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John E. Byrne, Oral History Interview—JFK#2, 9/16/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: John E. Byrne

Interviewer: Ann M. Campbell

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Biographical Note

Byrne, press secretary to the Governor of Maine (1958-1960); an executive at the General Services Administration (1961-1980); and advance man for President Kennedy's trip to Texas (1963), discusses how he became an advance man for JFK's November 1963 trip to Texas, arrangements in Fort Worth, Texas for a short public appearance and a Chamber of Commerce breakfast for JFK, and JFK's assassination, among other issues.

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John E. Byrne—JFK#2

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Second of Three Oral History Interviews

with

John E. Byrne

September 16, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Ann M. Campbell

For the John F. Kennedy Library

CAMPBELL: When were you first contacted about President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] Texas trip?

BYRNE: As I recall it, was about a week before Veterans Day, November 11th, 1963. Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno], who was at the Democratic National committee and, of course, had been known as JFK's "Mr. Advance Man" apparently needed several people to go to Texas and he asked Bernie Boutin [Bernard Louis Boutin], who was then Administrator of General Services Administration, if he could spare somebody, and the assignment came to me. Boutin suggested me to Bruno, and I went over to the committee

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and talked to Bruno. As I say, that was about a week before Veterans Day in '63, and that was the first word of it that came.

CAMPBELL: And this was a first experience for you in advance work?

BYRNE: Yes. Let's say I had done things for the Governor of Maine [Clinton A. Clauson] and also I had made some arrangements for President

Kennedy when he was a candidate for president in Maine just on the state level. But this was really the first time I did a presidential advance.

CAMPBELL: Advance trip. Do you remember what the first word was from Bruno? What were your first instructions, general instructions?

BYRNE: Let me think now. I know I went over to the Democratic National Committee and sat down with him, and he started asking me a lot of questions about what I'd done in the past. As I remember he was rather cryptic about the whole trip at this point and we didn't speak very long. He just told me the basic format; that there was going to

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be this series of visits in Texas he didn't even designate Fort Worth until the end of our conversation. He was still looking for people to go to the various places. I believe it was in that conversation, at the end, that he decided that I was going to Fort Worth.

CAMPBELL: Was there an indication of who he worked with at the White House? Where did his instructions come from?

BYRNE: Well, he was working directly for Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell].

CAMPBELL: For Kenny O'Donnell at the White House.

BYRNE: At the White House, yeah.

CAMPBELL: Then, what other briefing did you have before you left for Texas?

BYRNE: I don't believe I had really any briefing much at all, Ann. It was decided I'd go, and everything was always done very fast and quick conversations and, "You get down there and keep in constant touch with us," that was the word. "Let us know everything that happens, everything you're doing, and check out things." So that's mostly the way it was.

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I don't know whether, as I think back now, whether there had been any discussion at that point about the difficulties that were posed by the split between Yarborough [Ralph W. Yarborough] and Connally [John B. Connally, Jr.] and also between Yarborough and Vice President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. I have a suspicion that this wasn't discussed with me before I left.

CAMPBELL: Were you aware that Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]

was going along before you left?

BYRNE: No. As I recall, Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] had said somewhere along the line, made an announcement, that she was going along on the trip, but whether or not she was going to Fort Worth was open until fairly late in the game.

CAMPBELL: All right. Then when did you arrive in Texas?

BYRNE: I remember leaving the day after Veterans Day, November 12th. We all piled into a twin-engine aircraft at Andrews Air Force Base and took off for Texas. I remember it lasted a tremendous length of time, being an old propeller pushed airplane. I didn't know many of the people on the plane. As a

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matter of fact, I don't know whether I knew any at that point. Many of them I came to know subsequently, in that some of them very well. There were advance men; there were Secret Service agents; there were the White House communications agency boys. And as we went down there—I think Fort Worth was the next to the last stop—we stopped at all the other points along and dropped everybody off.

As I think back now, I remember talking with one advance man who I later on came to know rather well. This gentleman was Max Edwards [Max N. Edwards] who was with the Department of Interior. He was a fellow from the Southwest of the country, and he had one of the stops. Marty Underwood [Martin E. Underwood], I believe, was along. I didn't know Marty at that point. I came to know Marty very, very well in ensuing years. We worked together on the Johnson campaign in 1964 and were very, very closely associated. I presume he was on that plane, but I didn't know him at the time.

CAMPBELL: Then, at your stop in Fort Worth, who was involved?

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Who from the Secret Service?

BYRNE: The.... I remember as we all got off the airplane.... I had talked on the plane with the fellow from the Secret Service who was in charge. The agent in charge of the trip was Bill Duncan. With him was Ned Hall, acted as his assistant on the trip. There was Major Jack Rubley, who was the head White House communications man on the trip, and he had a young second lieutenant with him who he was breaking in by the name of Bill Hartnett, who was the other communications man. When we arrived in Fort Worth we were met by Mike Howard, who was the local Secret Service man. And that was the basic group that worked on the advance trip.

CAMPBELL: On the advance. And you've indicated before that responsibilities were

not really clearly defined between you.

BYRNE: Well, looking back on it, I guess I'm what they later would call team captain. That's what I was, except the strange thing about it was I hadn't done

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any previous trips and for some things that I should have known in that position, I had to depend on Bill Duncan, who had much more experience in advance trips for a president. But basically, his concern was with security and, of course, the communications men were with the communications, and I had all the political things to deal with. As I think and compare that with later trips I did when I became quite an active advance man, I think I probably ran into as many political problems at Fort Worth as any place, and I didn't give as much care or concern to physical arrangements as I did in later trips. As a matter of fact, I wasn't.... There was only one of me, of course, and I was involved in all business about the program and the tickets, and I really didn't have the opportunity to make many of the physical arrangements.

CAMPBELL: About the physical arrangements, how was, for instance, the Hotel Texas chosen, do you know?

BYRNE: That was before my.... Before my entrance into it, it was decided he was going to stay at the hotel.

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CAMPBELL: And that the breakfast would be held there?

BYRNE: And that the breakfast would be held there. To go back a bit, when my talk with Jerry Bruno—this was the one thing, that was clear; that there was going to be a breakfast. It was going to be held at the Texas Hotel. That it was going to be sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and that Raymond Buck [Raymond E. Buck] was the chief contact.

CAMPBELL: Then was he almost an immediate contact when you arrived in Fort Worth?

BYRNE: I remember getting there. I guess we left on the 12th, early in the day, and got there in the evening. And I had a meeting with him 9:30 or 10 o'clock the next morning on the 13th of November to which I brought Bill Duncan and his assistant. This is one thing I did then and which I did in nearly all the other places contrary to many, many other advance men. I always cut the Secret Service men in on all political arrangements and found it to be worthwhile.

CAMPBELL: How far along was the planning for the breakfast?

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BYRNE: At that point, when we held a meeting with Mr. Buck, I was then quite surprised to find that very little had been done outside of the fact that the hall was selected and they were starting to work on tickets. But I guess they were waiting for somebody to come from Washington to start organizing things. So very little had been done up to that point, but there were beginning to be rumbles. It was that day, as I talked to Mr. Buck and then I talked to others who I'd been put in contact with, like labor people, that I found out that there was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the basic format of the visit. The Democratic Party people were rather put out that the Chamber of Commerce was going to be the sponsor, which they point out was probably Republican dominated, and that the rank and file Democrats were not going to get a chance to see and hear the President. The labor people were vociferous on this point. Some of them got downright nasty about it. But of course I told them we were faced with—this was

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the format and this was what we'd have to work through.

Mr. Buck was—as I say, the Chamber of Commerce was Republican dominated, but he was a Democrat of the old school, long, curling, white hair, sort of looked like Tom Connally. And he the executive secretary there, a man by the name of Milt Atkinson [Milton A. Atkinson, Jr.], who is very conservative, a Republican I'm sure, who was actually supposed to be handling a lot of the physical arrangements for the Chamber. But Mr. Buck played it rather cool, and he dealt directly with me on tickets that were to be laid aside, and I ended up controlling for the White House about five hundred and fifty tickets out of the twenty-two hundred, I think it was. And I never know who paid for them, but Mr. Buck took care of that.

CAMPBELL: There was a charge, then, for attendance at the breakfast?

BYRNE: Yes, I believe it was three dollars a ticket.

CAMPBELL: And the bulk of the tickets were made available how?

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BYRNE: I have a printed letter here from the Chamber of Commerce that I pulled out of my file dated November 14th. It's from Mr. Buck to "Dear fellow member," (Chamber of Commerce). And it mentions the fact that a breakfast is being sponsored at 8 a.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the Hotel Texas, November 22nd. "The capacity of the ballroom is limited. The Presidential party, including those who will be traveling here with it, further restricts the tickets that can be supplied to our members. Applications for tickets will be filled at the price of three dollars per ticket in the order received at the Chamber of Commerce offices"—and they give the address—"with a

limitation of two tickets per member. Telephone orders cannot be handled.” So people from the Chamber of Commerce who belonged to the Chamber of Commerce could get two tickets, but they had to go down to the Chamber and pick them up. And that was a basic ticket format.

CAMPBELL: And, in other words, no instructions had come from

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Washington prior to your arrival concerning apportioning of tickets.

BYRNE: I believe that they had told Mr. Buck that they would expect some tickets to be made available to the President, and I’m sure that that was mentioned to me by Jerry Bruno before I left. That was something I went into right away with Mr. Buck at our first meeting and he assured me that some tickets would be there.

CAMPBELL: That some tickets would be available. Now you had several people to deal with there. Who represented Governor Connally in Fort Worth at that time in your discussions? Did he have someone locally?

BYRNE: Well, yes. The first people I believe I contacted outside of Mr. Buck were the Belews, Marjorie and David Belew [David O. Belew, Jr.], B-E-L-E-W. Marjorie Belew is the State Committeewoman and David, her husband, was a lawyer in town and I believe it was the, probably the night 13th or the 14th that I went to their house where—they called a meeting

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and brought people together like... [Interruption] We had this meeting at the Belew’s house, and I’m not absolutely certain now whether it was the same night as the arrival. I may possibly have met them before. I met with them before I met with Mr. Buck on the 13th. I may have met them on the night of the 12th. So it was either the night of the 12th or the 13th where we sat down and we talked about the whole event coming up. As I indicated, with Mrs. Belew was her husband David, Bill Potts [William S. Potts], who was County Democratic Chairman, Garrett Morris, who was State Committeeman and he’d been campaign manager for Governor Connally in the last campaign, Garland Ham of the United Auto Workers, John Heath, of the International Association of Machinists, and then a public relations representative from Bell Helicopter, who was a friend of the Belews, Bill Haworth [William F. Haworth], who they thought might be useful. But as you can see, Governor Connally was pretty well represented by the Belews and Garrett Morris.

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CAMPBELL: Was Senator Yarborough represented?

BYRNE: Not at that meeting. Subsequently, he did designate somebody to represent his interests during the visit. It was Bill Turner, who was a local businessman and who's also exalted ruler of the Elks. I had many, many letters and telegrams and conversations with Mr. Turner, who was very much concerned for Senator Yarborough that his interests were protected. He also gave considerable attention to his own request that we get the President to go to the Elks and present a flag, which was not done. But he did represent Senator Yarborough.

CAMPBELL: Was Congressman Wright [James C. Wright, Jr.] there in person?

BYRNE: Congressman Wright was there in person. He checked into the hotel, in the Hotel Texas, while I was in residence there on the same floor, and we had many conversations. He seemed generally disturbed over the split in the party at the top levels and did everything he could to paper it over as far as I could see.

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CAMPBELL: He didn't stand on one side or the other?

BYRNE: Well, he seemed to be working to smooth things over all during the preliminaries for the event.

CAMPBELL: Was Bill Moyers [William D. Moyers] involved in these early stages at all?

BYRNE: Bill never came to Fort Worth, but he did start contacting me by telephone. I remember our first conversation. I frankly didn't know who he was, and he called me up from Austin, I guess it was, and started asking me questions about it, and I ascertained who he was. I talked to Jerry Bruno back in Washington and Bruno said, "What's he doing in this thing? You're the advance man there. We're running things here," and was rather irritated about it. Then subsequently I talked to Jerry and Jerry said, "Well, he's all right. If he's got requests, you go ahead and fulfill them." In other words, Jerry had talked to somebody in the meantime and had found out that there was some sanction given to Bill Moyers operating as an overall

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liaison man down there.

CAMPBELL: Would he have been considered the Vice President's representative or a White House representative?

BYRNE: Well, I guess he would have been considered the Vice President's

representative, but Bill Moyers also had somebody else's confidence, too, because based on my conversation with Jerry Bruno, who possibly talked with Kenny O'Donnell, I was told to go along with him. I think that there must have been some meeting of the minds in Washington about Mr. Moyers' role.

CAMPBELL: In your advance work and in the early days how often were you in communication with Washington?

BYRNE: Usually once or twice a day.

CAMPBELL: A day.

BYRNE: Yeah. By telephone, although I did mail at least one letter of notes and enclosures to Jerry Bruno. Most of the other time I wrote notes and read them on the telephone.

CAMPBELL: All right. The question of the distribution of tickets was already a problem when you arrived, and

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you eventually got into print about that yourself.

BYRNE: Yes, the way I got into print was with my meeting with the union people. Somebody went to one of the reporters and started talking about me, and I was called by the reporters. And rather than pose as or be pushed into the position of being a mystery man operating out of the White House, I told them who I was and that I was a deputy Assistant Administrator of General Services Administration and that I'd been assigned to do this job, which was to make the arrangements for President Kennedy in Fort Worth. As you know, he was not an announced candidate for reelection at this point, so he was there in his capacity as President of the United States, so it was quite justifiable for me to have that responsibility, to be assigned to that job.

CAMPBELL: The papers indicated, or one would have assumed, someone argued on the other side against wide distribution of breakfast tickets. Would you remember anybody in particular that was in that role?

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BYRNE: Well, I do remember Mr. Atkinson of the Chamber of Commerce thinking that most of these tickets, since it was a Chamber of Commerce function, most of the tickets would go to the Chamber of Commerce. He was quite exasperated by my continual reminders to him that there were more things in it than his interests and that there had to be tickets made available for other people.

But I did end up, as indicated earlier, working rather closely with Mr. Buck on this rather than Mr. Atkinson. There were big problems over the tickets, and I ended up channeling these five hundred and fifty tickets to people who I thought should have them for the interest of the President. That included many to Democratic Party regulars who otherwise wouldn't have been able to go. I made a little count of how I broke those down. I figured I handled in one way or another about five hundred and fifty tickets for that breakfast. One hundred and eighty for the Democratic Party regulars, one hundred and seventy for labor—that meant AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor Congress of Industrial Organizations] and the

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International Machinists; forty which I saw went directly to Negroes when I found out that they had been fairly well ignored in this, all the planning here; ten for the Spanish-American group.

Now the reason there was only ten on that—I really wasn't in on that till maybe the day before the dinner was being held, and nobody seemed to have given any attention to the fact that the Spanish-American people had been rather ignored in this ticket arrangement. There again, it was the basic problem of having the show run by the Chamber of Commerce. If you had other sponsorship you could expect an equitable distribution in the population, but, of course, here you had a conservative businessmen's organization who had the first call on the tickets. The Spanish-American problem came to me very late in the game with a telephone call, as I recollect, from the sheriff of Tarrant County, who said that working for him was a young Spanish-American boy by the name of Jake Cardenas, who was head of SANO PASO [Political Organization of Spanish-Speaking People], which was a

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Spanish-American organization, and who was quite hurt that nobody had contacted him. I immediately got a hold of this young man, and that's how I made ten tickets available there. Forty tickets I made available to Senator Yarborough. Most of those were fairly late in the game, too. And the balance of this five hundred and fifty went to miscellaneous groups.

CAMPBELL: Was there a specific request from Yarborough people for those tickets?

BYRNE: I believe there was. I believe it came channeled through Bill Turner at the last moment, as I recall. So I did have a number of extra tickets in hand right up till close to day.

CAMPBELL: Then there was a question of head table seating arrangement.

BYRNE: Oh, that was a real problem almost from the beginning. The big problem was not labor, not the fact that the Chamber of Commerce vice presidents were going to be sitting at the table, at the head table; the big problem was the demand by Connally people that came to me in many, many different ways from many, many

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different people that they did not want Senator Yarborough seated at the same level at the head table as the Governor and President. Now I think any lack of experience probably helped there in this particular situation because I got my back up, which later on I learned not to do so much. But I was under instructions from Jerry Bruno to see that Yarborough got all the honors of protocol that were due him. And I just wouldn't stand for anything less. Then when the people from Connally's office started to strong-arm me a little bit, I just told them flatly no and this is the way it was going to be and that's all there was to it. So eventually it worked out all right. There was one man from the Governor's office from Austin who came over by the name of Scott Sayers, who repeated these demands that there be special treatment for the Governor and lesser treatment for the Senator, but the answer was no.

Bill Moyers, I understand, was also working on that. It was a problem for everybody. It was a problem for the Democratic Party because

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here you had a visit that was supposed to show the unity of the Democratic Party and you had this basic split between the United States Senator and the Governor and, to a lesser extent, the Vice President. So I interpreted this desires of President Kennedy as being to see that no one faction was favored and that everybody got the same and equal treatment and I believe that's what happened at Fort Worth.

CAMPBELL: At your head table arrangement, were other community leaders involved? The Chamber of Commerce was there.

BYRNE: Yeah, I have before me a list of the head table which I believe is the accurate list of what happened. It was President and Mrs. Kennedy, Vice President and Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson], Governor and Mrs. Connally [Idanell Brill Connally], Senator and Mrs. Yarborough [Opal Catherine Warren], Congressman and Mrs. Jim Wright, Mayor and Mrs. Bayard Friedman, Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Buck, then three Chamber of Commerce vice presidents and their wives, the executive vice president of the Chamber of Commerce and his wife, the head of the AFL-CIO and his wife, Mr. O.C. Yancy, Mr. and Mrs. Don Kennard, who

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are—he was a state senator. And then there was Judge and Mrs. Marvin Simpson, who I believe—he was a county judge, the administrative type judge, you know, for the county. So that was the makeup of the head table.

CAMPBELL: That was the makeup of the head table. I think it would be interesting to know how other details of the breakfast were planned. The question of the boys' choir that sang.

BYRNE: My recollection is that Mr. Buck came up with this idea.

CAMPBELL: Arranged things.

BYRNE: Yeah. He really made suggestions about the program, and I think they pretty well were carried out.

CAMPBELL: How about the gifts that...

BYRNE: Oh, I remember they gave....

CAMPBELL: A large hat.

BYRNE: A stetson, I remember they gave to President Kennedy and some boots, I believe. I'd been asked beforehand if he would be receptive to them and told them that he would be. If I remember President Kennedy, he wasn't

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one to don gift hats. He accepted it and just put it aside, as usual.

CAMPBELL: Now before the breakfast an appearance was arranged for President Kennedy in the parking lot across the way from the hotel. How did you get involved in that?

BYRNE: This seemed—very early in the game, this became an issue, and it stemmed from the same trouble that I was mentioning about the basic format of the breakfast. The Democratic Party regulars and the labor people thought it was unfortunate that the breakfast was going to be restricted to so many businessmen and that the regular public would not be exposed to him. So they, the Democratic people and the labor people from my initial meeting with them, started, you know, "There has to be something else. There was to be something else." And I kept passing this back to Washington receiving noncommittal answers. As you probably guess, in all advance work there are always a million requests for extra appearances, extra things to be done, and most of the time you have

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to turn them all down. But these people were very strong about it, the local party people and the labor people. They came to me, they came to Congressman Jim Wright, and he kept calling Washington through whoever he was dealing with there. And Bill Moyers was pressured on it. So we had this just general pressure building up and, of course, what

eventually happened is that President Kennedy did go out to the parking lot, and there was a fairly sizable crowd out there, and did speak before the breakfast.

CAMPBELL: And this was pre-announced several days ahead of time.

BYRNE: I believe it was.

CAMPBELL: Was there any objection to it locally?

BYRNE: I think.... I remember speaking with Mr. Buck about it, and he had no objection as long as the nonpartisan.... What he was concerned about, he was in a funny position that he had to see that the non-partisanship was preserved, because he was president of the Chamber of Commerce and

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a successful businessman in Fort Worth. But he told me that, you know, he really didn't care if they had an outside meeting as long as it didn't impinge in any way upon non-partisanship of the breakfast. I think the reluctance mostly was on the part of the presidential advisors, both in the White House and in the Democratic committee, and mainly because of keeping schedules. If you start adding all sorts of extra things, a schedule just falls apart, and you can't have that, you know.

CAMPBELL: What sort of schedule was set up when you arrived in Fort Worth? For instance, were you aware of the scheduled landing time for his plane at that time?

BYRNE: Yes. Right from the beginning, I had a schedule of the trip, which was prepared in Washington, and it was down to the minute of...
[Interruption] The original schedule I had was the one furnished me by Jerry Bruno before I left Washington, which had all the stops on it, the various things, the Fort Worth portion. Let's see, really, it started at 10:45 p.m. on the night of the 21st.

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"Arrive, Fort Worth, Carswell Air Force Base. Twenty minutes by car to Texas Hotel in downtown Fort Worth. 11:05 p.m. arrive Texas Hotel for night." And then it picks up "November 22nd, Friday, Fort Worth. 8:45 a.m. Leave for Grand Ballroom in Texas Hotel. Breakfast, one hour. 9:45 leave breakfast for room. 10:45 depart hotel. Twenty-minute ride to Carswell. 11:05 arrive Carswell Air Force Base. 11:15 depart airport for Dallas." Now that was the basic format that was given to me to improvise and play on.

CAMPBELL: To go to Texas with.

BYRNE: Yeah.

CAMPBELL: Then, the evening arrival at Carswell, did this present special problems in itself?

BYRNE: Well one thing, we went out to the Carswell Air Force Base, which was a SAC [Strategic Air Command] base, and we talked to the General, General Moore [Howard W. Moore]. I remember at first he explained, you know, being a SAC base, that it was restricted to the public. And well we thought that it would be very nice if

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we were able to open it up and let the people come in and see the President. He finally granted that favor. I'm sure after consultation with appropriate people in the SAC headquarters in Washington. But the base was opened. It was rather late at night. In addition to being a SAC base, there were a lot of problems of security, I suppose, posed by it being at night. But a lot of people came to that, when the plane came down. I remember President and Mrs. Kennedy took to the fences and shook hands all over the place.

CAMPBELL: How many traveling planes were you dealing with?

BYRNE: Well, let's see. At that point I wasn't so sophisticated in the thing. I saw Air Force One. But there was a press plane, I guess, that came in first, as was usual. I had this rather huge reception committee. As I look back on it, I'm rather chagrined because I don't believe I ever got trapped into such a huge thing again. Oh, the line went on for a great length. There was, just for starters, there was the commanding general and his

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wife of the base, the president of the Chamber of Commerce and his wife, six officials of the Tarrant County CIO-A.F.L.—that's a story in itself. Originally, I just had, of course, like with each organization, I tried to have one person and his wife. Just before the event they bearded me in my room and were threatening nobody would go be in the reception committee, and they were rather disagreeable about it. So I ended up saying, all right, all of them could go. I was bludgeoned into it, which made the line for reception for the President rather out of hand. But we went along with it anyhow. In addition to that, we had the chairman of the County Democrats and his wife, the Democratic County Committeewoman and Committeeman and their spouses, vice presidents of the Chamber of Commerce and their wives, the mayor and his wife, the head county administrative officer and his wife. This line went on and on. I lined them up in a hangar before the plane arrived. I remember Mrs. Belew had an

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armful of dewy roses for Mrs. Kennedy. They were rather dripping with moisture, and when she deposited these in Mrs. Kennedy's hands, I don't think Mrs. Kennedy held onto them too long. I think she passed them on to somebody else.

But that was the night of their arrival. Of course, it being so late, we didn't have to worry much about any sort of a parade motorcade. They drove directly to the hotel. The only thing is, we had the people at the base and we had them there in large numbers. And the President and Mrs. Kennedy did shake a lot of hands.

CAMPBELL: Had you gotten involved at all in arranging the transportation into town?

BYRNE: No. The Secret Service took care of the transportation.

CAMPBELL: And how about a route as unimportant as that would have been that evening? Was it just a most direct route?

BYRNE: Later on, as I became more sophisticated in these matters, I did a lot of arguing and changing with the

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Secret Service and routes. On this particular occasion the Secret Service chose the routes, and I don't even know whether I got to approve them. They were just there. They were picked by the Secret Service though.

CAMPBELL: Could we talk just a little bit about security planning before the visit, how deeply you got involved in this, and just your view of security arrangements?

BYRNE: Of course, I really didn't get involved in security as itself. I believe I attended a couple of the meetings, called by Bill Duncan, of police officers, law enforcement agencies. And I was a novice so I really didn't have anything to contribute in that field. Well, even when I wasn't a novice, I had nothing to contribute much in that field because the Secret Service handled it completely. But I was impressed then, and I was impressed later with Bill Duncan with whom I worked on many other occasions, later on, for President Johnson. A very competent operator, and I never had any work about security then or later

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where he was involved, because he touched all the bases and was a very careful, very careful operator.

CAMPBELL: There seemed to be no problem in cooperation between the local authorities and the Secret Service.

BYRNE: No. To the best of my knowledge there was good cooperation in Fort Worth.

CAMPBELL: How would you characterize your cooperation from Fort Worth in the early planning?

BYRNE: I think it was good. Mr. Buck and I got along very well. I became quite fond of the man. He was very understanding and gracious. I had no difficulty with him whatsoever. The only man I had a little trouble with was the executive vice president, Milt Atkinson, and I wouldn't say that it was any major trouble at all, but he was looking out mainly for the rights of the Chamber of Commerce members while I had some larger responsibilities—or different responsibilities, let us say. Also, he was, I gathered, a rather conservative type man.

CAMPBELL: Were these indications of hostility to President Kennedy's visit to Fort Worth?

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BYRNE: I don't recall running into any in the people I dealt with particularly. Of course, in neighboring Dallas, there were certain newspapers down there that were not very gracious. But as I recall the reception at Fort Worth, it was rather gracious all the way through.

CAMPBELL: And no apprehension on the part of your local contacts about...

BYRNE: No. They.... Well, the very fact, too, that the Chamber of Commerce were jumping all over—the members were falling all over themselves to get tickets—and I'm rather certain that they were not liberal Democrats—it showed the general acceptance of the community of this visit, the honor that they felt of having the President come to see them.

CAMPBELL: Do you know how the Chamber of Commerce was selected as the host?

BYRNE: That I do not really know. I guess the only people who are the best source for that would be like Kenny O'Donnell and Jerry Bruno. I can surmise. I can surmise in this way, is that

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they wanted to keep the coverture of a nonpartisan visit to the state for most of the whole visit, the whole state visit and by having in Fort Worth, for instance, having a nonpartisan affair sort of took the sting out of the partisan affair in Austin that was scheduled for the

night of the 22nd. I suppose with nonpartisan visits, too, the question of payment for airplane use had something to do with it.

CAMPBELL: In your papers that I've looked at there's a copy of a telegram from Senator Yarborough to Bill Turner. Could you give us the background on that?

BYRNE: Well, that was the whole business of the Governor Connally.... Now, I don't know how much Governor Connally was really involved in this personally because I only had one brief conversation with him, but his people gave me the distinct impression that they were passing on verbatim positions to me all the time I was there about the fact that they didn't want Yarborough treated the same way as the Governor was going to be treated with the President.

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And the matter of seating, the seating, the matter of automobiles and motorcades.... I had it told to me on several occasions that Governor Connally wanted Senator Yarborough's car to be back in the motorcade, back beyond the press car. And according to Jerry Bruno, I told them, "Secret Service take care of motorcars and motorcades." But when it became clear that we weren't going to accede to these demands for specialized treatment, I was able to give to Bill Turner, representing Yarborough, a plan for seating, the way the cars were going to be handled, the head table, and give him a commitment of what we were going to have. Then, Turner sent me over a telegram he received from Washington on the morning of November 19th from Senator Yarborough, after the Senator or his staff in Washington had looked over the arrangements, and it says simply, "Seating, cars, head tables, perfectly satisfactory. Please do not object or complain. It is 100 percent perfect. As to stopping at Elks lodge, we will see what can be done." But that's the background on that telegram.

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CAMPBELL: Had Yarborough people asked for assurances or had you done this on your own?

BYRNE: Oh, I had been asked for assurances. They knew what the Connally people were demanding and they were demanding that equal treatment and that's what they got.

CAMPBELL: Before we get to the actual visit, I wanted to ask if there was any feedback on your position of getting involved publicly with the press in Fort Worth.

BYRNE: I really didn't know what to do. Never having been in that circumstance before and figuring that the truth was the best way to

handle things, I told them who I was, as I indicated, and then we sat back to see what would happen. You've seen the clippings. My name is sort of beginning to blossom around the newspapers. And I don't think I was even, now as I think about it, I don't think I was even worried because I really didn't realize that this was probably not the best possible procedure. Although I didn't advance it, it just came to me, and I had to take that position. Bill Moyers, in one of our frequent

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telephone conversations, called me and said he'd read the papers and saw where I had been identified and said that when he got back to Washington he was going to recommend that people who are in similar situations, advance situations, do the same thing, that they just make a candid statement, with the idea that this stops speculative stories and, you know, "There's a mystery man at the Hotel Texas." It builds things up beyond where it should be.

CAMPBELL: In your arrangements at the hotel, who gets involved in selecting suites?

BYRNE: We worked at that time with the hotel manager. And as far as the selection of suites, there was a controversy over the fact that the Vice President was going to have a more expensive suite than the President. I believe it was a difference of a hundred dollars a day for the Vice President's suite to seventy-five dollars a day for the President's suite. This was a matter which I really did not get tremendously involved in, which surprises

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me because later on I would have been very conscious of such a matter because these things very often can, if not make or break a visit, can make or break an advance man. But it seems to me I almost let that go by the boards and let the Secret Service talk to the hotel. And there were people in the hotel thought that the seventy-five dollar suite would suit Mrs. Kennedy better because it was a little more modern. If you've ever been in the Hotel Texas, the word "modern" is not a word that comes easily to your mind. It was a very old hotel. I liked it, I like old hotels. But it wasn't something that you usually saw a presidential party ensconced in. But I do think that it was the hotel people and the Secret Service who decided that this suite arrangement was the best. It was a matter of exit and egress to the suite that made the suite that was eventually chosen proper as far as the Secret Service were concerned.

CAMPBELL: Then, were all of the party housed there at this hotel?

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BYRNE: Yeah. There was a large contingent of congressmen that arrived. That was another thing where I got in a little bit of trouble, being very blithe

about such things and not realizing all my responsibilities. I didn't do much about pre-registration of the congressmen, and I guess when they arrived at the desk the bags all piled up and there was a little confusion. This was brought to my attention by Kenny O'Donnell, who I went up to see after everybody was located in the hotel. But it hadn't occurred to me that this was a requirement. Later on I knew better.

CAMPBELL: Let's move, perhaps, to the actual visit, the arrival at Carswell. At this time people were assigned to specific motorcade cars?

BYRNE: On the motorcade going from the...

CAMPBELL: From Carswell into the city. Or was it catch-as-catch-can?

BYRNE: Oh, they were assigned.

CAMPBELL: They were assigned.

BYRNE: They were assigned the cars. I'm relatively certain. I base that more upon knowledge of the way things are done

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than actual recollection of what happened that night because it was an unusual arrival in that everything that was public exposure was there at the air field, really, and then there was a quick trip into town because it was so late at night.

CAMPBELL: Was there any problem here?

BYRNE: I don't recall any problems.

CAMPBELL: A question of were the Senator rode or something?

BYRNE: No, because that had all been agreed on. That was all laid out.

CAMPBELL: That was taken care of.

BYRNE: That was all taken care of.

CAMPBELL: In your early talks with the traveling party, were any changes made in your plans for the next day, any alteration in schedule?

BYRNE: No. Everything went off as planned.

CAMPBELL: Were they pleased with the trip up to that point? Did you get a reading on that?

BYRNE: I had a reading as they were leaving Fort Worth that morning and everybody was very pleased. I'd talked to various people on the White House staff,

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and there wasn't any anger, which when you're doing a presidential trip and things go smoothly, there usually isn't too much said. If things go badly, the advance man usually hears about it in many forms.

CAMPBELL: I believe there were some informal gatherings at the hotel that evening—Governor Connally meeting with a few people. Were you aware of any of these things?

BYRNE: No, I really just kept out of the way. We arrived at the hotel that night. I went up to see Kenny O'Donnell. I remember I just walked up on the floor there and Kenny O'Donnell was laughing in the doorway, and I was trying to see what he was laughing at. And then I looked in the room, and Dave Powers [David F. Powers] was in his shorts doing somersaults on the bed. [Interruption] And Kenny indicated that they were pleased with what happened except first he shot out that querulous thing about, you know, "Why didn't you get these congressmen pre-registered and why didn't you get them to their rooms?" And then he said, "Oh, never

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mind." He says, "Everything's working out fine," something like that. I didn't know Kenny O'Donnell very well. Well, as a matter of fact, I guess I didn't know him really at all at that particular point. I got to know him again rather well later on. But he was a very strong man in that operation, as we all know. And I guess—I mean he was the man that you really reported to.

CAMPBELL: Bruno was not then in the traveling party in Fort Worth?

BYRNE: No, he was not. Jerry Bruno remained in Washington. That night, once I left Kenny O'Donnell, I had a friend of mine from Dallas who checked into the hotel with me, Ross Wilder, who was helping me. I mean he had a car and so forth. And we sat down and had a few drinks with some friends of his and went to bed early. I think I was in bed before midnight. I had been invited to the party that was to be held at the Fort Worth Press Club, but there were just too many responsibilities that I.... I was beginning to feel the pinch a little bit, being a novice at this

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deal and so I didn't go over.

As you know that later flared up into some rather nasty publicity, that party. I believe.... The Secret Service fellows I worked with did not attend that deal. What happened was some of the fellows who were on an off shift went over to the press club and probably had a drink or so. As I remember, the man who ran the club over there said—well, he didn't know who the guys were, but he said they were drink nurses. They maybe had a drink and held onto it for an hour or so. It didn't seem to be anything out of order at all. Drew Pearson, of course, made a little wing-ding out of it and Senator Young [Stephen M. Young] of Ohio made some rather caustic remarks about it. My contacts with the Secret Service on that trip and later have always left me with the feeling that they're a very dedicated bunch, and I think it was unfortunate that somebody tarred them with that brush on that night because, as I say, it was fellows who were off duty, and I'm sure there was nothing out of

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line.

CAMPBELL: All right. And into the morning and the parking lot appearance. What was your responsibility here during the actual event?

BYRNE: Well, we had a little platform built there, as I recall. And the people were out there. I guess we did a little crowd stirring up through the labor unions and through a little publicity in advance. There really wasn't much to do. I didn't have to make any signs or anything like that, that wasn't the Kennedy style. So I just walked out to the lot with the party and heard the President speak. It was drizzling, as I recall. I remember looking around and seeing the silhouettes of policemen on all the neighboring roads around that big parking lot. I particularly remember the President bringing a rather large laugh to everybody when he mentioned the fact that Mrs. Kennedy wasn't with him and that it took her a little longer, but she looked better than us when she was finished.

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CAMPBELL: Was he accompanied in this appearance by Senator Yarborough or Governor Connally or....

BYRNE: I believe so. I'm sure he was. It seems the only thing I can remember in my mind is the picture of the President himself mounting that platform and speaking to the people with a large—he came out of the hotel with a large group of people which I'm sure included everybody who wanted to be seen with him.

CAMPBELL: Everybody, yeah.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

CAMPBELL: The breakfast speech, did you got at all involved in that?

BYRNE: Yes. Well, certainly not in the writing of it.

CAMPBELL: I mean because it was locally oriented, wasn't it? The defense interests in Fort Worth.

BYRNE: Yeah. It was about the TFX [Tactical Fighter Experimental] and our national defense posture and so forth. No, I really had nothing to do with that whatsoever. The only thing I had to do with it is to recollect it, really. I

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recollect that it went over very well with the people. I wrote a note to myself right after that that the enthusiasm in that hall was almost tangible, which was surprising in view of the fact that there were so many—it wasn't a real party gathering, although we managed to have gotten a few people in there. But it was, by and large, a conservative gathering under the Chamber of Commerce, and his speech was very well received. And, of course, the plaudits for Mrs. Kennedy were tremendous.

CAMPBELL: She was an asset on the trip.

BYRNE: Yeah. I was just moving around looking out for last minute physical problems at that point. The President came in through the kitchen to speak and went to the platform, and Mrs. Kennedy came in later. And she had to stand in the kitchen for a bit while somebody else was being introduced. I remember how well she looked in that dusky pink that she was wearing on that day. And when she did walk down the aisle, she was received with great enthusiasm by the people.

CAMPBELL: Then, I think the schedule indicated an hour's break,

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planned for an hour in between the end of the breakfast and the beginning of the motorcade. And at that time the President, at least it's recorded, made a couple of telephone calls: one to John Nance Garner, I believe, and wish him happy birthday; and the second one to a local art patron who had hung paintings in his room. Did you get involved in that project at all?

BYRNE: I believe I was asked if I had any objection to the hanging of the paintings and, having other fish to fry at that time, said no. I was not hanging around the presidential suite after the breakfast. I was mingling with the people. I remember my old—our old friend—Albert Thomas.... When I say hanging around, Albert Thomas came out after the breakfast and the first thing he did

was grab my hand and said, "You fellows did a tremendous job, a wonderful job," and he handed me his hat check and a quarter and said would I get his hat because it was on the other side of the hall and he didn't feel like bucking all the people. So

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there were things like that, talking to people, making arrangements and so forth. And then we moved outside. So I really didn't know what the President was doing at that particular time. I moved outside to help with the arrangements for the motorcade.

CAMPBELL: And what did this entail?

BYRNE: Well, we had pretty well planned who was going to sit where except, I guess there was still some doubt whether Vice President Johnson would sit in the same car with Senator Yarborough. There was, as we all know, a marked coolness there. When I got outside and the motorcade was forming up and the people began to come out to take their seats, Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] was there. Larry put Senator Yarborough in the same car with Mrs. Johnson, and there was another seat left there. And Larry said to me, "When the Vice President comes out," he says, "Will you place him in this seat?" And then he muttered something about, "You better do it because I can't." So that gave me

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no problem at all. Not knowing Vice President Johnson, I waited until he appeared and raced him as Rufus Youngblood was putting on his raincoat and said, "Mr. Vice President," and swung the door open and said this was his seat. As I remember, there was rather a long stare that probably could be interpreted, "And who the hell are you?" The Vice President sat down in the seat though, and this was, I believe, the first time in a trip that he and Yarborough traveled in the same car together. And it began to look like the Democratic Party was singing in concert in Texas.

CAMPBELL: Now, there was an indirect route taken back to Carswell Air Force Base, a bit of an indirect one. Were you involved in planning that route at all?

BYRNE: I had talked with the Secret Service about it, but again, I leaned completely on the Secret Service in the matter of routes, which later on we usually dickered about and discussed. I just bought the route that they suggested.

CAMPBELL: Why did the President not drive to Dallas?

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BYRNE: Well, it is rather a long trip. Relatively speaking I suppose it's short if you're thinking of a trip from here to New York, Washington to New York, or something; but, well, it's thirty miles or so, and motorcades aren't the most pleasant way to arrive. I suppose there's also something about the mode of arrival. It's sort of nice to come spiraling down from the sky in Air Force One. It adds quite a bit of drama, anticipation to it.

CAMPBELL: Any problems at the departure?

BYRNE: No. I remember I think we used the same party that we used for reception to escort the people to the airplane. And I remember very strongly everybody coming up to me with their face glowing and being completely delighted with what had happened and what had taken place in Fort Worth. I'm speaking about all the people who were in the reception committee and others who had been closely involved with the trip. And really there was a feeling of, you know, this Texas trip is now really hitting on all cylinders. The reception of the President was very good

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and for his wife, enthusiastic. And it looked like the people of Texas were really showing great hospitality and honor to their President. I left with as I returned to the hotel.

CAMPBELL: And every indication from the traveling party was positive.

BYRNE: That things were good; that things had gone as they wanted them to go.

CAMPBELL: Then, when the traveling party departed, might I just ask this, then did the Secret Service travel on with them or—the Secret Service advance man, Duncan—remain in Fort Worth?

BYRNE: As I remember from talking to them later on—not that day, much later on back in Washington—when they heard the news, they were in Fort Worth.

CAMPBELL: They were.

BYRNE: And they jumped in an automobile and went tearing down to Dallas by road.

CAMPBELL: You were in Fort Worth when you heard the news?

BYRNE: Yes. I was.... I'd started to knock out some notes on the whole trip to give a final wrap-up to

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Jerry Bruno. I did talk both to Bruno and to Moyers—Bruno in Washington and Moyers in Austin. I believe both of them called me asking how everything went, and I told them everything seemed fine. Then sat down to write a final report of what happened. I was going to put it in the mail and figured my duties were over. I wrote about a page which just really outlined a million things I've said today about the tickets and so forth, then I lay down.... I was in my room alone up in the Hotel Texas. I lay down for a little nap, and Ross Wilder, who was our business service center director in Dallas and who had moved into the hotel the night before to help me with some of the arrangements, suddenly was knocking on the door and asking me to listen to the radio. "Turn on the radio. Your boss is dead," he hollered. And I turned on a hotel radio and heard these bulletins coming from Dallas about the priest entering the hotel room and confirmed that the President was dead—the hospital room, I should say. When it became clear

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that the President was dead, I remember just turning the radio off and lying on my bed and weeping for I don't know how long. Then I canceled a flight that I had out of Dallas out of Love Field, and then I called Washington. I talked to Bernie Boutin, who of course was shook up like the rest of us, and said, you know, "I want to come back to Washington." He said, "Come ahead." He still was my nominal boss. Well, he was my boss for my job. Ross Wilder and a couple of friends of his—I don't even remember who they were; I think they worked for GSA—they drove me to Love Field in Dallas where I boarded an airplane and flew back to Baltimore and took the bus to Washington, cab to Virginia, and that was the end of it.

CAMPBELL: No contact in Fort Worth, then, with any of the people you'd known there before you left?

BYRNE: No. I didn't.... I probably would have gone around and seen everybody as was my usual procedure later on, but, I mean, this shattering news just

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ended everything. All I wanted to do was go home. Everything was so bright one minute and so dark the next.

CAMPBELL: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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