



The Primaries—J. F. K. Tackles the Religion Issue

Part 7 By Theodore C. Sorensen

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PROMPTLY AT 12:30 p. m., on Saturday, Jan. 2, 1960, Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy strode into a crowded press conference and read a one-page declaration of his candidacy for the Presidency.

He was 42 years old — and so youthful a candidate had never been elected President, nor in this century ever been nominated by a Democratic convention.

He was a Roman Catholic — and no member of that faith had ever been elected President nor, after 1928, even been seriously considered.

He was a United States senator—and only one Republican and no Democrats had ever been elected President from the Senate, nor had the Democrats even nominated a senator for 100 years. They had not nominated a New Englander for even longer.

If he swept the primaries . . . only in this way could he demonstrate his electability, prove that a Catholic could win, scatter the favorite-son candidates, pick up a bloc of committed delegates and knock one or more competitors completely out of the race.

Only then could he translate his voter strength in such states as New York, Illinois, and Pennsylvania into solid delegate strength. Only by thus getting Humphrey and Morse out of the race could he secure his own majority by picking up some of whatever votes they acquired.

And only by winning in an early convention ballot could he secure the nomination. "If it ever goes into a back room," he said, "my name will never emerge."

The senator and his wife opened the campaign in New Hampshire [where a political unknown opposed him] as though he were in the fight of his life. Early in March he received a Democratic vote

"I don't want to spend the next eight years presiding over the Senate . . . voting in the case of ties (which) . . . rarely occur, and waiting for the President to die."—Kennedy on TV in 1960

more than twice the previous record, and more than 2,000 write-in votes on the Republican ballot as well.

Richard Nixon, who ran unopposed on that ballot, also piled up a record vote, and there was in that primary a hint of trouble to come.

Shortly before primary day, Nixon's campaign manager, right-wing Republican Gov. Wesley Powell, denounced Kennedy as "soft" on communism; and although Nixon asserted he did not approve of the attack either before or after its issuance, his congratulations to his campaign manager on the Republican turnout gave Kennedy a foretaste of the future.

The primary results in Wisconsin confirmed both our hopes and our fears. Kennedy won the state with more votes than any candidate in the history of Wisconsin's primary. He carried six of the 10 districts and thus two-thirds of the convention delegates. He ran well in many farm areas, carried one farm district and carried labor's vote despite its leaders.

Humphrey ran best, it was correctly reported, in the least Catholic areas. But few pointed out that all these areas were near the Minnesota border — that Humphrey also ran well in the Catholic areas near Minnesota—and that Kennedy ran well in the cities and in the eastern part of the state among non-Catholics as well as Catholics. Humphrey did well in the cities near Minne-

sota; Kennedy did well on the farms further away. Geography was more decisive than religion.

Obviously Kennedy's religion did help him—and hurt him—in Wisconsin. Undoubtedly most Catholics did support him.

Wisconsin threatened to make religion the issue, and Humphrey treated this "psychological blow" to Kennedy as a psychological boost for himself.

Abandoning his earlier announced intention to withdraw from the race if he could not carry his neighboring state, the Minnesota senator carried the fight to a new field of battle: West Virginia.

"I know we can win here," he told his aids. Perhaps he recalled that in 1956 the Vice Presidential survey of his friend Louis Bean had flatly listed West Virginia as one of the states where "urban, Boston, Irish Catholic" Kennedy had "no appeal."

Kennedy had no choice but to accept

Humphrey's challenge in West Virginia. He spoke in every town and hamlet, Jacqueline tirelessly at his side. "I am the only Presidential candidate since 1924, when a West Virginian ran for the Presidency," he would say later, "who knows where Slab Fork is and has been there."

He shook every hand in sight. He campaigned day and night, and lost his voice in the process. For a few days his brother Teddy and I substituted for him, as he stood by on the platform smiling gamely.

One issue still plagued him — Catholicism. Repeated newspaper surveys

"The question is how many people will vote for Kennedy, who, among other things seems to be a Catholic. . . . Once we get into the argument . . . about there being a Catholic vote, we are on very treacherous grounds, indeed."—Kennedy in a letter to Sorensen in 1960

showed well over half of Humphrey's support was based solely on Kennedy's religion.

It lay heavily on the minds of all Kennedy's listeners. It cropped up in every poll and press interview. It gave rise to anti-Kennedy sermons in all kinds of pulpits. Even the Humphrey campaign song was sung to the tune of "Give Me That Old Time Religion."

"Protestants have nothing against Kennedy," said the Democratic leader of Madison, W. Va. "They think he is intelligent . . . But they are going to vote against him. That's the way they have been reared. It's like they like women, but won't vote for them for public office."

"People here aren't anti-Kennedy," said the publisher of the Coal Valley News. "They are simply concerned about the domination of the Catholic church."

In a complete switch in tactics, Kennedy decided that it was time to meet the issue head on. If he was to be downed by religious bigotry, he intended to go down fighting.

In a series of telephone calls to me in Washington, he outlined three basic approaches:

1) He switched the subject of his address that month to the nation's editors in Washington from foreign aid to religion.

2) He wanted nationally prominent Protestant clergymen, in an open letter to their colleagues, to call for an end to religious divisions and prejudice.

3) He would make a direct and posi-



tive appeal in West Virginia for fair play and a fair chance.

His address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors was a success. It was his first full exposition of his views on church and state. He emphasized: "There is only one legitimate question . . . Would you, as President, be responsive in any way to ecclesiastical pressures or obligations of any kind that might in any fashion influence or interfere with your conduct of that office in the national interest? . . . My answer was—and is—no."

"I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I do not speak for the Catholic church on issues of public policy, and no one in that church speaks for me. . . . Are we to say that a Jew can be elected mayor of Dublin, a Protestant can be named foreign minister of France, a Moslem can sit in the Israeli parliament but a Catholic cannot be President of the United States?"

Meanwhile I was working on the public appeal to and from Protestant clergymen. I made it clear to those ministers whom I approached that the statement would not be released by the Kennedy office and that my role would not be

"If any Pope attempted to influence me as President, I would have to tell him it was completely improper."—Kennedy in West Virginia

made known to the press. It was to be no more than a nonpartisan appeal for tolerance and for an end to the religious issue.

Two courageous clergymen helped get

The author, a Unitarian from Nebraska, had little in common with his boss, John F. Kennedy, but in the 11 years of their association he became—in some respects—Kennedy's 'alter ego.' Here he gives an inside look at how the candidate handled the delicate question of his Catholicism.



Sorensen



UPI Photo

A few minutes after he announced that he was a candidate for the Presidency, Kennedy chatted with Eleanor Roosevelt as they prepared for a telecast at Brandeis university. She did not support him at the convention.



In the midst of his primary battles, Kennedy took time out to appear at a dinner with his fellow contenders, Sen. Stuart Symington and Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson. Kennedy was confident after his victory in West Virginia.

UPI Photo



Sunday Group

Sen. Hubert Humphrey had gone for Kennedy's throat in the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries, but he was a gracious loser and fence mender.

the project under way. One was the Rev. Francis B. Sayre Jr., dean of the Washington Episcopal cathedral and grandson of President Woodrow Wilson, who instantly saw that the ugly repercussions of continued religious divisions could irreparably harm the nation. He agreed to serve as coordinator for the

letter and drafted the basic document. The other was Methodist Bishop Oxnam, whose long years of opposing the Catholic hierarchy as a leader of the P. O. A. U. [Protestant and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State] gave him impeccable credentials as a signer of this letter.

Other Protestant leaders began to respond favorably. Finally, on May 3, one week before the West Virginia primary, an "open letter" to their "Fellow Pastors in Christ" was issued from Dean Sayre's office over the signatures of 13 nationally known Protestant leaders.

"Quite apart from what our attitude



AP Photo

Kennedy's eloquent statement of position on religion before the American Society of Newspaper Editors was an important step toward his nomination.

toward the Roman church may be," the letter read, religious lines should not be drawn. Protestant ministers should preach "charitable moderation and reasoned balance of judgment. . . . We are convinced that each of the candidates has presented himself before the American people with honesty and independence, and we would think it unjust to discount any one of them because of his chosen faith."

Copies of the letter went to every Protestant minister in West Virginia.

"Senator, are you certain that you are quite ready for the country, or that the country is ready for you in the role of President . . . ? (We need) a man with the greatest possible maturity and experience. . . . May I urge you to be patient?"—Harry Truman in a TV press conference

Like the A. S. N. E. speech earlier, it had a beneficial effect in West Virginia, where plans for a mass of anti-Catholic sermons on the Sunday before the primary had previously reached our ears.

Putting aside the gloomy press and expert forecasts, Kennedy remained in Washington on primary day and tried to relax at a movie.

Whatever his secret hopes, the returns late that night must have amazed him. The people of West Virginia, anxious to disprove the charge of bigotry, and con-



vinced that this was the man who could relieve their plight, gave Jack Kennedy a thunderous endorsement by a 61-39 margin.

He carried all but 7 of its 55 counties. He carried towns dominated by the Mine Workers union. He carried Negro wards [which linked Robert Byrd with the Ku Klux Klan], and he carried Robert Byrd's home town. He carried farm areas and urban areas.

But, above all, he heavily carried the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant vote.

He flew that night back to West Virginia, and there he accepted Hubert Humphrey's gracious statement of withdrawal from the Presidential race. The religious issue, he said with jubilation,

"Mr. Truman asks me if I think I am ready. And I am reminded that 100 years ago Abraham Lincoln, not yet President and under fire from veteran politicians, wrote these words: 'I see the storm coming and I know His hand is in it. If he has a place and work for me, I believe that I am ready.' Today I say to you that if the people of this nation select me to be their President, I believe that I am ready."

—Kennedy

had been "buried here in the state of West Virginia."

Oregon, the final primary, was important. That state's model primary law not only automatically entered all Presidential candidates but bound its delegation to the winner until either he released them or his total convention vote dropped below a specified level.

This unusual state statute meant that Kennedy faced not only popular favorite son Morse, whom many had picked to win, and familiar foe Humphrey, whose name remained on the ballot. He also, at last, faced both Symington and Johnson, who had refused to campaign the their names had been entered.

Kennedy's Oregon organization drew from all the state's many Democratic factions. And in the end he polled more votes than all the other candidates combined.

He sought 10 days of rest at Cape Cod before flying to the Los Angeles convention. He was tired, almost haggard, but as his father remarked, "He would be a lot more tired if he'd lost."

Tomorrow:
Why He Picked Johnson

Many stories have circulated about the choice: that Kennedy's father dictated it, that Sam Rayburn made an ultimatum to Kennedy, that Kennedy and Johnson secretly agreed before the convention. Here's Kennedy's own story.

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