

## “YOUR GENEROUS INVITATION”: EVENTS PRECEDING THE APPEARANCE OF JOHN F. KENNEDY BEFORE THE GREATER HOUSTON MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION

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John Fitzgerald Kennedy, nearly twenty years after his death, remains the most identifiable Roman Catholic in the history of the United States. Throughout his political career, from his first election to the Congress in 1946 at the age of twenty-nine, until the solemn requiem mass that gripped the nation in November of 1963, Kennedy was known to his ever-expanding constituency as a communicant in the Church of Rome. As a congressman and later senator from Massachusetts, a state with a Roman Catholic population exceeding fifty percent, his faith was hardly a liability. His religion was, in fact, a significant asset on his running against the Eisenhower tide in 1952 and unseating Episcopalian Republican Henry Cabot Lodge.

A Roman Catholic running for national office was, however, a different matter. Conventional wisdom held that anti-Catholic prejudice in all sections of the country, but particularly in the South and Mid-West, would more than over balance Catholic bloc voting in the Northeast and industrial centers in the Great Lakes region. The defeat of the urban, Catholic, New York Governor Al Smith in 1928 by the western, Protestant, Herbert Hoover was confirmation of the thesis.

In 1959 and 1960 traditional political thinking concerning the influence of religious preference on voting behavior would be first challenged and then shattered. While there were significant events along the way, such as Fletcher Knebel's interview of Senator Kennedy in *Look* magazine in March of 1959, and the candidate's victory over Hubert Humphrey in the Democratic primary in Protestant West Virginia a year later, it was the appearance before the clergy of Houston on the evening of September 12, 1960, that defused issues emanating from Mr. Kennedy's faith for the remainder of the campaign.

The Houston meeting is perceived today as an event of signal importance in presidential history. To David Halberstam it is an example of Kennedy's skill in manipulating events for the new medium of television, an occasion in which a lion (Kennedy) was thrown to the Christians (the Houston clergy).<sup>1</sup> Theodore H. White has written about the "nonevent" of the 1960 presidential campaign; the expected happening that somehow does not happen:

The most difficult problem for any reporter is to report what Conan Doyle caused Sherlock Holmes to describe as the importance of the "curious incident" of the dog that did not bark. What does not happen is, sometimes, more significant than what does. The largest thing that did not happen in 1960 was an orgy of prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

The reason for the "nonevent," in White's view, is the address to the Houston ministers, Kennedy's best speech of the election year and an effort that "ranks with Lincoln's 'House Divided' speech and Bryan's 'Cross of Gold' as one of the great speeches of American political campaigns — a moment when politics reach up and touch history."<sup>3</sup>

The Greater Houston Ministerial Association is an organization not unlike similar groups of clergy that convene in cities across America. In 1960, of the more than one thousand Protestant ministers serving in the Houston area, somewhat less than fifty broke bread with their fellow pastors at monthly luncheon meetings of the Association. The body was entirely Protestant, as Catholic and Jewish clerics never expressed interest in the group. At the same time, however, the Association was hardly representative of the city's Protestant clergy as southern Baptist ministers refused to unite with interfaith organizations. In a metropolitan center where southern Baptist churches occupied eleven columns of listings in the telephone directory, no ecclesiastical group could be thought of as representative while the Baptists remained outside.

On September 12, 1960, however, all of this was to change. More than six hundred clergymen, including rabbis, Roman Catholic priests, and southern Baptist preachers would assemble somewhat self-consciously in the Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel in downtown Houston to hear the junior senator from Massachusetts express his views on the number one emotional issue of the 1960 presidential campaign.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy's appearance before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association came about primarily through the efforts

<sup>1</sup>David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 325-326.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore H. White, *In Search of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 485-486.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

of one man — the Rev. Herbert Meza. In June of 1960, some three months before the September 12 meeting, Meza, in his capacity as vice president and program chairman of the ministerial group, proposed that both the Republican and Democratic nominees for president of the United States be invited to appear before the Association in the fall. Except for the eminence of the personalities involved, the programs suggested by Rev. Mr. Meza represented a standard practice of the Houston clerical body. At previous meetings the clergyman had heard and interrogated members of the Houston board of education, representatives of the police department, hopefuls for the office of mayor of Houston, and, on one occasion, a Roman Catholic candidate for the United States Senate. This senatorial aspirant, Henry B. Gonzales, spoke at the invitation of his friend, Herbert Meza. His appearance, according to Meza, caused some stir among several members of the Association who were not kindly disposed to liberal, Democratic, Roman Catholic politicians.

Herbert Meza was well aware in the month of June that Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy were the probable standard bearers for their respective parties. His own personal sentiments, as a Democrat, were with Kennedy. The adverse criticism resulting from Henry Gonzales' speech, however, convinced him that an invitation extended only to the Bostonian would be interpreted by the clergy of Houston as a manifestation of his own biases. Accordingly, Meza proposed that both nominees be invited to address the Greater Houston Ministerial Association.

A month later, after the major parties had adjourned their conventions, invitations were sent to both presidential aspirants. The Republicans responded promptly in the affirmative — Richard Nixon would speak to the clergy of Houston. From the Democrats, however, there was no reply.

It would be difficult to envision a more unlikely candidate to promote a meeting encouraging a fair exchange of ideas on the religious issue than Herbert Meza, the associate pastor of the Bellaire Presbyterian Church of Houston. While Meza was born and reared a Roman Catholic in a Spanish-speaking family in Tampa, Florida, he became, at the age of eighteen, a Protestant convert and joined the Presbyterian church. After serving in the Marine Corps in World War II, Meza enrolled at Davidson College in North Carolina. Following graduation, he attended Union Theological Seminary of Richmond, Virginia, where he earned the Bachelor of Divinity degree. Upon ordination Meza served as a missionary for four years in Spain and Portugal. Because he was a Protestant missionary he experienced difficulty entering the Iberian Peninsula. Once there, he was expelled from Portugal on two occasions for proselytizing activity.

Meza disclaims partisan considerations in initiating Kennedy's speech to the Houston ministers. The Rev. George Reck, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church and president of the Greater Houston Ministerial

Association in 1960, agrees. Reck, a political independent who voted for Richard Nixon in the presidential election, gives full credit to Meza for the original ideas of having the candidates address the city's clergy. "We were neutral," he says, "I wish we could have had Nixon."

The actual invitation to the Kennedy campaign party to address the Houston clergy was tendered by the Harris County Democratic organization. The cochairmen for the Democrats in the county in 1960 were Woodrow Seals and John H. Crooker, Jr. Mr. Seals was contacted by the Rev. Mr. Meza, and it was he who proffered the original invitation to the Kennedy party in late July. The invitation specified that the subject of Kennedy's address should be his religion. Nixon's invitation indicated no subject.

The Greater Houston Ministerial Association does not meet during the summer months of July and August, and during the hot Houston summer the city's clergy all but forgot about the offer extended to Senator Kennedy. Richard Nixon followed up his original acceptance with a statement of regret that he would not be able, after all, to appear before the group. It became apparent to George Reck and Herbert Meza that the Democrats had pocketed their invitation and were waiting for the course of the campaign to determine whether their candidate should speak to and be interrogated on the religious issue when he visited Houston in mid-September.

On September 7, 1960, the presidential campaign that would end with the closest election in American history was sputtering along in low gear. Richard Nixon, the Republican heir apparent to the Eisenhower mantle of leadership, was hospitalized in Washington, D.C., with an infection resulting from a knee injury. Three thousand miles away, in Nixon's home state of California, John F. Kennedy was striving to tune a campaign machine that was escorting him in and out of cities in such haphazard fashion that he was overscheduled and underexposed. The senator was also laboring under a self-imposed ban on attacks against his opponent as long as the vice president remained in the hospital. In the absence of campaign fire, the nation concerned itself with the visit of Nikita Khrushchev to the United States and the surge of the Pittsburgh Pirates toward the National League Pennant.

The seventh day of September was marked by two statements on the most significant emotional issue of the campaign by a pair of key figures on opposing sides of the political war. Robert F. Kennedy, serving as campaign manager for his older brother, spoke to newsmen in Atlanta and identified Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, and Texas as "problem states" for the Democratic ticket. These states had become a problem, he stated, because of the Roman Catholic faith of the Democratic candidate. The younger Kennedy indicated that religious objections would be overcome by the same approach employed in the West Virginia primary in April. On that occasion, when John Kennedy crushed in the 1960 presidential

hopes of Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, he had faced the issue squarely and had given frank and candid answers to all sincere questions. "The overriding question and the only question is whether Senator Kennedy believes in the separation of church and state," argued the campaign manager. "He's said unequivocally that he does." Two southern governors, Luther H. Hodges of North Carolina and J. Lindsey Almond, Jr. of Virginia agreed with Robert Kennedy that religion could well determine the results of the election in their states.

In the nation's capital, on the same day, President Dwight D. Eisenhower took the liberty of speaking for his party's nominee and said that under no circumstances would the Republicans interject the issue of religion into the campaign. A candidate's faith, the president hoped, was a matter that could be "laid on the shelf and forgotten until after the election is over."

But the partisan political figures were not the only ones addressing themselves to the matter of John F. Kennedy's religious preference on September 7, 1960. For on that same date, an ostensibly nonpartisan religious group called the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom was meeting in the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. The National Conference was an *ad hoc* body whose importance stemmed from the eminence of the cochairmen of the group, the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale of Marble Collegiate Church in New York and the Rev. Dr. Harold John Ockenga of Park Street Church in Boston. Dr. Peale read the organization's position papers to assembled reporters, and the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom was immediately rechristened "The Peale Group" in honor of its spokesman.

The Peale Group was composed of 150 ministers and laymen identified by Peale as being "more or less representative of evangelical, conservative Protestants." The conferees, meeting under the motto, "Take care to be fair," included Daniel Poling, editor of *The Christian Herald*; Glenn L. Archer, executive director of the Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State (P.O.A.U.); Dr. Clyde W. Taylor, public affairs secretary for the National Association of Evangelicals; Dr. Charles Clayton Morrison, former editor of *The Christian Century*; and Dr. L. Nelson Bell, associate editor of *Christianity Today* and father-in-law of Billy Graham.

The Peale Group's statement expressed a concern that a Catholic president would be unable to resist church pressures in matters involving foreign relations, freedom of religion, and education. Beginning with a premise describing the Roman Catholic church as "a political as well as religious organization," the National Conference stated:

It is inconceivable that a Roman Catholic President would not be under extreme pressure by the hierarchy of his church to accede to its policies with respect to foreign relations in matters, including representation to the Vatican.

The statement cited persecution of Protestant ministers and missionaries in Spain and Colombia. After observing that nations in which the Roman Catholic population constitutes a majority often institute repressive measures against other religions, the report accused the Catholic church in America of attempting to break down the wall of separation of church and state by a continuous campaign to secure public funds for the support of its schools and other institutions:

In Ohio today (a state with a Roman Catholic governor), according to an Attorney General's ruling, Roman Catholic nuns and sisters may be placed on the public payroll as school teachers.<sup>4</sup>

A terse evaluation of the nature and origin of the religious issue in the 1960 presidential campaign concluded the Protestant organization's statement.

Finally, that there is a "religious issue" in the present political campaign is not the fault of any candidate. It is created by the nature of the Roman Catholic Church which is, in a very real sense, both a church and a temporal state.

Dr. Peale told reporters that the statement had been prepared before the National Conference convened and had been unanimously adopted by the body. He refused to identify the author(s) of the document. According to L. Nelson Bell, a medical doctor and a Presbyterian layman, "The only discussion concerned its length. Some people thought it was too long." Dr. Bell expressed alarm at a Protestant lack of understanding of Catholicism. "Pseudo tolerance," he said, "is not tolerance at all but simply ignorance." If Kennedy were to be elected, then Senate majority leadership would pass to Mike Mansfield of Montana; and John W. McCormack of Massachusetts would continue as majority leader in the House of Representatives. "Both are fine men, but both belong to a church with headquarters in Rome," concluded Bell. Kennedy was compared to Nikita Khrushchev by Harold Ockenga. Each man, said the Boston cleric, is "a captive of a system." When asked if the group had considered Richard Nixon's Quaker faith, Peale,

<sup>4</sup>The facts in the Ohio case were quite different than as reported by the National Conference. The decision to hire Catholic sisters to teach in public classrooms was made before the Roman Catholic Mike DiSalle took office as the state's chief executive. In 1958, while Protestant state Attorney General William B. Saxbe ruled that the thirty-nine year old practice of hiring nuns to relieve teacher shortages was not in violation of the Ohio Constitution. Governor DiSalle demanded an apology from Dr. Peale, saying, "This matter has never been before me."

an announced supporter and close personal friend of the vice president, said, "I don't know that he ever let it bother him."

By coincidence, Kennedy campaign aide John Cogley was staying in the Mayflower Hotel on September 7. Cogley, a former editor of *Commonweal* magazine and a staff member of the Democratic Community Relations Division (a euphemism describing a three-man committee working on the religious issue), recognized many of the clergymen of the National Conference and began a quiet, personal investigation. When the purpose and the posture of the meeting became clear, Cogley telephoned the Kennedy party in California with news of the Peale Group and its activity.

The intelligence provided by John Cogley prompted some hard thinking in the Democratic campaign staff. The essential problem for the Democrats was that the Peale Group had lifted the entire religious question above the level of the rantings of right-wing pulpit pounders and the hastily drafted resolutions of obscure religious sects. When, for example, Harvey Springer, self-billed as the Cowboy Evangelist of the Rockies, denounced the candidacy of Senator Kennedy because no Roman Catholics had sailed on the Mayflower, or when the annual convention of the 17,542 member North Bend Baptist Association of Northern Kentucky had unanimously passed a resolution opposing the election of a Catholic to the nation's highest office, little notice was taken by the media. But when the widely-read author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* and a weekly newspaper column "Confident Living," backed by figures associated with *The Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *The Christian Herald*, the National Association of Evangelicals, and Billy Graham openly questioned the ability of a Roman Catholic to serve as president of the United States, then the nation paused to listen. The personal prestige of Norman Vincent Peale had now given whispered bigotry a veneer of respectability.

Clearly, the statement emanating from the Mayflower Hotel on September 7 could not be ignored. But the views of the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom would provoke no blind counter-attack. The stakes in an American quadrennial election are far too great for a candidate to allow himself the emotional satisfaction of an intemperate verbal blast. The paper produced by the Peale Group was studied by the campaign staff and its bearing on the total religious question carefully weighed.

For the Kennedy aides, the imprecise science of determining the mind of the electorate was vastly simplified by the retention of a computer group. On August 25, Robert Kennedy received a 125 page report from the Simulmatics Corporation that represented a green light for open discussion of the religious issue and the engaging of Richard M. Nixon in the epic television debates. Thus, John Kennedy was technologically assisted in choosing options on the two most critical strategic questions in the 1960 presidential campaign. For two full weeks before the Peale Group statement of September 7 the candidate had known that he could speak out on his church affiliation without fear of political harm.

The Simulmatics Corporation was fostered by the Advisory Council of the Democratic National Committee and was ominously dubbed "The People Machine." Chairman and chief theoretician of the corporation was Professor Ithiel de Sola Pool of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It is an activity that tries to predict human behavior," said Pool by way of definition. "In the 1960 election, the services of Simulmatics were used by the Kennedy strategists to estimate the reaction of the electorate to different sets of campaign strategies."<sup>5</sup>

John F. Kennedy was identified as just one member of a new generation of politicians who both read and understood polls. Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, and Adlai Stevenson, according to Pool, neither used nor trusted public opinion findings.

The same cannot be said of any of the top political figures of 1960. Nixon, Rockefeller, and Kennedy all relied on polls, read them carefully, and understood them. A new political generation finally completed the revolution that had begun with Gallup's technological revolution in 1936. John F. Kennedy in particular not only understood enough to trust research; he understood enough to know when and in what respects to distrust it. He could ask the right questions and could distinguish between findings and implications. The same capacity for remembering and using numbers that so awed economists who dealt with him also stood him in good stead with survey researchers.<sup>6</sup>

Several questions were submitted to the People Machine in an effort to discern the attitudes of the American voting public. One such question asked: "What would happen on election day if the issue of anti-Catholicism became 'much more salient' in the voters' minds?"<sup>7</sup> A definitive answer would provide the Kennedy campaign staff with a

<sup>5</sup>"The People Machine," *Newsweek*, April 2, 1960, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup>Ithiel de Sola Pool, Robert P. Abelson, and Samuel L. Popkin, *Candidates, Issues, and Strategies: A Computer Simulation of the 1960 and 1964 Presidential Elections*. (Cambridge: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1964), pp. 20-21.

The Simulmatics people employed three essential components in their behavior predictions. An IBM 704 computer was engaged for necessary mathematical computations. Secondly, raw data on the electorate consisting of interviews with 100,000 registered voters taken between 1952 and 1960 by several organizations were sorted into 480 voter classifications. These data were then reduced to tape and stored in the computer. The final element consisted of a body of communications and social-psychological theory taken from research studies conducted at several universities, primarily Columbia.

<sup>7</sup>*Newsweek*, April 2, 1960, p. 57.

guideline for handling the explosive religious issue. The report of the Simulmatics Corporation concluded on August 25:

Kennedy today has lost the bulk of the votes he would lose if the election campaign were to be embittered by the issue of anti-Catholicism. The net worst has been done. If the campaign becomes embittered, he will lose a few more reluctant Protestant votes to Nixon, but will gain Catholic and minority group votes. Bitter anti-Catholicism in the campaign would bring about a reaction against prejudice and for Kennedy from Catholics and others who would resent overt prejudice. It is in Kennedy's hands to handle the religious issue during the campaign in a way that maximizes Kennedy votes based on religious prejudice and minimizes further defections. On balance, he would not lose further from forthright and persistent attention to the religious issue, and would gain. The simulation shows that there has already been a serious defection from Kennedy by Protestant voters. Under these circumstances, it makes no sense to brush the religious issue under the rug. Kennedy has already suffered the disadvantages of the issue even though it is not embittered now — and without receiving compensating advantages inherent in it.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to minimize the report of the Simulmatics Corporation regarding the religious issue. "Even though it is not embittered now" — in the words of the report — the coast was clear for John F. Kennedy to speak out decisively on the question without fear that candor might lose the election. On September 1 as the Democratic entourage prepared to depart Washington for the political hustings, the question before the Kennedy staff was one of timing: when should the religious issue be discussed? Only one week into the campaign the Peale Group had provided the answer.

An experienced politician such as Senator Kennedy did not need computers, newspapers, or Norman Vincent Peale to tell him of the salience of the religious issue as the postconvention campaign warmed to life. As he left the Capital to begin the election effort reporters asked the candidate his views on charges that Nixon was surreptitiously bringing the religious issue into the campaign. A day later, in Portland, Maine, Kennedy replied to a question on the distribution of anti-Catholic campaign literature. Twenty-four hours later, in San Francisco, the senator refused to lay blame for such literature when asked

<sup>8</sup>Thomas B. Morgan, "The People Machine," *Harper's*, CCXXII (January, 1961), p. 55.

about possible Republican complicity. In a statewide televised question and answer session in Seattle on September 6, an interrogator asked what the Democrats planned to do to counteract religious attacks. The next evening, in Portland, Oregon, a member of Kennedy's audience asked simply, "Can a Catholic be elected President?" Two days later in Modesto, California, a man standing near Kennedy's train platform shouted, "Do you believe all Protestants are heretics?" And the senator fired back, "No, and I hope you don't believe all Catholics are."

Thus, in a period of approximately one week, as the campaign moved from the nation's capital to cities in New England, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Michigan, and California, questions concerning the Roman Catholic faith of the Democratic presidential aspirant were being asked by the press and voters at nearly every stop.

Meanwhile, partisan reaction to the Peale Group meeting was not long in coming. John C. Bennett, dean of the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York, wrote in *Christianity and Crisis*:

The religious opposition to Senator Kennedy of the type associated with a kind of Protestant underworld — an opposition that expresses itself in unsigned manifestos and stirs up undisguised hatred of Catholics — is still with us, and it is hard to say whether there is more or less of it now than in earlier periods. . . .

There is one curious coincidence in these attacks: it is that those who take the leadership in this Protestant attack on the Roman Church as a campaign issue are also persons who would not support a liberal Democrat no matter what his religion; that the opposition on the religious issue centers in that part of the country where the opposition is equally strong on the issue of civil rights and on the economic philosophy of Senator Kennedy and his platform.<sup>9</sup>

Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a cochairman with Dr. Bennett of New York's Liberal Party, said, "Dr. Peale and I disagree on everything, religiously and politically." The New York Board of Rabbis likewise denounced the Peale Group statement. Rabbi David I. Golovensky, president of the body, termed voting against a candidate because of adherence to Catholicism a "sinister betrayal of the fundamental precept of American democracy."

<sup>9</sup>*Christianity and Crisis*, September 19, 1960, pp. 125-126.

The Democrats were no less swift in issuing statements to the press than were the theologians. Vice presidential nominee Lyndon B. Johnson declared, "I think it's a mistake when we permit any religious test as a requirement for holding office." Mr. Johnson then added a personal barb directed at one of the Peale Group participants. "Perhaps it was just a coincidence," he said, "that Dr. Poling is a Republican." Robert Kennedy played on the same theme in commenting on Poling and Dr. Peale. "Their close relationship with Mr. Nixon and the Republican Party in the election leads me to question the sincerity of their statement and their judgment in issuing it."

It was, as Johnson and the younger Kennedy pointed out, the political inclinations of the leaders of the National Conference that made their religious smokescreen readily transparent. Along with Peale's support of Mr. Nixon, critics pointed to Daniel Poling's previous candidacy for the office of mayor of Philadelphia on a Republican ticket. Harold Ockenga was a consistent advocate of conservative, Republican causes, and L. Nelson Bell was on the staff of a decidedly right-leaning religious periodical. Theodore Sorensen lists three factors that discounted the credibility of the Peale Group statement:

1. Men well known to be Republicans had pretended their opposition to Kennedy was for religious reasons.
2. Protestant clergymen opposed to the Catholic Church's intervention in politics showed no compunction about openly intervening themselves.
3. The political position of the Catholic Church had not only been inaccurately described but also inaccurately ascribed to Senator Kennedy, whose own views and legislative votes the group largely discounted.<sup>10</sup>

T.R.B., in *The New Republic* waxed poetic in offering his judgment of the National Conference.

'The Pope, the White House seeks to steal,  
Cried Dr. Poling to Dr. Peale.  
'For Heaven's sake, get Nixon rolling!  
Cried Dr. Peale to Dr. Poling.'<sup>11</sup>

Activity in Washington, D.C., however, disclosed that the Democrats would seek to counter the Peale Group's allegations with more than mere countercharges against the participants. The Democratic campaign workers in the nation's capital quickly assembled selected Kennedy quotations on church-state relations, birth control, aid to parochial schools, the fraudulent Knights of Columbus oath, and the

<sup>10</sup>Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 189.

<sup>11</sup>"T.R.B., From Washington," *The New Republic*, September 19, 1960, p. 1.

issue of an ambassador to the Vatican. These statements were combined with excerpts from the Constitution of the United States, the Congressional Oath of Office, and the Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States of 1948 and published as a position paper spelling out the senator's views on the separation of church and state.<sup>12</sup> The basic sources for the candidate's own words were the *Look* magazine interview of 1959, an article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, a speech delivered to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the acceptance speeches at the Los Angeles convention, and an interview with James Reston printed in the *New York Times*. The memorandum was distributed to the press and used as a "mailout" to answer the thousands of letters the Democratic campaign staff was receiving asking questions regarding Kennedy's religion.

As evaluation of the Peale Group statement, the People Machine data, and the questions from campaign reporters and audiences led to the inescapable conclusion that the religious issue of 1960 had, indeed, reached a crest. It was also readily apparent to the inner circle of the Kennedy staff that the surging tide of ecclesiastical doubt could not be contained by mere cofferdams constructed of press releases and mailouts. Accordingly, on September 8, John F. Kennedy reluctantly decided to accept a long standing invitation of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association to appear before the clergy of Houston and answer questions on the presidency and his Roman Catholic faith. The following day Senator Kennedy told a press conference in Burbank, California, that he would not respond to Dr. Peale. When asked if he planned to discuss religion in his speeches Mr. Kennedy replied, "Not unless I am asked."

The offer from Houston beckoned as a golden political opportunity far too glittering to pass up. Not only was the timing ideal in that the charges of September 7 could be answered only five days after hitting the front pages of the nation's newspapers, but the invitation was strategically perfect as well as it provided a chance for the candidate to speak out on the religious issue while adhering to his stated policy of addressing the subject only when asked to do so.

As the decision to meet with the Houston ministers was made a scant four days before the meeting was to take place, time was of the essence. Orders crackled out of the New Frontier Express in California to the Harris County Democratic Committee in Houston and the Democratic National Committee in Washington, D.C. James Wine (a Presbyterian) and John Cogley (a Catholic) of the Community Relations Division were advised of events and dispatched to Houston to help in preparations for the confrontation.

Even before the senator had announced his formal acceptance of

the Ministerial Association's invitation, Harris County Democratic cochairmen Woodrow Seals and John H. Crooker, Jr., told the press about the bid. They also stated that the Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel had been reserved. "We are not only urging him to accept, but we are suggesting he answer questions from ministers in the audience," they said.

When Kennedy's affirmative answer to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association was disclosed, Crooker and Seals announced that the event would be shown "live" on television on twenty Texas channels with local coverage on Houston's KTRK-TV. The cochairmen said they had consulted with Herbert Meza before arranging for the telecast. There was some disagreement, however, between the pastors and the politicians over the final arrangements for the meeting. George Reck speaks of the Ministerial Association's being "victimized" by having the meeting at the Rice Hotel instead of a local church. "We intended to meet in a church, possibly First Methodist downtown," he explains. But by the time Kennedy's formal acceptance was made public, the local Democratic committee had already engaged the Crystal Ballroom.<sup>13</sup>

While the Harris County Democrats handled logistical arrangements for the occasion, Wine and Cogley negotiated the ground rules for the meeting with George Reck and Herbert Meza. This conference to establish procedures resulted in an interesting reversal of expected roles as it was the Washington Democrats rather than the Houston ministers who argued for open and unscreened interrogation from the floor following the senator's prepared remarks. Reck and Meza were concerned that inflammatory and unintelligent questions from clergymen who did not usually attend meetings of the Association would cause embarrassment for their organization. Wine and Cogley, however, argued that any screening such as requiring questions to be submitted in written form to be read by a narrator would create the impression that the Catholic nominee was being shielded from difficult queries. The ministers saw the logic of the Community Relations people and agreed to open interrogation. After selling the free question format to the clerics, the Washington staffers flew to Lubbock, Texas, to join the Kennedy party and resell the program to a clearly apprehensive Theodore Sorensen.

<sup>13</sup>At this point the officers of the clerical group, curiously, remembered the widely publicized "Poling incident" of 1947 in which Kennedy, as a Congressman, refused to represent the Roman Catholic faith at a banquet honoring the memory of the four chaplains who heroically went down with the troopship *Dorchester* in 1943. Poling's son, Clark V. Poling, was one of the four. The dinner was held to raise funds for an inter-faith chapel to be situated within the Baptist Temple in Philadelphia. From this incident, the leaders of the Houston group reasoned that Kennedy might not be able to take part in a meeting in the sanctuary of a non-Catholic church. The ministers were in error in their belief that the Four Chaplains Dinner was held in a church. The banquet took place in a Philadelphia hotel.

<sup>12</sup>Memorandum, Democratic National Committee, 1960.

It soon became apparent that the Texas Democrats were not content only to name the meeting place; they wanted to control the introduction of the candidate as well. In doing so, they encroached into the territory of Wine and Cogley. Accordingly, without consulting the Ministerial Association or the Kennedy party, the local Democratic organization let it be known that Senator Lyndon Johnson would introduce Senator Kennedy. There was, in fact, a heated exchange between the preachers and the politicians. The press quoted an official of the Ministerial Association as saying, "We didn't want to make a political rally out of our little meeting. But L.B.J. and Mr. Sam wanted to get on that platform and were mightily put out when we wouldn't let them."<sup>14</sup>

On the morning of September 12, George Reck and Herbert Meza were invited to the Rice Hotel by the local Democratic committee. "They asked us if Johnson could introduce Kennedy and Rayburn could be on the stage," says Reck. The ministers replied in the negative, arguing that such arrangements would take the meeting completely out of the hands of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association and turn it into a television rally. "The Kennedy party wanted to take over the meeting," Reck remembers, "but Meza was very firm." Meza carried the argument by saying that if Johnson and Rayburn sat on the platform, no representatives of the city's clergy would take part in the meeting.<sup>15</sup>

It was not the Kennedy party, however, that wanted to dominate the proceedings. On the afternoon of September 12, as the senator's campaign plane approached Houston, he solicited the aid of both James Wine and John Cogley in keeping the Senate majority leader and the Speaker of the House off the dais. "Mr. Johnson and Sam Rayburn were on the plane," Cogley later recalled. "He (Johnson) wanted Rayburn and himself to be on the platform to show support. Kennedy didn't want them — he wanted to be alone. The solution was that at the earlier meeting at the Coliseum LBJ and Rayburn would appear on TV."

Lyndon Johnson would not be eased from the spotlight so easily, however. When the Democratic campaign entourage reached Houston, he was adamant about introducing Kennedy on the telecast. At this point, only a few hours before airtime, it became James Wine's responsibility to placate Mr. Johnson. Without informing the Texas senator of John Kennedy's insistence that he desired to face the ministers and the cameras alone, Wine instead told Johnson that it was the opinion of the Rev. Herbert Meza that Johnson and Rayburn should not appear. A

<sup>14</sup>New York Herald Tribune, September 14, 1960, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>It would have been impossible, of course, to cancel the meeting at this juncture. The officers of the ministerial body were, however, fully prepared to boycott the proceedings.

somewhat less than mollified Lyndon Johnson then retorted, "No damn little preacher is going to tell me what I can do in my own state." That evening, however, only Meza and Reck appeared before the audience and television cameras with Kennedy, while the senator from Texas and the Speaker of the House of Representatives viewed the program on a giant television screen that had been set up for the rally audience in the Houston Coliseum.

The entire process of setting up the confrontation in the Rice Hotel clearly shows the separate communications networks maintained by the Democratic presidential and vice presidential nominees in 1960. Inasmuch as the meeting would take place in Johnson territory, the initial arrangements were handled by Woodrow Seals and John Crooker, men who had long labored in Texas political vineyards with LBJ and who now took the liberty of including the two leading citizens of Texas on the program. (In the Johnson administration, Seals would become a federal judge and Crooker would be appointed chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board.) At the same time, however, John Cogley and James Wine, men who were answerable to Senator Kennedy were sent from Washington to oversee arrangements. (In the Kennedy administration, Wine would be appointed ambassador to the Ivory Coast.)

It is far from accidental, therefore, that in the single area in which the two pairs of representatives clashed — the inclusion or exclusion of LBJ and Sam Rayburn in the Rice Hotel proceedings — the Kennedy emissaries called the play. The lesson is clear: in a presidential campaign the top man on the ticket dictates to the number two man even when the final decision results in embarrassment and discomfort for the running mate in his home state.

Kennedy's prepared remarks for the Houston ministers were written in Los Angeles on September 10 and 11 during a weekend respite from campaigning. The candidate and chief speech writer Theodore Sorensen closeted themselves in the Ambassador Hotel and hammered out the text of the address that both men realized could be the most important single effort in the race for the presidency. The collaborators relied, for the most part, on previous positions expressed by the candidate on church-state relations. Sorensen gathered the texts of the *Look* magazine interview with Fletcher Knebel, the speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors of April, 1960, the acceptance address to the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles two months before, and various statements made in press conferences throughout the United States. Impressed with the significance of the coming confrontation, Sorensen remarked to a friend, "We can win or lose the election right there in Houston on Monday night."<sup>16</sup>

While the Democrats were seeking primarily to placate fearful

<sup>16</sup>Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Morrow, 1964), p. 311.

Protestants on the religious issue, they wanted, at the same time, to avoid charges of "overaccommodation" which might cause a defection of Catholic voters from the Kennedy ticket. The *Look* magazine article of the previous year had prompted bitter charges in the Roman Catholic press that the senator was going so far to pacify Protestants that he was betraying his own faith. Now, in 1960, critics were pointing to these attacks as examples of Catholic reaction to Kennedy's liberal views on church and state. In order to head off possible reaction from the nation's Catholic journals, Sorensen telephoned Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray and narrated the entire speech. The speech writer also conferred with staff members Wine and Cogley to elicit comments and advice from both a Protestant and Catholic point of view.

Even as the Texas and Kennedy Democrats were at work, another group was preparing a reception for the senator. Some two hundred people assembled in the downtown First Baptist Church of Houston on Thursday night, September 8, to formulate plans for the distribution of anti-Catholic leaflets at the Coliseum rally. (Newspaper reports after the event mentioned such pamphlets being circulated but did not identify those handing them out.) One man stationed himself in the lobby of the Rice Hotel with copies of a particularly vicious anti-Catholic flyer. When arriving guests of the Ministerial Association questioned him, he refused to give his name.

On Monday, September 12, the Democratic faithful of Houston thronged to the Coliseum to pledge their support to their party's nominee. As was his habit during the campaign, Kennedy ignored his prepared text and exhorted loyalists with a speech that was entirely off the cuff. The New England Irishman paid his obeisance to the heroes of the Lone Star State and joined their names with heroes of the Bay State. Thus, Bowie, Travis, and Crockett of the Alamo were mentioned with Paul Revere. Sam Houston was cited for his service in the United States Senate with Daniel Webster. Sam Rayburn was extolled for his record as Speaker of the House and John McCormack, the House majority leader, was identified as "his strong right arm." And, lest the lesson be lost by the assembled Texans, Kennedy identified himself as the presidential candidate from Massachusetts running with a vice presidential nominee, Lyndon B. Johnson from Texas.

Kennedy's performance was a good one, and the thousands who filled the great auditorium laughed in all the right places and interrupted him frequently with ringing applause. At the end of the rally the crowd tendered him a standing ovation as he took his leave of Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn to go to the Rice Hotel two blocks away.

In the Rice Hotel Mr. Kennedy dressed in television basic black and reviewed the impending confrontation with Pierre Salinger. When Kennedy inquired about the mood of the ministers the press secretary replied, "They're tired of being called bigots."<sup>17</sup> Downstairs James

Wine was having second thoughts about the open interrogation. A few minutes before the meeting was to begin he sought out Herbert Meza. "Mr. Wine asked me to be fair and protective and not allow any abuse," Meza says. "He was apprehensive about rude questions."

For some unknown reason, Kennedy seemed confused about the starting time of the meeting and entered the packed Crystal Ballroom at seven minutes before nine o'clock. The audience rose and applauded politely as he moved to his seat at the front table that was centered beneath two opulent chandeliers that hover over the room like a pair of pregnant cut-glass clouds. He was greeted by George Reck and Herbert Meza. Two lecturns flanked the table giving the appearance of a divided chancel. Only the rostrum on the left was used during the course of the evening, and no one seems to remember why the second lecturn was in the room.

In the moments before the telecast, the three men at the front of the room made sparse conversation. Both ministers noted that Kennedy's hands were shaking and that he seemed tense. "He was very, very nervous," recalls Reck. The president of the ministerial body adjudged his brethren of the cloth sufficiently threatening in countenance to offer pastoral encouragement to the candidate. "They're not as beastly as they appear," he said reassuringly.

Precisely at nine p.m., the Rev. Mr. Reck made a general welcome accompanied by an admonition urging restraint, respect, and "good Christian behavior generally." When asked eight years after the event why he thought such remarks were necessary in a meeting of clergymen, Reck answered matter-of-factly, "I know southern Baptists. I was just afraid."

Herbert Meza, in his capacity of vice president and program chairman of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, introduced Senator Kennedy.

This program this evening does not constitute an endorsement of either the speaker of the evening or the party which he represents.

The program has been motivated by the religious issues in the campaign — issues that are not modern. There are some who insist that nothing has changed within the Roman Catholic Church. And there are others who insist that nothing should change. The problem is not to deny the religious issue or to brand as intolerant those who raise it. The problem is to place it in perspective and to determine where the candidate stands in relation to that perspective.

The extremists on both sides have tended to dominate the debate. Contrary to foreign propaganda, the South is not a hotbed of religious and racial intolerance. There are many honest minds that are raising honest questions. Many Catholics differ with us

<sup>17</sup>"Test of Religion," *Time*, September 26, 1960, p. 21.

on many questions that are relevant to the welfare of our country. The fact that the Senator is with us tonight is to concede that a religious issue does exist. It is because many are seriously and decently raising these questions that we have invited our speaker of the evening and have allowed this meeting to be broadcast. To that end I should like to introduce at this time the Senator from Massachusetts and the Democratic candidate for the Presidency of the United States, Senator John F. Kennedy.

"When he got up to speak," says Meza, "I felt that all of his nervousness had gone."

Now, some five months after the American Society of Newspaper Editors speech, two months after the invitation had been extended to the Democratic party by the Houston ministers, and five days after the intemperate blast of the Peale Group, John F. Kennedy stood before nearly 1,000 ministers, reporters, and guests in the Crystal Ballroom and thousands of Texans watching on television.

"I am grateful," he began simply, "for your generous invitation to state my views."

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It would be an overstatement to say that the religious issue died a dishonorable death after September 12, 1960. Anti-Catholic campaign activity continued until election day. The twelfth day of September did, however, mark the demise of the Catholic question as a respectable campaign issue. While the bigoted voices of the far right persisted in their descriptions of the Pope's holding audience in the oval office, no such eminent leaders as Daniel Poling or Norman Vincent Peale chose to join the fray. Richard Nixon, in fact, vetoed a written endorsement by Evangelist Billy Graham that was to appear in *Life* magazine. Although Graham's support was carefully devoid of religious considerations, the vice president was afraid of exacerbating the religious question.<sup>18</sup>

The defense articulated by Senator Kennedy in his own behalf was, by way of contrast to the objections raised to his candidacy, reasoned and dispassionate. The Catholic nominee in 1960 did not level

<sup>18</sup>Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1962), p. 365.

charges of anti-Catholic prejudice at all those who raised religious questions; nor did he attempt to educate the nation as to the real nature of his church. As a religious man in a secular calling, Kennedy chose to apply the guarantees of tolerance and freedom of the secular realm (the Constitution and the Bill of Rights) to his religion, rather than to attempt to defend the position of his church in a secular society. At Houston, therefore, he wisely refused to argue dogma and stood, instead, on the Constitution and historical precedent. In this way, if his critics were to continue their indictments, they would have to attack the long-established American tradition of religious freedom as well as the Roman Catholic church.

The senator's encounter with the Houston clergy amply demonstrated the wisdom of his position. Questioners cited canon law and read long quotations from Catholic works to force the candidate onto the horns of a dilemma, but the defendant countered with guarantees of freedom of belief and freedom from religious tests for office as specified in the highest law of the land. The result was that the tables were turned; and it was the questioners, rather than the respondent, who, seemingly, were on trial. Certainly, as Herbert Meza assessed, the trivial character and bigoted nature of many of the arguments raised by those who questioned Senator Kennedy's candidacy were amply displayed. Meza summarized his views of the meeting as follows:

I am convinced that one of the results was that it showed prejudice to be so ugly by the questions and the way they were asked. . . . There's no doubt in my mind that many people were repelled by this kind of religious dogmatism. Religious prejudice became ugly and, therefore, lost much of its compulsion.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy himself seemed well satisfied with his confrontation with the Houston ministers in the Rice Hotel. Evelyn Lincoln, Mr. Kennedy's personal secretary, has written:

The Senator felt that the meeting with the Houston ministers was the most important of the campaign. He hoped he had finally erased the doubts many Protestants had about voting for a Catholic for President. . . . That speech and the question and answer period following were filmed and shown repeatedly all over the country throughout the rest of the campaign, and the Senator seemed to regard it as

an early turning point in the campaign. Thereafter, he seemed much surer of the course the campaign would take.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Evelyn Lincoln, *My Twelve Years with John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1965), p. 176.

In addition to written sources, much research material for this study was gathered from interviews with the Rev. Herbert Meza and the Rev. George Reck of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Robert Kilgarlin of the Harris County Democratic Committee, Sidney Hopkins of the Rice Hotel management, and John Cogley of the Kennedy campaign staff.

## TEXAS LABOR IN THE THIRTIES: GILBERT MERS AND THE CORPUS CHRISTI WATERFRONT STRIKES

*The struggles of organized labor in Texas, while as varied and absorbing as more popular fields of study, have yet to receive adequate consideration from scholars of local history. Recently, however, interest in this area has steadily increased. As a consequence, attention is being given to many of the people who were directly involved in efforts to introduce unionization to Texas workers. One such individual is Gilbert Mers, who was highly active in attempts to organize the Gulf Coast maritime laborers.*

*Born in Ponca City, Oklahoma on January 21, 1908, Mers later moved with his family to Arizona where he attended school and began working as a miner in 1927. After following his family to Corpus Christi, Texas in 1929, he was employed as a longshoreman and subsequently became a member of the International Longshoremen's Association. During the following Depression years, conditions for workers deteriorated, generating widespread labor unrest. Encouraged by the new pro-labor legislation of the Roosevelt administration, labor unions embarked on innumerable strikes throughout the country. It is within this context that strikes occurred along the Corpus Christi waterfront in 1934, 1935, 1936-37. Gilbert Mers participated as a leader in all of these strikes, the success of which prompted Governor Allred to summon the Texas Rangers to defend strikebreakers.*

*During the height of Mers's involvement with the labor movement, he was drafted by the army in 1941 where he remained until the close of World War II. After his discharge, Mers moved to Houston for a short time, returning to Corpus Christi in 1948 where he served as a local union president for three years. At this time Mers joined the Industrial Workers of the World (more commonly known as the Wobblies), a revolutionary industrial union which foresees the overthrow of the capitalist system principally through use of the general strike, thereby placing the means of production and distribution in control of the workers.*

*Since 1957 Mers has resided in Houston where he remains an active member of the Wobblies. Currently, he is writing an autobiographical book on labor history. The following interview took place at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center on September 27, 1977. The interviewers were Louis J. Marchiafava (HMRC) and George T. Morgan (University of Houston); editorial notes by Deborah A. Bauer and Steven R. Strom. Ellipses indicate where passages have been deleted.*