The Underestimated Oregon Presidential Primary of 1960

By Monroe Sweetland

President John F. Kennedy on a visit to Astoria, Oregon, in September 1963
The Friday in Oregon that Made Kennedy President

In 1964, Monroe Sweetland, Oregon journalist and legislator and one of the first Kennedy organizers in Oregon, wrote this piece about the significance of the 1960 Oregon Primary.

Friday, May 20, 1960, was a judgment day which could bring impetus or disaster to the Kennedy-for-President campaign — the Democratic Primary in Oregon. The bandwagon had been rolling well. Each of the six contested primaries — six potential roadblocks — had been cleared. From the beginning in New Hampshire through the rugged battles with Senator Hubert Humphrey in Wisconsin and West Virginia, the Democratic voters had thawed and then warmed to John F. Kennedy.

Just as the Oregon Trail had been bordered long ago with the bleached bones of those who tried but didn't quite make it, Kennedy's campaign craftsmen knew that defeat in Oregon could be decisive. The growing image of Kennedy as "a winner" could be extinguished by a rebuff in Oregon as convention-time neared. Oregon was the last of the seven contested primaries. It was the only primary testing opinion in the Far West — that terra incognita, to the Bostonians, which lay beyond the Farm Belt.

To the Kennedy forces Oregon did not look good, but it couldn't be avoided. Oregon's primary law puts all of the avowed candidates on the primary ballot of their party whether or not the candidate approves. On the presidential ballot would be, for the first time, the complete roster of Senator Kennedy's colleagues who challenged him for nomination: Senators Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, and Stuart Symington of Missouri. A write-in drive for Adlai Stevenson was also being organized.

In many states the Massachusetts senator had well-placed personal or political friends, but Oregon was not one of them. In most states the far-flung connections of the Kennedy family provided at least some associations, but not in Oregon. Here was a state, moreover, in which Senator Kennedy himself had not spoken or campaigned until 1959 as he began to plan toward 1960. At the 1956 Democratic convention, Oregon had voted solidly for Senator Kefauver, not for Senator Kennedy, for vice-president.
In 1959, while campaigning for the 1960 Oregon Primary, U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy visited Monroe Sweetland’s publishing offices in Milwaukie.

Oregon has always been an overwhelmingly Protestant state. It was the one state, what’s more, where the anti-Catholic surge of the Ku Klux Klan era had abolished by vote of the people all parochial and private schools. Only a celebrated Supreme Court case invalidated this enactment. Would this state, only a generation later, endorse a Catholic for president?

Another negative factor in Oregon was the strength of the Teamster’s union, well-organized and politically alert. Everywhere this union was a vocal opponent of the Kennedy candidacy. In Oregon, the Steelworkers, United Automobile Workers, or textile unions — major Kennedy supporters in the East — were not substantially represented.

In Oregon’s metropolis, Portland, resided a popular Democratic mayor who had personally been put on the griddle by the congressional committee probing crime and corruption — and brother Robert Kennedy was its chief counsel. Although absolved of the charges, the mayor’s many friends were not likely to forgive or forget — at least not by May 20, 1960.

As if all these problems were not enough, a new and totally unexpected bolt struck the Kennedy caravan as it neared its last contested
primary in Oregon. At the filing deadline a petition was filed for Oregon's senior senator, Wayne L. Morse. The dynamic Morse had never been topped in an Oregon primary or election as a Democrat, nor when he earlier was a Republican. Now he announced as a “favorite son” candidate for the presidency.

The Kennedy Committee had been hoping and working for a majority of votes when the only opponents were the three out-of-state senators. With Senator Morse now in the fray, the hope for a majority vaporized. The supporters of Senators Johnson, Symington, and Humphrey and of Adlai Stevenson were urged to join a “Stop Kennedy” drive by voting for the favorite son, and many did so.

Knowing all the time that Oregon would be a danger zone that he could not avoid, Senator Kennedy had begun early. In the spring of 1959 he and Mrs. Kennedy came to Medford where he was guest speaker at the annual Roosevelt Day banquet. It was on this visit that the writer and some other Democratic officials were convinced that Kennedy was their man for 1960. In August he returned, and appearances were arranged for him at the Oregon AFL-CIO convention at Seaside and elsewhere. When a luncheon was attempted in his honor in Clatsop County, a third of the seats were unfilled — an inauspicious omen, his companions noted. But at the Labor Convention, his sincerity and force persuaded many in a skeptical assembly. It was on this visit that the first plans for a statewide committee for 1960 were made, and some leaders were actually enlisted.

Later, the Kennedy forces persuaded the popular Congresswoman Edith S. Green to leave the Humphrey camp and head the Oregon Committee for Senator Kennedy. This triumph alone later saved the Oregon campaign as her leadership brought support no other could have recruited, among them many of the longtime friends and supporters of her fellow liberal, Senator Morse. But once committed to Senator Kennedy, they stayed put even after Senator Morse’s belated declaration.

Toward the close of the primary campaign, in the course of sharp attacks on Senator Kennedy’s voting record, the maverick Senator Morse told the press he would get 60 percent of the total primary vote. Whatever he may have thought privately or may have been advised by his pollsters, Senator Kennedy publicly hoped for a plurality, bracing himself as an underdog for whatever Oregon’s Democrats might do.

“Not a single major Oregon Democrat supports him [Morse],” Time observed. “All the Party big-wheels — Representatives Edith Green and Charles O. Porter, State Senator Monroe Sweetland — even Maurine Neuberger — are in Kennedy’s camp. And in the Morse code this is nothing less than high treason.”
Monroe Sweetland poses at the Birkemeier-Sweetland House in Milwaukie, Oregon. Sweetland served on the Democratic Party’s platform committee in 1960 and attended the party’s convention that year. In 2000, forty years later, he went to the Los Angeles convention as a delegate and was the only representative from Oregon on the party’s platform committee.

“I hope to be a good second to Senator Morse,” Senator Kennedy said almost plaintively. But he and his staff knew he badly needed a majority in Oregon — even a plurality without a majority might plague him later if rumbles of a coalition behind Adlai Stevenson were to develop. Indeed, this almost happened even after the Oregon Primary.

It was brother Ted Kennedy who was given responsibility for Oregon in the Kennedy family’s division of labor. At the Gresham, Oregon, rally on the Sunday before the primary he said: “I think Oregon is the key state where we can win this nomination. If we get enthusiastic support next Friday we can go on and win the nomination. What will be decided here is who is going to get the nomination.” Maurine Neuberger, the Democratic choice for the term in the U.S. Senate, which she won in November, quoted her friend Adlai Stevenson to say: “If Kennedy wins the Oregon Primary, he deserves the nomination.”

From across the partisan barricades the staunchly Republican Oregonian summed up the cruciality of the Oregon showdown: “Primary victory for Kennedy in Oregon, this time against a ‘favorite son,’ Wayne
L. Morse, will just about cinch the nomination for the popular senator from Massachusetts. After all, the Democrats want to place their bets on a winner." Newsweek, too, underlined the Oregon test:

Kennedy this week flew to Oregon for the year's last significant Primary. Running against a favorite son, Senator Morse, and against Johnson, Humphrey and Symington, Kennedy — looking as underdoggy as he knew how — thought he would be safe if he came in second [after Morse]. But actually Kennedy hoped he could blitz Oregon and win all of its 34 delegates. If he could take this primary, Kennedy calculated his bandwagon could no longer be stopped.

The New Republic's pre-election sum-up, scenting a Kennedy victory, said: "The Kennedy camp is relying on the May 20th Primary in Oregon to convince the lingering doubters."

Then came the momentous Friday. Once more Senator Kennedy had sold himself to a doubtful electorate. Only two small counties gave Senator Morse narrow pluralities; in the other thirty-four counties — farm and industrial, coastal, valley, and plateau — Kennedy swept the polls. The vote was: Kennedy, 146,332; Morse, 91,715; Humphrey, 16,319; Symington, 12,496; Johnson, 11,101; Stevenson, 7,924 (write-ins); others, 1,210 (write-ins). Kennedy not only had his hoped-for plurality, he actually had a bare 50.9 percent majority of all votes cast.

And so it was once more in Oregon's presidential primary, as both Republicans and Democrats had learned in past elections, that a nominee—-to—be had run the gauntlet and survived the test.

In post-election commentary the national press seemed even more aware of the decisive impact of the Oregon Primary. Said the New York Times on page one: "The Massachusetts senator capped his series of popularity tests in Oregon on Friday by polling more votes than all four rivals for the Democratic nomination. . . . It was a display of political popularity and power that could not fail to impress uncommitted Democratic delegations." Democratic National Chairman Paul Butler then exclaimed: "Any ball team that wins seven in a row has a psychological advantage."

Theodore White's The Making of a President, 1960 underlined the impact of the Oregon victory on labor and the key state of Michigan:

With Kennedy's smashing victories in West Virginia and Oregon, Michigan was now convinced that Kennedy was their man. The Massachusetts Senator had proved himself a clean, hard, organizational fighter in Staebler's terms; had given his commitments and friendship to labor clearly enough to satisfy Reuther; and had passed all of Gov. Williams' tests of liberalism and humanitarianism. Michigan
President John F. Kennedy posed with U.S. Representative Edith Green when he visited Astoria in September 1963. Green was an early supporter of Kennedy's candidacy in 1960, even though he was opposed in the Oregon Primary by Democrat Wayne Morse, Green's political friend and ally.

was ready to join the bandwagon. With ceremonial dignity all arrangements were now made for the Michigan endorsement.

U.S. News & World Report, reviewing the Kennedy campaign, reported: "Then came the voting in Oregon, last of the 1960 key primaries, where Mr. Kennedy beat Oregon's 'favorite son' candidate, Senator Wayne L. Morse, on his home ground by a margin of 8-to-5." Newsweek concluded:

Kennedy's victory in Oregon, the last significant primary before the National Conventions, was certainly convincing. Kennedy topped the State's favorite-son candidate by 3-to-2, and his more serious rivals for the nomination, Lyndon Johnson and Stuart Symington, by a hefty 10-to-1. Adlai Stevenson, once very strong in the West, drew only a handful of votes after formally withdrawing his
name. Surprisingly, the best of the also-rans was Hubert Humphrey, who was no longer in the presidential race at all.

*Time* agreed:

The Oregon Trail for Sen. John F Kennedy was really the end of a long, grueling cross-country tour-de-force. In the Oregon Primary the youthful Bostonian gave U.S. Senator Wayne L. Morse the drubbing of his political life and registered his 7th straight primary victory — the final one on his schedule.³

The Oregon Primary provided the fringe on the top of the rolling bandwagon. Pitted for the first time against a field of four, Kennedy registered a knockout.

The *New Republic* predicted: “Kennedy beat Morse in Oregon, making it 7 straight primary victories — and it now rather looks as though America will have a Catholic presidential nominee for the 2nd time in history.” And the May 22 *Oregonian* judged: “The Catholic issue has been laid to rest, at least for now, by victories in the strongly Protestant states of West Virginia and Oregon.”

There was one episode of the Oregon Primary which later loomed large in campaign debate and which certainly belongs in any complete history of the 1960 campaign. After the shooting down of the American U-2 “spy” plane in Soviet territory, Senator Kennedy was asked by a student at the high school at St. Helens, Oregon, what he would have done had he been in President Eisenhower’s shoes. Kennedy told the student assembly in his “off-the-cuff” reply to this query that there were several alternative courses the president might have taken and listed an “apology” as one possible course. The Republicans obtained tapes of this event, skillfully excerpted the references to an “apology,” and it was made into a major, oft-repeated attack on the Democratic nominee all through the fall campaign. Democratic explanations that it was an unfair cutting from Kennedy’s full reply never seemed quite to catch up with the implication, and the GOP probably scored on this Oregon episode.

Now, four eventful years later, on May 15, 1964, the spotlight is once more on the Oregon scene — but with a Republican cast. Here again the primary trail, which begins in New Hampshire in March, will reach a climax in Oregon where the verdict will be given by registered Republicans on Governors Rockefeller and Scranton, Senators Goldwater and Margaret Chase Smith, Ambassador Henry C. Lodge, and Richard Nixon. As in years past with Dewey and Eisenhower, Stevenson and Kefauver, Kennedy and Morse, the Oregon Primary test may once more be decisive.
Did the Oregon Primary Make Kennedy President?

An Afterword by Jack Ohman

Oregon's presidential primary has faded into oblivion since bosses (what's left of them) of both major parties have decided that so-called front-loading, the stacking of key, early, big state primaries into huge decisive voting blocs, is the key to a quick nominating decision (thus avoiding mediagenic but messy party divisions). The heyday of the Oregon Primary ranged from 1948 to 1968. In 1948, Republican Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York smashed the presidential drive of popular Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen. In 1968, Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota edged out Senator Robert Kennedy, who suffered the first electoral defeat in his family since his grandfather, Mayor John F Fitzgerald of Boston, lost his 1916 Massachusetts U.S. Senate race to the brahmin isolationist Henry Cabot Lodge. Because of Oregon's rich and contrarian primary history in those years, the state is often cited in political historical literature as a roadblock to any would-be president.

Monroe Sweetland's "The Friday in Oregon that Made Kennedy President" was written in 1964. Sweetland, now ninety years old, was first elected to the Oregon legislature in 1952. He served in the Oregon Senate from 1954 through 1962 and was a candidate for secretary of state in 1960. In 1964, he wrote this article — until now unpublished — that the Oregon Primary was critical to the hopes of Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts. Sweetland was a delegate to the 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles. Amazingly, forty years later, he returned to Los Angeles as a representative to the Democratic platform committee at the 2000 convention. At the time of the 1960 Oregon Primary, Sweetland was in the middle of his long and well-positioned career as an Oregon Democrat. His 1964 remarks deserve consideration, for they offer a view "from the ground" that is plausible and thought-provoking.

In 1960, Kennedy pursued a multi-track strategy of winning primaries while wooing major state delegation bosses such as Governor David Lawrence of Pennsylvania and Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago. By the time of the Oregon Primary in May, Kennedy had successfully executed the first leg of his strategy, convincingly winning six contested primaries. The two most prominent were the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries, where he battled Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. Wisconsin had not been the knockout blow Kennedy's strategists had hoped for; Kennedy won by 56 to 44 percent and had lost key Protestant congressional districts, where he had hoped the issue of his Catholicism would be put to rest. West
Virginia, on the other hand, had knocked Humphrey out of the race. Kennedy won there 60-40, and all that seemed to stand between him and the nomination was the stealth bid of Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, who hoped for a deadlocked convention. Two-time Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson, the former governor of Illinois, was also waiting in the wings, dithering about a possible last-ditch effort at the Los Angeles Democratic convention. By the conclusion of the West Virginia primary, Kennedy had nearly sealed the nomination. Could the outcome of the Oregon Primary have derailed his nomination, as Sweetland argues?

The political landscape in Oregon in 1960 was dominated by Senator Wayne L. Morse, the sun around which all other politicians in the state revolved. Morse was not a Kennedy acolyte — he thought JFK immature and unready — and the Oregonian harbored presidential aspirations of his own. Morse decided to enter the Oregon Primary as a favorite son, and here Sweetland's thesis is put to the test. Was Morse a serious candidate or a stalking horse for Stevenson or Johnson? Politicians in the state were divided. On the one side was a pragmatic, moderate faction led by Senator Dick Neuberger, his wife Maurine, and U.S. Representative Edith Green (no ally of the Neubergers but a friend of Senator Kennedy's). On the other side was the liberal, pro-labor Morse faction. As Sweetland rightly observes, Oregon was not fertile ground for Kennedy. His brother, Robert F. Kennedy, had previously served as chief counsel for the Senate Rackets Committee. In that capacity, he had led an investigation into the Teamsters union in Oregon and nationally, leading to an indictment against Portland's mayor, Terry Schrunk. Although Schrunk was acquitted, he became an implacable foe of the Kennedys, and Oregon's union leadership had not forgotten the joie de vivre with which Robert Kennedy — JFK's campaign manager — had prosecuted Schrunk and the Teamsters.

Representative Green agreed to head up the Kennedy effort in Oregon, and other state political leaders such as the Neubergers (sentimental supporters of Adlai Stevenson, but political realists) saw the inevitability of Kennedy's nomination. By the eve of the May 20 Oregon Primary, Kennedy was generally considered the all-but-certain Democratic presidential nominee. Still, he faced the last-minute favorite-son challenge of Senator Morse, who seemed to be running against the Massachusetts senator out of pique. Kennedy, notes Sweetland, had hoped for a mere plurality of the Democratic vote in Oregon, believing that Morse was merely a hiding place for other, more plausible candidates. In Oregon, however, Kennedy could not avoid a contest with Morse because of the Oregon law that mandates that the Secretary of State decide which presidential candidates appear on the primary election ballot. In contrast, Kennedy could easily avoid other favorite-son states such as California, where Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown ran as a presidential candidate, knowing that Brown was going nowhere and that his delegates would probably end up in JFK's camp anyway. Moreover, Senator Kennedy had

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In September 1963, President Kennedy returned to Oregon on a campaign trip. Oregonian photographer Frank Sterrett took this photograph of the president in Astoria with Harry Swanson, a candidate for Congress from Eugene. President Kennedy was assassinated a month after making this trip.
committed himself to a plan of contesting primaries to demonstrate his popularity and thus could scarcely avoid Oregon, but he had to do so in a manner that would not leave Oregon's Democrats (and national labor unions) with the feeling that he was somehow anti-union.

The 1960 Oregon Primary scarcely rates a nod from writers such as Theodore H. White, and there is virtually no mention of it in any other historical work of the period. The prevailing wisdom in 1960 and since is that to Kennedy the Oregon Primary was a speed bump at best, not a formidable obstacle on the road to the nomination. As Sweetland's essay reminds us, however, Kennedy viewed Oregon as "a danger zone which he could not avoid." Hence, he had made some early forays into the state in 1959 to shore up the support of the Neubergers and Edith Green in the hope of mitigating the damage of the Morse challenge. Sweetland is certainly correct in his contention that, viewed through Kennedy's lens in 1959, Oregon was one of those seven primaries through which he had to pass in order to convince other party leaders that he was, in fact, unstoppable.

Sweetland's argument that the Oregon Primary could have spelled disaster for Kennedy was made moot by the fact that 50.9 percent of the state's Democratic voters favored the Massachusetts senator. Morse's 1960 presidential hopes — whatever they may have been — were put to rest decisively. But what if the outcome had been reversed? Sweetland argues persuasively that such a result could have been disastrous for Kennedy, planting doubts in the minds of some party leaders already reluctant to support a very young candidate who had spent his entire career building his own political organizations in Massachusetts and nationally. For party leaders — above all the bosses who in 1960 still enjoyed a great measure of autonomy inside the convention hall — a defeat in Oregon could have sent Kennedy packing back to Massachusetts and the Senate.

History is full of stories of unexpectedly successful and almost-made-it candidacies. If Sweetland's analysis is correct, a different outcome in the 1960 Oregon Primary could have led to a different Democratic convention and a different president — a Johnson or a Stevenson or (more likely it seems) a Republican, Richard M. Nixon. There is no way to tell, but Sweetland gives us a most interesting account from a nonhistorian who was actually in the trenches, experiencing the events as they happened.

Notes

1. Time erred; Porter preferred his old friend Adlai Stevenson.
2. This oblique credit is the only appraisal of the epochal Oregon Primary in White's otherwise definitive history. See Theodore H. White, Making of the President, 1960 (New York: Atheneum, 1961).
4. Maurine Neuberger was elected to her husband's U.S. Senate seat in November 1960. Governor Mark Hatfield appointed Republican Hall Lusk to the seat after Richard Neuberger's untimely death at the age of forty-seven, just before the May 20 Oregon Primary. Former Governor Elmo Smith ran against Maurine Neuberger in the 1960 election. Lusk did not seek the 1960 nomination.

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