PT 109, it is important to note that Donovan's work very strongly reflects Kennedy's sentiments and recollections.

not be attributed to the advantages of having Joe Kennedy as a father.³⁵ In his book *PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II*, Robert Donovan asserts that Kennedy “might never have reached the White House if it had not been for PT 109.”³⁶

In 1946 Kennedy entered the political arena by running for the House of Representatives in the Eleventh Congressional District of Massachusetts. Kennedy made this decision after recovering from his injuries from the PT109 incident and later working as a journalist for the *New York Journal American*. Although Kennedy was well known throughout the district because of his war exploits and his father’s prominence, he still had to overcome his youth and inexperience and a field of nine other candidates.

In a manner that became a trademark in future elections, the entire Kennedy family hit the campaign trail for young Jack. They traveled throughout the district promoting Kennedy’s image as a war hero and a scholar and they appeared with him at a number of political functions. The Kennedy team was extremely dedicated, well organized and well funded. This played a crucial role in giving Kennedy a nearly three to one victory in the general election.³⁷

In 1952, after serving three terms in the House, Kennedy ran for the Senate. He had a difficult campaign ahead of him because he was facing a well-known incumbent, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., who was also the son of a wealthy, prominent national figure. The Kennedy political machine went to work with the entire family again hitting the

³⁵ Kennedy owes much of his fame from the incident to an article by John Hersey. While the incident itself helped measure Kennedy’s courage and quick thinking under extreme duress, there is some speculation that Joe Kennedy may have used his connections at Reader’s Digest to help make the event national news. Some historians, such as Joan and Clay Blair, assert that Kennedy “was a manufactured war hero.” Blair, *The Search for JFK*, 587.

³⁶ Donovan, *PT 109*, 240.

³⁷ Parmet, *The Struggles of John F. Kennedy*, 162.

campaign trail and Joe providing the financial backing. As the election drew nearer, Lodge began complaining that he was “in a battle to buy the Senatorship.” According to biographer Victor Laskey, the Kennedys outworked and outspent Lodge, and on election day Kennedy beat his opponent by almost 70,000 votes.³⁸

In 1955 Kennedy wrote *Profiles in Courage*, an examination of bravery and courage exhibited by various U.S. Senators. The book was a best seller and he received the Pulitzer Prize in Biography. Although a great deal of controversy exists in scholarly circles concerning how much of the book Kennedy actually wrote, *Profiles in Courage* helped create an image of Kennedy among the public as a profound thinker and scholar.³⁹ His growing fame created talk among prominent Democrats of a potential opening for him in the second spot on the 1956 presidential ticket.

During his congressional career Kennedy earned a reputation for his understanding of foreign affairs.⁴⁰ He pushed hard for foreign aid to developing countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa, and he took an uncompromising stance against the spread of Communism. As his congressional career progressed, his ideology shifted further left as he began focusing on domestic issues. He supported the civil rights movement, minimum wage increases, increased funding for low cost public housing and aid to impoverished regions. Although his voting record reflected the more liberal ideas of the Democratic Party’s domestic platform, in his fourteen years in Congress he never

³⁸ Laskey, *J.F.K.*, 149-151, 164.

³⁹ Reeves, *A Question of Character*, 128. Some of Kennedy’s critics have stated that while the ideas conveyed in *Profiles in Courage* were Kennedy’s, notable scholars such as Allan Nevins and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Kennedy aide Theodore Sorenson were the actual authors of the book.

⁴⁰ Kenneth O’Donnell and David Powers, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye: Memoirs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*. (Boston: Brown Little & Company, 1970), 81-85.

wrote a significant piece of legislation and many of his colleagues noted that he never displayed any real passion about any particular issue.

In the 1956 presidential election, the Democrats faced an uphill battle. The nation had experienced peace and prosperity under President Eisenhower, and Kennedy recognized that it would be difficult for the Democrats to win the White House. Many considered Illinois native Adlai Stevenson, Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver and New York Governor Averell Harriman to be the leading candidates for the Democratic Party's nomination for president. Kennedy believed that a Stevenson-Kefauver ticket was inevitable and throughout the early months of the campaign season he did not openly campaign for his party's nomination for president.⁴¹

Kennedy advisor Ted Sorenson believed that the national spotlight of a vice-presidential campaign would help Kennedy in future national elections and he began compiling statistics that showed that a Catholic running mate would only serve to strengthen the Democratic ticket. Sorenson organized grass-roots campaigns in Massachusetts to support Kennedy as a favorite son for vice-president. Kennedy traveled the country giving speeches promoting his status as a war hero, a celebrated author and a ten-year veteran of Congress. By June, Kennedy's support base had grown to include large regions of New England and he emerged as a legitimate contender for the nomination.

The delegates gathered for the Democratic National Convention on August 13 without a clear favorite for vice-president. Stevenson easily won the presidential nomination as expected, but, in a rather unusual move, he called on the convention to vote for his running mate. Along with Kennedy and Kefauver, Senators Hubert

⁴¹ Laskey, *JFK*, 181-183,

Humphrey of Minnesota and Albert Gore of Tennessee also emerged as contenders. Stevenson's decision angered all the candidates because it gave them less than twelve hours to campaign. Kennedy and his team spent the night frantically trying to gather support and by morning hundreds of delegate members were wearing pro-Kennedy buttons and shirts.⁴²

Although Kennedy lost the nomination, his efforts did not go unnoticed. However, many of his political opponents forced him to address a number of personal issues that would follow him throughout his career. Among those issues were his youth, his inexperience, his wealth, and, most notably, his Catholic background. Many leading Democrats saw Kennedy as unelectable in a national election because of his Catholicism, and Kennedy saw the religious issue as an obstacle that would be difficult to overcome.⁴³ Kennedy's eloquent concession speech was broadcast on television to 40,000,000 Americans and his exposure to the American public through this relatively new campaign medium played a crucial role in the development of the Kennedy political machine by creating a following within the Democratic Party.

Despite Kennedy's defeat in 1956, he had emerged as one of the leading Democrats for the 1960 presidential race. Although Kennedy settled comfortably back into his role as a U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, he also made known his desire to be president. Kennedy had more money and more resources than any other Democratic candidate and he campaigned earlier and harder for his party's nomination. Wherever he went, he drew enormous crowds of supporters. According to a 1959 article in the *New York Times Magazine* written by Cabell Phillips, "Jack Kennedy is a singularly gifted

⁴² *Ibid*, 185, 187, 189-191.

⁴³ Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 84.

young man in looks, bearing, intelligence, and personality. There is about him a subtle blend of deference and self-confidence, of engaging shyness and forthrightness. He radiates a gentle, honest warmth and people are instinctively at ease with him.”⁴⁴

By late 1959, Kennedy was as well known an American figure as Jimmy Stewart or Mickey Mantle, and almost no other political figure had as strong a national following of loyal young fans across the country as Kennedy.

In the 1960 presidential primary, two drastically different worlds were about to converge upon one another. The Kennedys were at the very top of the country’s social hierarchy. They were among the first families in the world to own an automobile, to take commercial flights overseas and to have a television set.⁴⁵ They attended Broadway plays, had summer vacation homes and frequented the best restaurants in the world. The Kennedy children enjoyed the benefits of a Harvard education and million-dollar trust funds. Jack Kennedy was the young, charismatic heir to this Kennedy legacy. In 1960, Kennedy brought his youth and idealism to West Virginia in an attempt to convince the country that he was a legitimate contender for the presidency of the United States.

For many living in West Virginia, progress had passed them by. Many homes lacked running water and electricity and many more lacked television sets or even radios. Very little adequate infrastructure existed to connect the state to the rest of the country. Along the backcountry gravel roads and throughout the small coal towns of West Virginia, John Kennedy would attempt to forge a connection between these extremely different worlds.

⁴⁴ Cabell Phillips, “Two Candidates on the Road,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 1959, 24.

⁴⁵ Blair, *Searching for JFK*, 17.

“Nobody will win this nomination who sits in the big easy chair and waits for lightning to strike. This is a fighting year and Jack’s the best fighter in the party.”¹

Robert F. Kennedy

“For it is in the executive branch that the most crucial decisions of the century must be made in the next four years... how to prevent the collapse of the farm economy and the decay of our cities; how to achieve without further inflation or unemployment, expanded economic growth benefiting all Americans; and how to give direction to our traditional moral purpose, awakening every American to the dangers and opportunities that confront us. These are among the real issues of 1960. And it is on the basis of these issues that the American people must make their fateful choice for the future.”²

John F. Kennedy

Chapter III

As the 1960 presidential campaign neared, John Kennedy faced a number of difficult questions. Would he have enough influence and experience to challenge the Democratic Party’s already established and deeply entrenched political power players? Could the young Senator emerge from his father’s shadow and stand on his own in the eyes of the voters? Most importantly, could an Irish Catholic win the presidency? The answers to the first two questions would depend, to a great degree, on how skillfully the Senator campaigned and how well he addressed the issues. The third question, however, depended more upon a firmly established precedent set by voters in the 1928 election. This chapter will examine the impact of the ‘Catholic issue’ in that election as well as Kennedy’s own experiences during the 1960 West Virginia primary.

Before 1960, only one Catholic candidate had emerged as a legitimate contender for a major party’s presidential nomination. During the 1928 National Democratic

¹ Severeid, *Candidates*, 215.

² John F. Kennedy, “Statement of Declaration for the Presidency,” Washington D.C., January 2, 1960.

Convention, Alfred E. Smith challenged the nation's prejudices toward non-protestants in a national election, and his life parallels that of Kennedy in many ways. Born in 1873 to the parents of first generation Irish Catholic immigrants, Smith received the typical upper class Catholic parochial education before eventually taking control of his father's trucking business. In 1904, Smith began his career in politics by winning a seat in the New York state legislature. Sixteen years later, Smith won the first of four terms as governor. As New York's chief executive, Smith became known for his liberal, progressive views and engaging personality. According to biographer Christopher M. Finan, "Smith became the first Catholic political leader with a national following," and his strong base of wealthy New York and New England supporters made him an attractive presidential candidate.³ In 1924, Franklin D. Roosevelt nominated Smith for the presidency at the Democratic National Convention, but religion became a major issue during the pre-convention political struggle as the Ku Klux Klan built an anti-Smith coalition in an attempt to block his nomination. Despite Smith's national name recognition, the Klan successfully used the religious issue to divide the Democratic Party and allow little known Clarksburg, West Virginia native and New York banker John C. Davis to secure the nomination.⁴

During the next four years Smith built a coalition that united the Democratic Party behind his candidacy. Although Smith won the nomination in 1928, Republican candidate Herbert Hoover easily defeated him in the national election. Smith carried only

³ Christopher M. Finan, *Alfred E. Smith: The Happy Warrior*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.), 5.

⁴ Richard O'Connor, *The First Hurrah: A Biography of Alfred E. Smith*. (New York: Putnam, 1970), 11-27.

eight states and lost to Hoover by more than six million votes.⁵ In West Virginia, Hoover defeated Smith convincingly with nearly 60% of the vote.⁶

A number of factors played a role in the election of 1928. During the late 1920s, the United States experienced marked levels of prosperity and Smith's own views on Prohibition no doubt aided Hoover. Most historians agree, however, that religion was at least as significant as any other issue in the election. According to Republican Senator George Norris of Nebraska, "The religious issue has done damage. It has sown the seed of hatred, prejudice and jealousy and they will grow fruit and bear after the present generation has passed away."⁷

As Kennedy directed his efforts toward a run for the presidency in 1960, the public once again began to consider the implications of a Catholic candidate. In January 1959, the *New York Times* weighed in on the issue:

"The political implications of nominating a Roman Catholic for the Presidency are now coming increasingly to the fore in the capital. With Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts quietly increasing his influence with Democratic politicians, what was primarily a matter of speculation ... is now being openly debated from the public platform."⁸

An October, 1958 Gallup poll showed that although 68% of Americans would consider voting for a Catholic candidate, 25% said that they would not vote for a Catholic. During Al Smith's campaign in 1928, a similar poll found that only 62% of Americans would

⁵ Finan, *Alfred E. Smith*, 228.

⁶ Rice, *West Virginia*, 266.

⁷ Finan, *Alfred E. Smith*, 230

⁸ *New York Times*, January 1, 1959.

consider voting for a Catholic. While 97% of Catholics said they would vote for a fellow Catholic, 40% of those who identified themselves as Protestant said they would not.⁹

By late 1958, presidential politics were taking most of Kennedy's time.

According to an October 10 *New York Times* report from Parkersburg, West Virginia:

“Senator John F. Kennedy from Massachusetts is quietly but diligently building support these days for the 1960 Democratic Presidential nomination. Though voters are not even showing as much interest as in the 1958 election, the handsome young New Englander was here helping the West Virginia Democratic candidates in the hope that they will return to help him two years from now.”¹⁰

Although Kennedy's popularity remained high in other key regions of the country after the 1956 Democratic Convention, some in West Virginia doubted that the Senator would be understanding and sympathetic to their needs. According to an October 12 editorial in the Republican controlled *Wheeling Intelligencer*, “Senator Kennedy, who wants to be president... would do well to confine his campaigning to urban areas... Kennedy fails to understand the American farmer.”¹¹

The *Wheeling Intelligencer* did not soften its stance against Kennedy as the primary drew nearer. In an August 5 editorial the *Intelligencer* denounced Kennedy's efforts to protect unions in the name of political ambition and stated, “Kennedy identifies himself with labor reform but he fails to deal with the abuses in the labor relations field.”¹² The *Intelligencer* continued to lead the attack in West Virginia against Kennedy's labor and agricultural policies. According to an October 13, 1959 editorial:

⁹ George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion, 1935-1970*, Volume 2. (New York: Random House, 1972), Q54-A, 604-K.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, October 10, 1958.

¹¹ *Wheeling Intelligencer*, October 12, 1960.

¹² *Wheeling Intelligencer*, August 5, 1959.

“(Senator Kennedy) is more the demagogue than statesman . . . That Senator Kennedy, in the extremity of his political need to regain lost ground in the ranks of organized labor would represent this presidential performance as a demonstration of anti-union bias is a sufficient commentary on the fitness of this young man from Massachusetts for the high office to which he so obviously aspires.”¹³

A 1956 Vice Presidential survey conducted by Kennedy’s staff concluded that an “urban, Boston, Irish Catholic,” had no political appeal in West Virginia.¹⁴ By late 1959, it had become apparent that Kennedy would enter the following year’s presidential race even though many thought he lacked sufficient popular support for a successful campaign in West Virginia.

John Kennedy ended the speculation and officially announced his candidacy for the presidency on January 2, 1959. He would have to face the same huge obstacles he had encountered in 1956. No Catholic, and no one so young, had ever been elected President, and it had been over one hundred years since a New England native was President. A long list of potential candidates included Senate majority leader and leading contender Lyndon Johnson, Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, and U.S. Senators Stuart Symington and Hubert Humphrey.

As the West Virginia primary neared, Lyndon Johnson declared that he would delay any decision concerning his candidacy because of his duties as Senate Majority Leader, and both Stevenson and Symington announced they were not currently candidates.¹⁵ Although Johnson and Symington remained two of the leading contenders for the party’s nomination, they opted not to campaign during the primary season because

¹³ Ibid, October 13, 1959.

¹⁴ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 138.

¹⁵ Many high-ranking Democrats believed Johnson was the leading contender for the party’s nomination because of his status as Senate Majority Leader, Despite his national popularity, he did not poll well in West Virginia. A number of Gallup polls reflected Johnson’s unpopularity in the state, and a poll

they would have the most to lose by a poor showing. Johnson and Symington supporters hoped Humphrey could defeat Kennedy in key primaries thereby crushing Kennedy's chances and forcing him to withdraw from the race.

By late January, only Humphrey had announced plans to enter the West Virginia Primary, and he challenged Kennedy to do the same.¹⁶ According to a January 29 article in the *Martinsburg Journal*, "Kennedy indicated that he would stay out of the election," despite Humphrey's argument that "West Virginia offered a better cross-section test than Midwestern primaries."¹⁷ Kennedy aide Theodore Sorensen pointed out, "The West Virginia Primary had been of no historical importance. Its voters are not typical of the country. Its outcome was not binding on its delegates. The delegation itself was not large. And Senators Johnson and Symington, with no campaign at all, were certain to have many of that delegation's votes."¹⁸

Humphrey attempted to bait Kennedy into accepting his challenge in West Virginia because the young, Catholic Senator did not poll well in the state. "We'll be dealing with real Democrats, not those one day Democrats," said Humphrey in response to West Virginia's law forbidding crossover voting. Kennedy biographer Victor Lasky noted that Humphrey believed West Virginia could be the best chance to knock Kennedy

conducted by Senator Byrd's office showed that only one in four Democrats in the areas surrounding Beckley would vote for Johnson. As the frontrunner, Johnson would have the most to lose by entering the primaries. As a result, Johnson did not formally announce his candidacy until one week before the convention.

¹⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 123.

¹⁷ *Martinsburg Journal*, January 29, 1960.

¹⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 138.

out of the race because, “there is tremendous apathy among this election in lower income groups- almost half of them undecided in a Kennedy-Humphrey race.”¹⁹

With only registered Democrats voting in the primary, Kennedy’s universal popularity and money might not prove as decisive a factor as it could in other primaries, and Kennedy’s religious affiliation coupled with his perceived inability to relate to the plight of West Virginians might be too much to overcome.

Because no other major candidate had any intention of entering the primary, Kennedy realized that a victory in West Virginia could force Humphrey out of the race as well as build a base of support among rural farmers and labor unions, two very important groups that Kennedy would need if he wanted to be his party’s nominee. On February 4, Kennedy officially filed to enter the West Virginia Primary.²⁰ With earlier victories over Humphrey in the New Hampshire and Wisconsin primaries, Kennedy had built some much-needed momentum going into the West Virginia contest.

The Kennedy team faced a number of political hurdles in the early days of the campaign. Almost from the beginning, the young Senator faced a strong contingent of ‘anti-Kennedy’ campaigners who believed that his candidacy would die in West Virginia. Because neither Johnson nor Symington had planned to run in the primary, many of their supporters campaigned for Humphrey. Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, a Johnson supporter, backed Humphrey by stating, “If you are for Adlai Stevenson, Senator Stuart Symington, Senator Johnson, or John Doe, this may be your last chance to stop

¹⁹ Laskey, *JFK*, 339.

²⁰ *New York Times*, Feb 5, 1960.

Kennedy.” Kennedy fought back by stating that the people of West Virginia “should be more interested in stopping Nixon.”²¹

Humphrey benefited early on from the initial lack of popularity of Senator Kennedy in West Virginia. With early polls showing Humphrey with a nearly 2-1 advantage in the mountain state, the Kennedy team attempted to devise a campaign strategy that would emphasize unique benefits that West Virginians would gain if the Senator from Massachusetts became president. U.S. Congressmen Ken Hechler, Harley Staggers, and Cleve Bailey sent a joint memo to the Kennedy campaign outlining what they felt would be key issues in the upcoming primary in some of the more distressed areas of West Virginia. According to the memo, “Unemployment is a problem,” and any successful candidate “needs to promote tourism and the development of new industry.” The memo also described the sentiments that many West Virginians held toward welfare, “They want jobs not doles...They think it (doles) is a blow to local pride...West Virginians are a proud and sensitive group who want outsiders to acknowledge that the state’s unemployment burden hurts all the nation.”²²

The leaders of the Kennedy campaign also obtained some understanding of West Virginian’s attitudes from state newspapers. “West Virginians are a proud decent and conscientious people,” wrote West Virginia native Holmes Alexander in the *Morgantown Post*. “They do not like the ‘Tobacco Road’ image of their state as given in the faceless statistics of low income and persistent unemployment. Hard up they may be, but West Virginians object to being pointed at. They loathe being pitched.”²³

²¹ Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 141.

²² Chuck Daley, “Memo to Mike Feldman,” April 6, 1960.

Kennedy acknowledged the sentiments of many West Virginians at a press conference in Charleston, West Virginia when he pledged to “work increasingly for more economic development...This will not be done through relief, but through area redevelopment. Not through doles, but social insurance.”²⁴ The next day, at a reception in Beckley Kennedy asked, “Why should one state prosper while another suffers...The (Eisenhower) administration is talking about prosperity, but they haven’t been to West Virginia. The state has been forgotten in the White House.”²⁵

Kennedy presented a detailed outline of his program for West Virginia in a speech in Wayne on April 25, 1960. In the speech Kennedy stressed the need to increase unemployment benefits and modernize food distribution. He outlined a plan to create a youth conservation corps to give jobs to young West Virginians and to improve the infrastructure within the state. Kennedy also discussed the need to “develop steam plants in West Virginia to better utilize coal extraction. In a speech at Bethany College two days later, Kennedy stated, “We are failing to provide for those who have too little. We are increasing our wealth, but we are failing to use that great wealth to meet the urgent needs of millions of our citizens and the demands of our growing nation.”²⁶

Humphrey had also urged the creation of a youth conservation corps, an area re-development bill, improvement of infrastructure, economic growth, and more jobs.²⁷ Although few West Virginians could see any real difference in the key issues emphasized

²³ Holmes Alexander, *Morgantown Post*, April 28, 1960.

²⁴ John Kennedy, “Press Conference, Charleston, West Virginia.” April 11, 1960.

²⁵ John Kennedy, “Remarks at Reception in Beckley, West Virginia,” April 12, 1960.

²⁶ John Kennedy, Speech at Wayne County,” April 25, 1960. “Speech at Bethany College,” April 27, 1960.

²⁷ *Charleston Gazette*, March 24, 1960.

by the two candidates, Kennedy had one weapon the Humphrey did not. While the relationship between the Kennedy and the Roosevelt families dated back more than twenty years, to the days of Joe Kennedy and President Franklin Roosevelt, the connection that many West Virginians felt to President Roosevelt was even stronger. During the Great Depression, employment in West Virginia coalmines dropped 28% while overall production decreased 40%. Wages in other industries also dropped considerably while thousands more faced losing their farms for nonpayment of taxes. During the first four years of the Depression, President Hoover's administration seemed unable to curtail the continued economic decline. According to Otis Rice, "Neither federal nor state governments provided effective responses to the Depression. Both were attuned to the laissez-faire doctrines of the 1920s."²⁸

The election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 brought a significant change in federal policies and helped raise the spirits of struggling Americans. John E. Mendez, a former Logan County miner and union official, recalls that:

"During the depression, the miners were practically slaving. There was no union at the time. They were lucky if they could get a dollar scrip a day. In 1933, when F.D.R. was elected, immediately he revised this country and he gave us confidence and was bringing us out of the dark days of the twenties and into a new world."²⁹

Under the Roosevelt administration West Virginia received nearly \$51 million from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and millions more for projects from other public newly established agencies such as the Civil Works Administration, Public Works

²⁸ Rice, *West Virginia*, 266-267.

²⁹ John E. Mendez, Interview with Author, 21 April 2002. Mendez was born in 1923 on Malakoff, Texas and his family moved to Logan, West Virginia in 1926. He began working in the coalmines in 1942. After a three-year absence from the mines in which he served in Europe during World War II, Mendez returned to the coalmines in 1945 because few other opportunities existed. In 1946, he was elected financial secretary in Local Union 5922. Mendez served 57 years as a union officer in Southern West Virginia before retiring in 1993.

Administration, and the Works Progress Administration. As a result of Roosevelt's New Deal Policies, nearly 125,000 West Virginians found employment between 1933-1936. West Virginians showed their appreciation at the polls as Roosevelt received more than 55% of the vote in the 1936, 40, and 1944 elections.³⁰ The policies of Franklin Roosevelt and the "New Deal" marked one of the first times that a presidential administration demonstrated concern for the poor of West Virginia.

Less than thirty years had passed since Roosevelt's last administration and some West Virginians still felt a connection to the 'New Deal.' Former Congressman Ken Hechler states, "In the coal fields, there's usually three photographs on miners' walls; John L. Lewis, Jesus Christ, and Franklin D. Roosevelt."³¹ As a result of this connection between West Virginians and President Roosevelt, Kennedy enlisted the aid of Franklin Roosevelt Jr. to help in his primary campaign. According to Hechler:

"(Roosevelt Jr.'s) voice sounded a great deal like his father, it conjured up images of the tremendous influence that Roosevelt's policies had had in West Virginia in terms of Social Security and many other New Deal programs that have helped so many people in this state and have actually changed West Virginia from a Republican state to a Democratic state, which its been ever since."³²

In speeches throughout West Virginia, Kennedy continually compared his future presidency to the "administration in the great New Deal tradition of Roosevelt"³³ and stated that "Now is the time for another New Deal in Washington."³⁴ The Kennedy campaign also ensured that Franklin Roosevelt Jr. remained a visible and outspoken

³⁰ Rice, *West Virginia*, 268. In 1936, Roosevelt received 55% of West Virginia's total votes. In 1940, 57% and 1944, 56% voted for the President.

³¹ Hechler, Interview with Author.

³² Ibid.

³³ John Kennedy, "Remarks at Reception, Beckley, West Virginia," April 12, 1960.

³⁴ John Kennedy, "Campaign Speech," April 29, 1960.

member of the campaign. While Kennedy himself never personally attacked Humphrey, he allowed Roosevelt to publicize the fact that Humphrey was not a veteran. Because nearly 35% of West Virginians were veterans, Kennedy allowed Roosevelt to contrast the candidate's reputation as a hero in World War II to Humphrey's lack of military experience. In one such speech Roosevelt called Kennedy "the only war wounded veteran" and added, "There's another candidate in your primary. He's a good Democrat, but I don't know where he was during World War II."³⁵

Although these tactics helped attract the veteran vote within West Virginia, they had serious repercussions throughout the rest of the nation. The *Washington Post* called it "a new low in dirt politics... If Mr. Roosevelt does not think these really are the facts, that is one thing. But to simply say that 'I don't know where he was in World War II' is a slur which all decent people will resent."³⁶ After nearly two weeks of negative criticism in the press concerning Roosevelt's comments, Kennedy publicly declared, "Any discussion of the war record of Senator Humphrey was done without my knowledge and consent, as I strongly disapprove the injection of this issue into the campaign."³⁷ Despite the smear tactics, the presence of the Roosevelt name helped add a sense of legitimacy to the Kennedy campaign. With Roosevelt in their corner strongly promoting the candidate's war record, the Kennedy team could focus on more pressing campaign issues.

Although the candidates' platforms and political associations would no doubt play a crucial role in how West Virginians would vote in the primary, the rest of the country

³⁵ Laskey *JFK*, 344. There is some debate as to who actually allowed FDR Jr. to openly attack Humphrey's war record. According to Dan Fleming, the evidence points to Robert Kennedy. He reportedly sent Roosevelt materials outlining Humphrey's lack of service and requested that he hit the issue hard while stumping through West Virginia. Fleming, *Kennedy vs Humphrey*,

³⁶ *Washington Post*, April 28, 1960

³⁷ *Washington Post*, May 7, 1960.

paid close attention to the religious issue. Despite Kennedy's initial attempts to focus on economic issues, his religious affiliation remained the dominant issue throughout the primary. Joseph Kennedy had voiced disapproval of his son entering the West Virginia primary because he thought the religious issue would be too much to overcome. Many other leading Democrats shared the elder Kennedy's belief that West Virginia was a "nothing state and they'll kill the Catholic thing."³⁸

Many West Virginians shared Joe Kennedy's sentiments. According to John Mendez, "A Catholic was not very well known or liked. The first thing everyone talked about when he announced he wanted to be president was his religion." Although religion did not play a critical role in previous primaries, it would no doubt be crucial in West Virginia where nearly 94% of the voting population professed a Protestant faith. James Young, a Catholic Conservative and editor of the *Parkersburg News* stated that Humphrey would win in West Virginia because religion and labor "can deliver a hell of a vote... West Virginians will either bury their prejudice or they will bury John Fitzgerald Kennedy."³⁹

By the time of the primary, the entire nation had weighed in on the role that religion would play in West Virginia. The *Washington Post* predicted a Humphrey victory in West Virginia due to the "issue of religion."⁴⁰ Because of the close attention focused on Kennedy's religion in West Virginia, the rest of the nation paid increasing attention to news articles coming out of the state. The West Virginia *Hillbilly*, edited by

³⁸ Benjamin Bradlee, ed, *Conversations with Kennedy*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1975), 35.

³⁹ Fleming, *Kennedy vs Humphrey*, 39.

⁴⁰ *Washington Post*, May 4, 1960.

the flamboyant Jim Comstock printed the story, “Pa Ain’t Going to Sell No Vote to No Catholic.”⁴¹ Although the story was a satirical look at both the state’s election process and the nation’s perception of West Virginians as religious bigots, the *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, *New York World Tribune*, and *New York Times* and a number of other major papers printed this article as an editorial reflection of the sentiments of West Virginians. Most newspapers, with the exception of the *Tribune*, later printed a retraction.⁴²

According to Ken Hechler, Kennedy needed to assure West Virginians that any rumors that, “the Pope would rule (Kennedy) in the White House were hogwash and that he was an American and would stand up for the principles of peace and justice.”⁴³ He gained support from a number of Protestant ministers, not just in West Virginia but throughout the country, who signed a petition that called for religious toleration during the elections.⁴⁴

As Kennedy spent more time in West Virginia, his rhetoric concerning the Catholic issue became more assertive and straightforward. In a brochure that circulated throughout West Virginia, Kennedy stated, “There are people who would not give me a chance... simply because I attend the church of my parents...When I swore to preserve, protect, and defend the constitution (during World War II), no one said my religion made

⁴¹ Jim Comstock, “Pa Ain’t Going to Sell No Vote to No Catholic.” In *Pa and Ma and Mister Kennedy*. (Richwood, West Virginia: Appalachian Press, 1965),7-12.

⁴² Laskey, *J.F.K.*, 141.

⁴³ Hechler, Interview with Author.

⁴⁴ Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc), 34.

me ineligible.”⁴⁵ At a news conference in Washington D.C. on April 21, Kennedy proclaimed, “I am not the Catholic candidate for President.”⁴⁶

His tactics worked. According to Ken Hechler, Kennedy addressed the religious issue “very directly and very persuasively,” and this helped to downplay the issue in the minds of many West Virginians.⁴⁷ The focus could be shifted away from religion and to other issues, and more importantly, to the men themselves.

Throughout the campaign, the Kennedy team sought ways to help their candidate connect better with the people of West Virginia. In a letter to Kennedy aid Ted Sorenson, Kennedy supporter Robert Wallace stated, “I think JFK’s speeches should show a heartfelt feeling for the people of West Virginia,” with the main aim being to paint a “picture of a man who can help them. The religious issue is nothing compared to help for them.”⁴⁸ While early polls showed that Humphrey had a substantial lead on Kennedy, the more time Kennedy spent in West Virginia the more the people liked him and believed he truly did want to help them.⁴⁹ According to Mendez:

“We had a lot of labor problems, especially when Kennedy came into the fields. There were thousands of miners that were cut off from the workforce. He came in here and the first thing he did was to tell the miners that he would improve their working conditions...His theme was that, in a voice that was so convincing because of his Irish accent, he said that no one should live like this. People believed that he was sincere when he told them he would help them.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ John Kennedy, “Brochure of War Record Program,” April 18, 1960.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, April 22, 1960.

⁴⁷ Hechler, Interview with Author.

⁴⁸ Robert Wallace, “Memo to Ted Sorenson,” April 26, 1960.

⁴⁹ Dan Fleming, Jr, *Kennedy vs. Humphrey*, 41.

⁵⁰ Mendez, Interview with Author.

During a campaign speech outside the coalmines in Slab Fork, West Virginia one of the miners asked, “Is this true Senator Kennedy that you’ve never worked a day in your life?” Kennedy laughed and replied “Well I guess there’s some truth to that,” and the miner then said, “Well you haven’t missed a goddamn thing.”⁵¹ Mendez heard Kennedy speak at a rally in Logan County. “He was the kind of guy that broke away from the security, and he would just mingle with the people just like he was one of us,” said Mendez, “The people really loved him, they believed in him. I don’t think you will find a coal miner today who will say a bad thing about Kennedy.”⁵² Kennedy’s New England accent, clean-cut image, and youthful good looks helped build a sense of trust with West Virginians. His charismatic personality built a following of loyal supporters throughout the state.

Kennedy also gained followers in West Virginia because of the way he answered questions. “Kennedy, speaking in softer tones and shorter answers, without notes,” said Theodore Sorenson, “scored with local illustrations and specifics aimed chiefly at West Virginia.”⁵³ According to Ken Hechler, he addressed the difficult questions from West Virginians just as directly as he attacked the religious issue in the early weeks of the campaign. At a campaign speech in Welch, West Virginia a department store owner told Kennedy that if his plan for raising the minimum wage became law, he would have to lay off his employees. “Kennedy looked at him and said, ‘well I guess you and I disagree on

⁵¹ Hechler, Interview with Author.

⁵² Mendez, Interview with Author.

⁵³ Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 140-141.

this issue,' and the crowd applauded because they'd never heard a politician talk that directly and they really appreciated that."⁵⁴

A number of other differences between Kennedy and Humphrey existed.

According to an April 1960 *New York Times* article,

"Senator Kennedy brings to the campaign a different kind of tirelessness than does Minnesota's Senator Humphrey. Senator Humphrey, an energetic political hummingbird, always nervously on the move, is up against a different kind of bird. Kennedy is a Robin, head cocked to one side, eyes carefully appraising the ground ahead, then, jump, jump, jump, moving in quickly to strike hard."⁵⁵

An April 5 article in the *Martinsburg Journal* presented additional advantages that Kennedy possessed: "Kennedy's mass of tousled hair, like the late William E. Borah's lion-like mane and George Norris's ribbon neckties provides an easily remembered trademark. Hubert Humphrey has none of these. He is nasal and rasping of voice, and ponderously longwinded. He has covered much of the same speaking ground which Kennedy has stumped, but his crowds have only been about a quarter as large and he does not have the hail-fellow technique that Kennedy has with strangers."⁵⁶

By May, Kennedy had narrowed the gap between the two candidates. Nevertheless the *New York Times* noted that, "Every political sign points to a victory by Senator Hubert Humphrey."⁵⁷ Kennedy's future political opponent disagreed. Three days before the May 10th primary, an article in the *Huntington Herald Dispatch* reported, "Vice President and Republican Presidential candidate Richard Nixon believes Senator

⁵⁴ Hechler, Interview with Author.

⁵⁵ *New York Times*, April 23, 1960.

⁵⁶ *Martinsburg Journal*, April 5, 1960.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, May 9, 1960

Kennedy will sew up the nomination in next weeks (West Virginia) primary... He is convinced that his opponent for 1960 will be chosen there.”⁵⁸

When the polls closed in West Virginia on the evening of May 10th, Kennedy and his wife were waiting out the election returns with friends in Georgetown, Maryland. When news reached the party that he would be declared the winner, Kennedy and his family quickly boarded their private plane, the *Caroline*, and headed to Charleston, West Virginia for the victory speech.

The margin of Kennedy’s victory in West Virginia was nearly as significant as the victory itself. The 61-39 percent margin, “buried (the Catholic issue) in the state of West Virginia,” and Humphrey decided to drop out of the presidential race altogether.⁵⁹ Kennedy’s stunning victory had demonstrated overwhelmingly that the winner’s religion was much less important to voters than the promise to help the state overcome its serious social and economic problems.

Other factors helped Kennedy in West Virginia. According to Ken Hechler, Kennedy had an advantage because the entire Kennedy family, including his wife Jackie, and his brothers Bobby and Ted, and several members of his extended family actively campaigned in West Virginia during the primary. Humphrey had only his wife to represent him as family during the campaign. Kennedy’s family helped provide a certain sense of unity and stability that Humphrey lacked: “Non family members of a presidential staff are constantly elbowing their way for some preference and if you have

⁵⁸ *Huntington Herald Dispatch*, May 7, 1960

⁵⁹ Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 146.

family members like Kennedy did, there's no question about their loyalty and their dedication."⁶⁰

Kennedy and his staff and family were also more efficient and more effective than Humphrey at campaigning. The Kennedy team would have strategy sessions in which they determined what they needed to do and who they needed to talk to in each part of the state ⁶¹ Moreover, as an April 5, article in the *Martinsburg Journal* pointed out, "Kennedy and his campaign have done a saturation job of campaigning, at which they are highly adept."⁶² In addition, "The 'Kennedy Clan' as the group was often referred to, knew how and where to bring pressure ... Whatever was needed in order to win votes was provided no matter what the cost or the time it took to accomplish the task."⁶³

Some observers were convinced that Kennedy's victory in West Virginia was attributable to the fact that Kennedy had deeper pockets than Humphrey. According to Lester Perry, Kennedy decided to run in West Virginia because, "it was determined that (he) could win with the proper amount of money."⁶⁴ Hubert Humphrey agreed. "I don't have a daddy who can pay the bills for me, stated Humphrey, "I can't run around this state with a little black bag and a checkbook. I don't think elections should be bought. They're spending with wild abandon."⁶⁵ Humphrey denounced Kennedy for lavish spending throughout the campaign. Journalists in West Virginia also linked Kennedy's

⁶⁰ Hechler, Interview with Author.

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² *Martinsburg Journal*, April 5, 1960.

⁶³ Perry, *Forty Years of Mountain Politics*, 102.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 101.

⁶⁵ Lasky, *JFK*, 343.

victories in other states to his money. A *Martinsburg Journal* article reported that during the Wisconsin Primary “Kennedy admittedly has spent 70 thousand dollars—slightly more than Hubert Humphrey has for the entire pre-convention campaign— and the true figure, if all attendant and unofficial costs could be reckoned, would probably run more than twice that.”⁶⁶

The large sums of money being spent by the Kennedy campaign both to promote the candidate to the masses and to secure placement on specific slates, coupled with the traditional methods of politics practiced in southern West Virginia did, however, eventually create problems for Kennedy. After the West Virginian primary, the Kennedy team faced accusations of vote buying and mafia connections and many anti-Kennedy state and national leaders called for an investigation. Bobby Kennedy came to the defense of his brother. “They can investigate until doomsday and they won’t find anything wrong with our operation,” said Bobby. “I can’t vouch for everyone who was for Kennedy in West Virginia, but there was absolutely no vote buying for Kennedy with Kennedy money. There may have been some vote buying for some people with whiskey, money, or both, but they weren’t votes for us and it wasn’t our whiskey and it wasn’t our money.” Ted Sorensen also defended Kennedy by stating that the accusations against his boss were false. “Several newspapers, the supporters of other Democratic candidates, and the Republican Department of Justice all combed West Virginia for proof of irregularities,” stated Sorensen. “They found as was customary in West Virginia, some vote-buying for local candidates and slates; and Kennedy campaign money may have been diverted to this use. But no evidence could be found of Kennedy’s buying popular

⁶⁶ *Martinsburg Journal*, April 5, 1960.

votes, for none had ever existed.”⁶⁷ According to John Kennedy, “We carried 49 out of 55 counties in West Virginia while people slated with us were being defeated. It was a clear statewide sweep and you can’t do that with money alone.”⁶⁸ The *Charleston Gazette* supported Kennedy’s claim. “We sent two of our best men out. They spent the last three or four weeks checking. Kennedy did not buy that election. He sold himself to the voters.”⁶⁹

Despite the use of slates in West Virginia, Kennedy still had to demonstrate that he could win the election. Local candidates would not want to risk losing the election by aligning themselves with a candidate that had no chance of winning.

Kennedy did not have much time to celebrate his upset victory in West Virginia. As the *Clarksburg Exponent* reported, “(the victory) gave Kennedy a clear shot, (it was) nothing more than a popularity contest and should have no real bearing on the election.”⁷⁰ With Humphrey out of the race, Kennedy could now focus on Lyndon Johnson. In the two months before the Democratic National Convention Kennedy swept the last five primaries he entered and traveled to Los Angeles as the leading contender for his party’s nomination. Kennedy confirmed his new status on the first ballot vote of the convention as he soundly defeated Johnson 806-409 to secure the Democratic nomination for President.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 146.

⁶⁸ Fleming, *Kennedy vs Humphrey*, 152.

⁶⁹ *Charleston Gazette*, June 4, 1960.

⁷⁰ *Clarksburg Exponent*, May 12, 1960.

⁷¹ *Washington Post*, July 14, 1960.

The road to the White House would prove more difficult as the Republicans selected Vice-President Richard Nixon to oppose Kennedy. Nixon was a shrewd and experienced politician who knew how to play the political game, but he lacked certain characteristics that Kennedy possessed. The young Senator's youthful good looks, charm, and charisma sharply contrasted with Nixon's dark, brooding, almost shady appearance and in the first nationally televised debate in history, Kennedy emerged as the more physically appealing candidate.

In the national election, Nixon refused to make religion an issue. According to Victor Laskey:

“From the day of (Kennedy's) nomination, Nixon laid down the firm line that no one directly or indirectly connected with his campaign should initiate or even engage in any discussion of the religious issue. He made it clear that he did not believe that Kennedy's Catholicism should be an obstacle to his serving as President. He also proclaimed his faith in Kennedy's unqualified and undivided loyalty to America's interests and to the constitution. He called for an end to the discussion.”⁷²

Although the nation was experiencing an economic downturn, the public became focused on foreign policy issues during the campaign. The two candidates' views on the spread of Communism in South East Asia and Cuba played as critical a role as domestic issues among voters in 1960.

In one of the closest elections in American history, the nation elected John F. Kennedy president by less than 1% of the total vote. Although the *New York Times* supported Kennedy, it also lauded the closeness of the election. “We think it is a good thing that the election was so close. It should serve as a restraining force, as a reminder

⁷² Laskey, *JFK*, 484.

to the Kennedy administration that it should proceed with caution and that it has no mandate to embark on drastic changes of policy, either foreign or domestic.”⁷³

In West Virginia, Kennedy received nearly 53% of the total vote. Kennedy’s popularity within the state led many county Democratic Executive Committees to attach the Kennedy name to their ‘slate’ of local candidates. As a result, the slate process which was widely used in elections in southern and central West Virginia, helped bring victory to many Democrats who sought to attach their name to the popular presidential candidate. In the Governor’s race, William Wallace Barron defeated the Republican challenger by more than 66,000 votes, and the Democratic incumbent Jennings Randolph defeated former Governor Cecil Underwood for the United States Senate. Democrats also secured eighty-two of the one-hundred seats in the House of Delegates and twelve of the sixteen state senate seats at stake during the election.⁷⁴

As the president-elect prepared for the next administration, the lack of a clear mandate by the people coupled with the current state of foreign affairs made it difficult for the new administration to focus solely on the country’s economic conditions. However, Kennedy had made a number of campaign promises to help the people of West Virginia, but it was still not clear whether or not the young President would possess the political support to follow through on his bold promises.

The Kennedy campaign brought to national attention the widespread poverty in West Virginia. Because both the nation and the Kennedy campaign focused so much attention on West Virginia during the 1960 primary, any change in the economic conditions within the state could serve as a political barometer of the President’s ability

⁷³ *New York Times*, November 10, 1960.

⁷⁴ Rice, *West Virginia: A History*, 282.

to deliver on his promises and his overall performance concerning domestic economic policy. If the public viewed Kennedy as a failure on either of these issues, then the 1964 election could prove disastrous for Kennedy.

There is no doubt that West Virginia played a vital role in the successful effort of John F. Kennedy to reach the White House. However, questions remain as to the extent to which Kennedy's visits to West Virginia affected his thinking as well as the extent to which West Virginia benefited from the policies of the Kennedy administration.

*“All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the lifetime of this administration, not even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin anew.”*¹

John F. Kennedy

*“We will be aided in every possible way by our national administration. President-elect Kennedy has already begun plans to honor the campaign commitments he made to our citizens. With Washington and Charleston teaming together, we have a sense of unity and purpose.”*²

William Wallace Barron

Chapter IV

In early 1961, West Virginians experienced a sense of optimism as John F. Kennedy took the oath of office as President of the United States. The ‘New Frontier’ that Kennedy so eloquently and passionately discussed reminded many of Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ and West Virginians showed their support for his ideas in record numbers. More than 75% of the total voting age population voted in the national election, the highest total in West Virginia in 20 years and 15% higher than the national average. Although West Virginia traditionally has a higher voter turnout than the rest of the country, the 1960 election reflected approximately an 8% higher voter turnout than all other Presidential elections between 1944 and 1968.³ Because such large numbers of West Virginians voted in the 1960 election and because the Kennedy campaign network extended into areas never before exposed to a presidential election, many voters felt they

¹ John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” Washington D.C., January 20, 1961.

² William Wallace Barron, “West Virginia Governor’s Inaugural Address,” January 16, 1961.

³ John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A History for Beginners*. (Martinsburg, West Virginia, Appalachian Editions, 1997), 190.

had a personal connection to the new administration. This chapter will examine the personal and political relationship that developed between Kennedy and West Virginians as a result of the presidential primary as well as the policies enacted by the new administration aimed at providing relief to the state.

While Kennedy made a number of campaign promises to West Virginians during the 1960 primary, he had to contend with a series of both foreign and domestic problems in the early months of his presidency. Although the country was experiencing an economic recession, Congress displayed more concern about the impending Soviet threat and the fear of the spread of Communism into Cuba and Southeast Asia than about the lingering economic crises in depressed and rural areas and this proved to be a major problem for Kennedy's domestic policy agenda. According to James Tobin, Economic Advisor to President Kennedy:

“When Kennedy came into office, there was always hope that there would be a change from the Eisenhower economic policies, and half of Kennedy favored that, but he was afraid of offending two establishments: the Conservative Democrats in the Congress and the wider financial establishment. He had been a junior Senator, and in the minds of many of the older Democratic Committee Chairman, he was an upstart. Those of us at the council were disappointed by his caution at the beginning of the administration. We were trying to persuade the President to be more audacious in economic policy.”⁴

In his first State of the Union Address, President Kennedy stated, “Our recovery from the 1958 recession... was anemic and incomplete. Our gross national product never regained its full attention. Unemployment never returned to normal levels. Maximum use of our national industrial capacity was never restored. In short, the American economy is in trouble.” With more than five million Americans without jobs, Kennedy focused his initial attention on the economic problems plaguing the entire nation rather

⁴ James Tobin, Interview with Gerald Strober, December 17, 1991. In *Let Us Begin Anew: An Oral History of the Kennedy Presidency*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 243. Tobin served as a member of the Council of Economic Advisors from 1961-1962.

than on alleviating the problems in one specific region. Despite the national economic crises Kennedy did acknowledge that, “Nearly one eighth of those who live without jobs live almost without hope in nearly one hundred especially depressed and troubled areas.”⁵

With economic problems affecting all areas of the country, Kennedy needed to address the state of the national economy while at the same time tailoring legislation specifically for West Virginia and the surrounding Appalachian region. According to Theodore Sorensen, “(Kennedy’s) experiences in ... West Virginia made him more attuned to specific solutions for specific problems; depressed areas, untrained workers, substandard wages. But he recognized that both the general economy and the specific problems had to be treated.” Sorensen added, “As jobs increased in new industries and service establishments, they decreased in old industries – coal, textiles, railroads, and others. The economists called it ‘structural unemployment.’ The pessimists said it was unavoidable, and after each recession it grew worse.”⁶

During his campaign, John Kennedy made a number of promises to provide economic assistance to West Virginia and he attempted to follow through on those promises. Even before he took the oath of office, Kennedy appointed a task force headed by U.S. Senators Robert C. Byrd and Jennings Randolph, both from West Virginia, to put together a plan for economic recovery in the state and the rest of the Appalachian region.⁷ They constructed the “Area Redevelopment Act,” which Kennedy supported in a February 2, 1961 message to Congress. With this act Kennedy wanted to “establish an

⁵ John Kennedy, “State of the Union Address, January 30, 1960.” In *Let the Word Go Forth: The Speeches, Statements and Writings of John F. Kennedy, 1947-1963*. (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1988.),148-49.

⁶ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 401.

⁷ Hechler, *West Virginia Memories of President Kennedy*. (United States: Printed at private expense), 23.

effective program to alleviate conditions of substantial and persistent unemployment and underdevelopment in economically distressed areas.”⁸ One of the most important elements of the Area Redevelopment Act was the creation of the Area Development Administration. According to President Kennedy, this new government agency would “relieve unemployment and spur economic expansion in those areas of the country which have failed to share fully in the economic gains of the recovery from the 1958 recession... The jobs created will be made available to the maximum feasible extent to the unemployed within the eligible communities.”⁹

When passed, the Area Redevelopment Act provided federal money for a ‘Rural Electrification Program’ that helped bring electric power to many depressed areas and called for the use of federal money to aid low-income families and small farms.¹⁰ Some presidential advisors like Arthur Schlesinger saw the act as a “program of welfare... but not a program of economic recovery.”¹¹ Despite such criticism, West Virginia received millions of dollars in federal aid to bring electricity into homes that had never had it before and to bring economic relief to thousands of people who were living below the poverty line.

While the Kennedy administration pushed for a number of legislative measures that attempted to raise the standard of living in West Virginia, one of the more crippling

⁸ John F. Kennedy, Public Law 87-27; Area Redevelopment Act. In *U.S. Statutes at Large; 87th Congress, 1st Session Volume 75*. (Washington D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1962), 61.

⁹ John F. Kennedy, “President’s New Conference, September 14, 1962.”

¹⁰ U.S. Congress. “Public Law 87-27: Area Redevelopment Act.” In *U.S. Statutes at Large; 87th Congress, 1st Session Volume 75*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1962), 61-64.

¹¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 629.

problems facing the state was the lack of employment opportunities. More than 9% of West Virginians experienced unemployment and Kennedy attempted to address the needs of the chronically unemployed through several bills. Passed in March of 1962, the Manpower Retraining Act provided \$435 million for training programs to alleviate long-term unemployment for persons with a net income of less than \$1,200. The act affected primarily those families in areas of chronic unemployment and small rural farm families who could not survive the worsening conditions within the agricultural economy. The act also ensured that retraining would be provided for jobless victims of automation such as miners displaced by the mechanization of the coalfields. The Manpower Act created 138 programs in 20 states, including 10 programs in West Virginia. According to President Kennedy, "I consider the Manpower Retraining Act of 1962 to be one of the most important issues ever passed by Congress. It is a bill which will eliminate waste of our human resources wherever it may occur throughout our nation."¹³

On July 26, 1962, Kennedy signed the first public welfare legislation since 1935. The bill provided, "services instead of support, rehabilitation instead of relief, and training and useful work instead of dependency."¹⁴ Representing West Virginia, U.S. Senator Jennings Randolph wanted to ensure that his state received the lion's share of funds allocated for this bill. At the time, Kennedy attempted to push both the Public Welfare and the Medicare Bills. Randolph, a Democrat, feared that the controversy surrounding Medicare would distract from welfare and he began to publicly discuss the possibility that he would vote against the President and other Democrats to save the Welfare Bill. Senator Robert Kerr, a high-ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance

¹³ John F. Kennedy, "President's New Conference, March 16, 1962."

¹⁴ Ibid, 157.

Committee and leader of the Medicare opposition, promised to channel more money to West Virginia if Randolph voted with him. The senator from West Virginia agreed. As a result West Virginia received more funds than the original allocation and the Medicare bill for which Kennedy so desperately fought failed to make it out of the Senate.¹⁵ This move reflects the growing influence that the West Virginia Congressional delegation had in fostering change within their state. The funds being diverted to the state elevated the status of West Virginia's legislators and gave them the economic leverage necessary to bring money to the state without relying solely on the President.

Despite Randolph's failure to support a key 'New Frontier' piece of legislation, President Kennedy continued to divert federal money to West Virginia. In September 1962, the Kennedy administration implemented the Accelerated Public Works Program, which allocated \$900 million to initiate or accelerate public works programs in areas of chronic unemployment. According to stipulations established by the Commerce Department any areas that experienced at least 9% unemployment during the twelve-month period before the implementation of this program would qualify for program funds. Because the unemployment rate in West Virginia had remained at or above 9% for more than three years, the Commerce Department allocated more than 10% of the funds from the Public Works Program for projects within the state.

Kennedy pushed forward with more measures. He realized that in the "past seven years the growth rate has slowed considerably" and he knew that in areas of traditional economic distress conditions would be even more difficult.¹⁶ Kennedy unveiled the Pilot

¹⁵ Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 344.

¹⁶ Kennedy, "Message to Congress on Economic Recovery and Growth, February 2, 1961." *Public Papers of the Presidents; JFK, 1961*, 290.

Food Stamp program during a news conference to assist people in “areas of maximum chronic unemployment.” Kennedy said that West Virginia had been selected as one of five states that would be a part of the program, and he asked Congress to consider allocating excess farm subsidies to areas that were experiencing economic distress.¹⁷

Kennedy wanted to “utilize more effectively our agricultural productive capacity to improve the diets of the nation’s needy persons.”¹⁸ While campaigning in West Virginia the year before, Kennedy reportedly said to one of his aides “ just imagine kids who never drank milk.”¹⁹ The president attempted to fix this problem his first day on the job as he “ordered food distribution to the needy.”²⁰ According to Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Kennedy issued his first executive order, doubling the rations of food by the federal government to four million needy people across the nation; this was in response to his memories of West Virginia and the pitiful food rations doled out to the unemployed miners and their families.”²¹

¹⁷ John F. Kennedy, “President’s News Conference at the State Department Auditorium, February 2, 1961.” In *Public Papers of the Presidents*; JFK, 1961, 31.

¹⁸ “Letter to Senator Kennedy from James Haggerty,” April 28, 1960.

¹⁹ Hechler, *West Virginia Memories*, 27.

²⁰ *New York Times*, January 21, 1960.

²¹ Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 166.

The Agricultural Act of 1961 benefited West Virginia greatly because it provided for the distribution of surplus foods to impoverished areas of the state.²² Under the Eisenhower Administration, the Department of Agriculture donated \$380,000 in surplus foods to West Virginia for use in charitable institutions. During the Kennedy administration hungry West Virginians received nearly three times that amount.

Although President Kennedy attempted to improve the diets of West Virginians, other problems existed that made economic growth in the state almost impossible if they weren't resolved. When traveling on the poorly maintained, inadequate roads of West Virginia while campaigning in the state in 1960, Kennedy recognized the relationship between infrastructure and economic growth. According to a West Virginia Department of Transportation report:

“Historically, the region’s mountainous terrain has caused road construction to be an expensive undertaking. To minimize the cost, roads were built to follow the region’s topography, resulting in a highway system of winding roads following stream valleys and troughs between mountains, characterized by low travel speeds and long travel distances... With very few exceptions Appalachian communities were not able to compete for large employers due to poor access to national markets.”²³

With help from President Kennedy, the governors of Alabama, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia established the Conference of Appalachian Governors (CAG) to find ways to develop the region so it could compete nationally for industrial and commercial growth. The Conference concluded that roads needed to be constructed in areas of high growth potential, but had failed to experience the economic growth of comparable areas in other

²² “Public Law 87-128: Agricultural Act of 1961.” In *U.S. Statutes at Large; 87th Congress, 1st Session Volume 75*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1962.

²³ West Virginia Department of Transportation, *Characteristics and Usage: The Appalachian Highway System*. Charleston, West Virginia, 1998.

regions. After reviewing the Governors' conclusions, Kennedy established the President's Appalachian Regional Commission to be coordinated with the U.S. Department of Commerce in an attempt to find solutions to the region's lack of infrastructure. With the aid of the CAG and the Commerce Department, the President developed the Appalachian Highway system, a network of 'corridor highways' that connected distressed areas of Appalachia with the outside world for the purpose of spurring economic growth.²⁴

As a result, the federal government allocated funds for the construction of these corridor highways throughout the state. Because West Virginia is the only state to rest entirely within the borders of Appalachian the region, it received the most funds for the development of the Appalachian Highway system. More than \$1 Billion, or 23% of the total funds allocated for the system has been diverted to West Virginia for corridor road construction.²⁵ As of 1998, 440 miles of corridor roads had been built throughout the state.²⁶ While all of these newly constructed highways connected towns within the Appalachian region, Corridor E, which connected Morgantown, West Virginia with highways leading to Washington D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland, became one of the more important of these corridor highways because it provided a major transportation route for goods leaving the central region of the state. This highway later became part of the federal Interstate system as I-68.

²⁴ West Virginia Department of Transportation Planning and Research Division: Intermodel Special Projects Division. *West Virginia National Highway System Report*. Charleston, West Virginia.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ West Virginia Department of Transportation: Traffic Analysis Section, West Virginia Traffic Count File Summary Tables. Charleston, West Virginia: 2000.

Kennedy directed the Bureau of Public Roads to consider routes through West Virginia as part of the federal highway system. During the Kennedy administration the federal government allocated more than \$600 million for the construction of Interstate 81 that is a north-south route through the state's eastern panhandle, and Interstate 79, which connects Charleston, West Virginia with Pittsburgh Pennsylvania.²⁷ Bob McDonough, Kennedy's campaign organizer in West Virginia and later state Democratic Chairman, called the construction of I-79 the most important benefit the state received as a result of the Kennedy administration. McDonough died in 1965 and his ashes were scattered along the highway in accordance with his wishes.²⁸

Between 1961 and 1964, the federal government spent another \$53,000,000 on the construction and maintenance of highways in West Virginia. This massive effort by the federal government provided viable transportation routes that helped connect rural and distressed areas of West Virginia with the rest of the nation thereby providing these previously economically untapped regions with an opportunity for a tremendous growth in commerce and trade.

The federal funds that were being diverted to West Virginia for the development and maintenance of highways allowed the state legislature to allocate more money for other necessary projects. In 1960, the state legislature allocated 40% of the state's budget for highways, 30.4% for education, and only 18.8% for health and welfare.²⁹ By 1964,

²⁷ Fleming, *Kennedy vs Humphrey*, 168.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 167-168.

²⁹ Myers, *West Virginia Blue Book, 1960*, 899.

highway development received 30% of the budget while education received 33% and health and welfare received 24.1%.³⁰

West Virginians also benefited from the military contracts that were being diverted to the state during the Kennedy administration. In 1959, then Congressman Hechler made a number of speeches which emphasized the gap between West Virginia's per capita contributions to the armed forces and the number of military contracts that came to the state. Hechler ended every speech by saying "West Virginia, first in war, first in peace, and last in the hearts of the Pentagon."³¹ According to the 1960 Census, 35% of West Virginia's population could claim military veteran status, the highest percentage in the country. Yet West Virginia ranked last in military contracts awarded to the states.³² Kennedy recognized that West Virginia had given disproportionately to the armed forces and had received very little in return. In an April 20, 1960 campaign speech in Charleston, West Virginia, Kennedy reiterated Hechler's sentiments:

"We must direct all federal agencies, especially the defense department, to give special preference in awarding government contracts to areas of substantial unemployment... Today West Virginia which was first in proportion of its men who shed their blood in Korea, is last in the amount of money spent by the Pentagon."³³

Because of the relationship between Kennedy and Hechler and their mutual desire to improve the state's economic problems, West Virginia rose from last to 35th in military contracts during President Kennedy's administration.

The 1960 primary not only brought national attention to the impoverished economic conditions within West Virginia, but it also helped create the idea of an

³⁰ Myers, *West Virginia Blue Book 1964*, 920.

³¹ Hechler, Tape-recorded interview with author, 12 November 2001.

³² Bureau of the Census, *Summary of the Eighteenth Census*, S-51.

³³ John Kennedy, Speech, Charleston West Virginia, April 20 1961.

Appalachian identity. The pictures and articles that came out of the state as a result of the campaign spurred an interest in Appalachian culture and society. Natives of the state moved back home to reconnect with their ‘mountain roots’ and many writers, artists, lawyers, doctors, teachers and other professionals who were tired of the day to day grind of urban life moved to the small towns of West Virginia in an attempt to experience the romantic qualities of Appalachia made popular by national newspaper and magazine coverage during Kennedy’s visit.³⁴

Writers and scholars began focusing attention on this new idea of Appalachian identity by extolling the quaintness of life in the mountains. Published in 1969, James Craft’s *Wheels on the Mountain* is an autobiographical account of the life of a West Virginian who managed to overcome the limitations of a rural, mountain life and find success in the transportation industry in southern West Virginia.³⁵ Other writers helped promote the idea of being Appalachian. While more than five million people moved out of the state between 1950 and 1970, Andy Yale moved back to West Virginia to give his family a “different life.”³⁶ First Lady Jackie Kennedy helped foster this intellectual and cultural movement in support of all things Appalachian when she purchased glass for the White House that was manufactured in Morgantown, West Virginia by the traditional blowing techniques that had been utilized within the state for more than 140 years.³⁷

As people began moving back to West Virginia from the major population centers of the Midwest and northeast during the late 1960s, they brought with them the

³⁴ Williams, *West Virginia: A History for Beginners*, 193.

³⁵ James Craft, *Wheels on the Mountains*. (Parsons, West Virginia: McClain Publishing, 1969).

³⁶ Andy Yale, “Down Here on the Edge of Things.” In *The Nation*; November 20, 1989, 591.

³⁷ Rice, *West Virginia: The State and its People*, 264.

experience of city life that helped reshape rural Appalachian culture. A group of social scientists from across the region met in Morgantown to discuss the impact that these urbanized Appalachians who have returned to their native state to find their roots have had on the region's unique society and culture. According to the report from this meeting, "The sociocultural integration of rural Appalachia within the larger American society was occurring at a rapid rate... The influx of federal roads, the development of a regional highway system, marked improvements of local roads and transportation systems paved the way for the general diffusion of social and cultural changes."³⁸

Between 1960 and 1970 rural Appalachia had in a sense been infused with some of the trappings of modern society. This cultural modernization allowed West Virginia to adapt to the realities of mainstream American society to some extent, while at the same time maintaining a unique cultural heritage which people wanted to identify with for the first time or even reclaim as their own after years of abandonment.

One of most important legacies of the Kennedy administration cannot be measured quantitatively or determined by an examination of legislative documents, but rather by examining how West Virginians felt about him. A number of letters between the promoters of the Mountain State Forest Festival and Kennedy administration officials reveal the positive attitudes that many West Virginians had about Kennedy. A letter from festival officials inviting Kennedy to be the keynote speaker states, "Your appearance will no doubt bring joy to the people of West Virginia." After receiving a kind letter of rejection from the Kennedy administration, festival officials extended an open invitation to Kennedy to at least make an appearance at the festival so he "would have the opportunity to meet the wonderful people of West Virginia who so diligently worked to

³⁸ "Change in Rural Appalachia: Implications for Action Programs", 1971

ensure a Kennedy administration for the next four years.”³⁹ Although Kennedy once again graciously declined the invitation, this correspondence reflects the relationship that many West Virginians felt for the President. In his first two years in office, President Kennedy received nearly twice as many invitations to political conventions, dedication ceremonies, elementary schools, and business grand-openings from West Virginians as he did from any other state.⁴⁰

Although the Kennedy administration helped bring significant progress to West Virginia, it also brought to the state a new and, at times, negative image. After the Civil War, the rest of the nation began to recognize Appalachia as a distinct region with uniquely identifiable characteristics. As the country progressed, West Virginia remained in a pre-industrial state. Before 1960, television shows such as *Hee-Haw* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* helped to strengthen Americans’ perceptions of Appalachians as a backward, poor, uneducated but relatively happy group of people. The image of West Virginia changed dramatically in the 1960s as a result of Kennedy’s campaign. As a result of the coverage that the state received during the 1960 primary, a more realistic image of West Virginians’ problems developed, but it also helped create some negative stereotypes. West Virginians, despite an abundance of natural resources and food sources, were now seen as severely impoverished, without adequate health care or education, and entirely dependant on welfare. During the 1960s, West Virginia became an example of an area existing within the paradigm of pre-industrial America that could not survive economically in the modern world. Many people in more urbanized areas believed that

³⁹ White House Central Subject Files, Box 407. John F. Kennedy Library.

⁴⁰ Ibid, This was determined by author after close examination of file contents from West Virginia and other states.

the masses in rural Appalachia lived in a parasitic relationship in which all their basic necessities were provided for them by the government free of charge. This image of the lazy, poor, and uneducated Appalachian created a false picture of a culture of poverty and dependency that continues to plague the people of West Virginia today.

While the image of West Virginia presented by the media suffered during the 1960 primary, other more pressing political and economic problems developed or worsened within the state as a result of the Kennedy presence. In West Virginia, a 'slate' system of politics, in which candidates pooled their resources to run as a group, had existed for years. On these 'slates' weaker candidates could align themselves with stronger candidates to help their chances of winning, and once in office, these groups traditionally would work together to maintain the 'status quo.' The slate system created a 'good ole boy' network throughout southern West Virginia that allowed for a great deal of corruption. The influence of Kennedy's money during the campaign and the influx of federal money during his administration helped strengthen this network of good ole boys and created a higher level of corruption. According to John Alexander Williams:

"The same primary campaign that catapulted Kennedy to the White House also launched W.W. "Wally" Barron as the rebuildier of the Democratic statehouse machine and although there was no formal alliance of the two candidates, an obvious symbiotic relationship was fostered in many counties by Kennedy's supply of money and Barron's equally lavish promises of political jobs."⁴¹

President Kennedy supported Barron's election as chair of the Appalachian Governor's Conference in 1961 and also helped begin the process that led to the enactment of the Appalachian Regional Development Bill of 1965 that was responsible for much of the social and economic progress in West Virginia and other areas of

⁴¹ Williams, *West Virginia: A History*, 184-185.

Appalachia in the years to come.⁴² As governor, Barron established a work and training program by combining the state's own emergency employment plan with federal grant programs, and he supported the state legislature's issuance of tax exempt industrial development bonds for financing new or expanding industries. In 1961 Barron created both the Commerce Department and the Industrial Development Authority to promote and expand industry and business in West Virginia.⁴³

Although Barron accomplished much in promoting Kennedy's battle against poverty at the state level, he did it all while presiding over one "of the most corrupt administrations in the history of the state, an administration whose misdeeds left even hardened West Virginians aghast."⁴⁴ Although no scandals became public while Barron served as governor, soon after he left Charleston a series of criminal investigations revealed levels of corruption and illegal activity that extended all the way to the governor's mansion. Thirteen high-ranking officials, including the state treasurer, attorney general, state road commissioner, and the liquor control commissioner, were convicted of crimes ranging from bribery to tax evasion.⁴⁵ The Barron administration has the dubious distinction of being the most corrupt in the state's history and Barron himself became the first West Virginia governor to serve time in prison.⁴⁶ The Kennedy campaign did not openly support Barron for governor nor did the President's

⁴² John C. Morgan, *West Virginia Governors*. (Charleston, West Virginia: Charleston Newspapers, 1980), 330-331. Barron states that even though the bill passed Congress during the Johnson administration, it was Kennedy pushed hardest for passage of the bill.

⁴³ Otis K. Rice, *West Virginia: A History*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 282.

⁴⁴ Williams, *West Virginia: A History*, 184.

⁴⁵ Rice, *West Virginia: A History*, 282.

⁴⁶ Morgan, *West Virginia Governors*, 331

administration channel funds to the state for the purpose of supporting the fraudulence and corruption practiced by Barron and other state officials. The slate system that existed in southern West Virginia coupled with Kennedy's popularity within the state during the 1960 general election strengthened the Democratic base of power throughout West Virginia and allowed Barron to win the governor's seat. Because of this, Kennedy indirectly helped promote Barron's political career.

Although President Kennedy's administration supported legislation to help build a stronger economic base within the state and to ease the hardship of poverty in some of the more distressed areas, it did not create solutions to the problems affecting workers in two key economic sectors, farming and mining. A 1960 editorial in the *Martinsburg Journal* notes that farmers had spent the previous decade suffering from severe hardship.

According to the *Journal*:

"We have failed to control production, we have failed to satisfy growers, we have saddled the American taxpayer with an enormous burden of expense and we have piled up unneeded grain all over the land in our efforts to operate a planned agriculture. It probably would prove a temporarily painful operation, but in the long run everybody would be better off were we to abandon altogether the enterprise of running the nation's farms out of Washington and permit the natural laws of economics to operate in agriculture as they do in steel and automobiles and textiles and other industries."⁴⁷

After World War II, West Virginia farmers experienced good times, but during the 1950s West Virginia farm income decreased dramatically. According to President Kennedy, "Since 1951, farm income has been squeezed down by more than twenty-five percent."⁴⁸ In 1951, the average West Virginia farm income reached \$190,995. By the beginning of Kennedy's administration, it had dropped to \$137,223. Kennedy's measures did not help the West Virginia farmer as average income reached a forty year low of \$120,510 in

⁴⁷ *Martinsburg Journal*, April 11, 1960.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, State of the Union Address, In *Let the Word Go Forth*, 147.

1963; a 12% decrease in just three years.⁴⁹ Because nearly 22% of West Virginia's population depended on agriculture and farming, this failure by the administration to maintain the stability of agricultural commodities through price controls severely hurt West Virginia's ailing economy.

While the President did attempt to fix the agricultural problem by controlling prices, he lacked a basic understanding of the impact of technology on the small farmer. According to Theodore Sorensen, "Technological unemployment, which Kennedy understood, was a basic problem in our farm economy, which he never understood."⁵⁰ By increasing automation, productivity increased but jobs decreased. Only those large-scale farms with the capital to invest in large automated heavy machinery could take advantage of the new technologies, and they helped to severely diminish the profits of the small farmer. Although Kennedy recognized that this could be a tremendous problem, he failed to curtail the enormous influence of large scale farming operations that opposed any meaningful price controls.

Another economic problem developed, at least in part, as a result of the increase in federal money being pumped into the state by the Kennedy administration. In 1957, the workforce was comprised of 135,000 people in manufacturing, 80,000 in the coal industry, and 60,000 in state government. By 1964, the number of state workers had increased by more than 14,000 while manufacturing and coal lost a combined 20,000 workers.⁵¹ While this could have been an indication that the state was attempting to

⁴⁹ Myers, *West Virginia Blue Book*, 1964,

⁵⁰ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 402.

⁵¹ West Virginia Department of Employment Security, "*Employment in West Virginia, 1948-1988*," 1989.

address the employment needs of the people by expanding government services and providing more jobs, a closer look at the statistics reveals that no new jobs were being created. Instead, a shifting of emphasis from one field to another occurred, and the three major fields experienced an overall loss of 6,000 jobs. The shift in jobs from manufacturing and mining to bureaucracy added no real value to the West Virginia economy. While a miner, glassmaker, or a textile worker can produce products that generate revenues and create more jobs, a government employee typically does not add tangible value to an economy and instead serves to extract potential economic gains from any increase in federal money.

As Congress diverted more federal money to West Virginia, the state became increasingly dependent on Washington to solve its financial problems. In 1959, the state received \$70,960,551 in federal funds.⁵² By 1964, that amount had increased to \$93,309,289.⁵³ In 1970, the West Virginia Department of Finance and Administration reported that 37.4% of the state's revenues came from federal money. By 1974, that figure had increased to 47.2%. This drastic increase in the percentage of federal funds set aside for West Virginia reflects a change in attitude that Washington displayed toward the state. The Kennedy administration helped pave the way for more money to come to West Virginia, but it also created a growing dependency on the federal government to provide services that arguably should have been supported by the state.

In 1960, only 7.8% of the state budget was allocated for 'other costs.' These costs included the management and maintenance of the executive and fiscal departments,

⁵² J. Howard Myers, ed, *West Virginia Blue Book, 1959*. (Charleston, West Virginia: Jarrett Printing, 1960), 860.

⁵³ Myers, *West Virginia Blue Book, 1964*. (Charleston, West Virginia: Jarrett Printing, 1965), 918.

business relations, and judicial and legislative affairs. By 1974 the state legislature allocated 13% of the budget for 'other costs.'⁵⁴ The increase in discretionary allocations from 1960 to 1974 that the West Virginia Legislature approved annually offsets much of the federal money allocated for education, transportation, or health care and created a more bureaucratic and, in some ways, less efficient government.

The cost of campaigning within the state also increased dramatically after 1960. The Kennedy campaign was the first in the state to effectively utilize television and radio advertisements and among the first to conduct their own polls. In West Virginia, a candidate running for a statewide office such as governor, state senator, or state supreme court justice could win an election while spending less than fifteen thousand dollars. Kennedy reportedly spent more than four times that to win the 1960 primary. The Kennedy machine steamrolled through West Virginia and brought with it a new way to campaign. After 1960, state candidates began campaigning with an entourage of media, image, and advertising consultants, as well as a small army of election day workers and pollsters. Democrat John Rockefeller IV reportedly spent hundreds of thousands of dollars of his own money while campaigning for governor in 1972, 1976, and 1980, while Republican Arch Moore spent more than two million dollars to win the 1984 governor's race.⁵⁵

To many in West Virginia, the negative influences that the Kennedy campaign and ensuing administration brought to West Virginia did not outweigh the positives. West Virginians showed their support for Kennedy's fight against poverty by supporting his Vice-President and eventual successor Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 elections. The

⁵⁴ Myers, *Blue Book*, 1974, 1001.

⁵⁵ Fleming, *Kennedy vs Humphrey*, 169.

final returns in the state showed Johnson with 538,087 votes compared to 253,953 for Republican challenger Barry Goldwater. State Democrats rode the wave of support that followed the Kennedy-Johnson administration as Robert Byrd received more than twice as many votes in the race for a seat in the U.S. Senate as Republican Cooper Benedict, and Hulett C. Smith defeated Cecil Underwood by more than 77,000 votes in the race for governor. The trend that developed in state legislative races during the 1960 campaign continued in 1964 as Democrats won fourteen of the sixteen available state senate seats and ninety-one of the one-hundred House of Delegate seats.⁵⁶

Despite the support that many within the state gave to the president and his policies, West Virginians continued to experience many of the same problems in the years following the Kennedy administration that they faced when he first visited the state in 1960. Between 1960 and 1970, West Virginia lost more than 120,000 people, or approximately 7% of its population. During the same period the U.S. population grew by more than 12%.⁵⁷ Although a significant population increase and subsequent growth in the economy occurred in the 1970s as professionals and city dwellers came to West Virginia in an attempt to find their ‘mountain roots,’ a downturn in the coal industry in the middle of the decade created a recession in the state’s economy that forced many new residents to once again find economic opportunities in neighboring states. Outmigration continued to hinder the economic potential of the state as West Virginia experienced another 7% decrease in the 1990s and has yet to reach its 1950 pinnacle of more than two million inhabitants. The lack of professional and well paid jobs in comparison with

⁵⁶ Rice, *West Virginia; A History*, 283.

⁵⁷ U.S Bureau of the Census, “WV Coal Counties Population, 1950-1990,” In *West Virginia: A History for Beginners*, 185.

neighboring states and the continued process of mechanization within the coal industry has helped foster this mass exodus of West Virginia's brightest young people. As a result, West Virginia currently has the highest median age and one of the highest percentages of retired persons in the country.

Kennedy's death in November 1963 created disorder within the Democratic Party. Many people within the administration, including Attorney General Robert Kennedy, did not support Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. Despite his ascension to the presidency under the most severe of circumstances and his lack of support from key members of the Kennedy administration, the transition of power was relatively smooth. According to Gerald Ford, Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Michigan during the Kennedy administration, "(Kennedy) never had a solid relationship with Congress... He was never really part of the establishment. He never really had a significant legislative record as President. Johnson had a much better record because he understood Congress; he was a part of Congress."⁵⁸ Former Assistant Secretary of State Phillips Talbot re-affirmed this sentiment by stating:

"It is clear that Kennedy was already in trouble with Congress when he died, so my sense is that he would have been reelected quite easily, but that he would have been rather more preoccupied than he had anticipated, in getting the Congressional agenda sorted out... There was a very strong feeling that Congress, which was getting restless before he was killed, would see what a substantial political lead he would give... His ability to manage Congress would be greater. His standing in the world would be strengthened, because people would no longer look at him as having just managed to get in."⁵⁹

Although Kennedy did not serve his full term, he can be credited with aiding the passage of key legislation in the next administration. After Kennedy's untimely death,

⁵⁸ Gerald Ford, Interview with Gerarld Strober, July 22, 1991. In *Let Us Begin Anew*, 475-476.

⁵⁹ Phillips Talbot, Interview with Gerald Strober, November 20, 1989. In *Let Us Begin Anew*, 476.

new President Johnson continued the ‘War on Poverty’ in Appalachia with more support from a sympathetic Congress and a mandate from the people to use their Kennedy’s policies as a political eulogy. The Appalachian Regional Commission would become a permanent agency in 1965 under Lyndon Johnson and funded more state highways though the implementation of a road program covering 13 Appalachian designated states. From this program, West Virginia received \$285,000,000 for the construction and maintenance of state roads. With federal funds covering 90% of the costs, the state Department of Highways began construction on 510 new miles of highway that would better connect the towns and various regions of West Virginia.⁶⁰

The 1960 West Virginia primary proved invaluable to the Kennedy campaign. According to Pierre Salinger, without West Virginia, “he might never have been able to demonstrate that he could overcome the Catholic issue.”⁶¹ The state became the ultimate testing ground for Kennedy to analyze the potential political liability of the Catholic issue and it gave him a surprising victory that propelled him into the national spotlight and made him a legitimate contender for the Democratic nomination for President.

There is, however, a reciprocal relationship between John F. Kennedy and West Virginia. At a state centennial celebration in 1963, President Kennedy remarked to an audience in Charleston, West Virginia that during his administration West Virginia had risen from 50th to 30th in the “attention it receives from the national government” and the state’s unemployment rate had been cut in half.⁶² This increase in the level of attention

⁶⁰ Myers, *West Virginia Blue Book; 1970*. (Charleston, West Virginia, Jarrett Printing, 1971), 485.

⁶¹ Salinger, *With Kennedy*, 35.

⁶² John F. Kennedy, “Remarks at the State Centennial Celebration in Charleston, West Virginia, June 20, 1963.” In *Public Papers of the Presidents; JFK, 1963*. (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 494.

by the federal government helped decrease those unemployed in West Virginia from 106,000 in 1960 to 52,000 in 1963. Those living below the poverty line also decreased from 639,000 in 1960 to 275,000 in 1963.⁶³ This reflects Kennedy's desire to improve the conditions in West Virginia. Ken Hechler stated that as a result of Kennedy's many visits to the West Virginia he felt a personal connection to the people of the state and supported a number of measures that increased jobs and economic opportunities, built roads, and created electricity and clean water for many West Virginians.⁶⁴

Without the 1960 primary, West Virginia may not have experienced the economic changes that occurred during the Kennedy administration. Kennedy was the first candidate to come to the state during a presidential primary since 1924 and in many people's eyes the first major candidate to direct any emphasis toward the people of West Virginia since the 1930s. According to Hechler, "Kennedy's policies seemed like a rebirth of Roosevelt's 'New Deal' and the strong desire from the people for the government to bring about economic recovery."⁶⁵ The Kennedy experience in West Virginia also created a relationship between the federal government and the state that lasted throughout his presidency. His reforms helped to ease the state's ailing economy and gave people hope that the government was truly concerned about all Americans.

⁶³ Fleming, *Kennedy vs. Humphrey*, 168.

⁶⁴ Hechler, Interview with Author.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

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