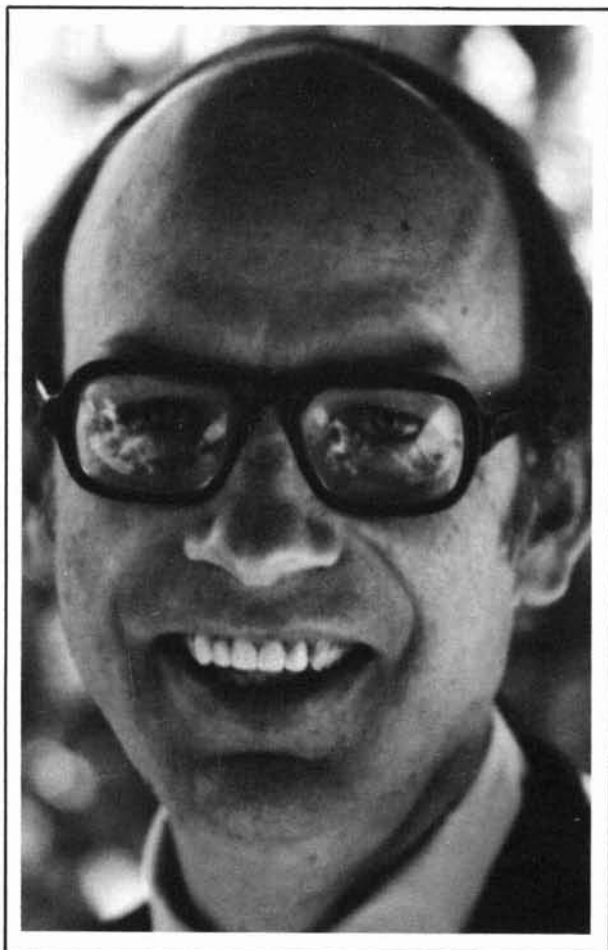


Robert Bennett:

Mormon Lobbyist, Campaign Manager, Nixon Appointee,
Hughes P.R. Director

Interviewed by Peggy Fletcher



Robert Foster Bennett, director of public relations for the Summa Corporation, is the son of Frances G. and Wallace F. Bennett, Republican Senator from Utah (1951-1975). He completed a mission to Scotland, graduated from the University of Utah, worked as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C. and served as a congressional liaison for the Nixon administration. In 1971 he bought the Robert R. Mullen Company, a Washington public relations firm, and served in a bishopric in Virginia. In 1976 there was media speculation that Bennett was the "Deep Throat" referred to in the Woodward/Bernstein book, All the President's Men, a theory which both he and Woodward have consistently denied. He is presently living in Los Angeles with his wife, Joyce McKay Bennett, and six children.

Sunstone: What role did you play in your father's senatorial campaigns?

Bennett: I worked in every one of his campaigns in one capacity or another. The first one was in 1950 when I was in high school. I passed out campaign literature door to door in Democratic precincts. In '56, I was in college and was involved at a little higher level. But it wasn't until the '62 campaign that I really became wrapped up in it. It was Dad's most difficult campaign—the only one (with the exception of the first) where he did not lead in the polls all the way.

Sunstone: Was religion an issue in that campaign?

Bennett: David King, the incumbent Democratic Congressman running for Dad's Senate seat, had been a member of the General Superintendency of the MIA before he ran for Congress. Dad, on the other hand, had been a member of the General Superintendency of the Sunday

School before he went to the Senate. The difference was that King's church service was more recent. Dad, having been in the Senate twelve years, was perceived pretty much as a politician while a lot of people still remembered "Brother King" of the MIA. We had to deal with the "Brother King" image; that is, we had to demonstrate to people for whom that was important that Wallace Bennett's Church credentials were every bit as good as David King's. We did that mainly by demonstrating that David King was himself a politician. He had a record of four years in the House of Representatives which we were able to draw on and talk about, and the more we talked about it, the more upset he became because he did not want to be perceived as a politician. He recognized the value of his "Brother King" image, and as long as people thought of him as Congressman King rather than as Brother King, and looked at his record as Congressman King, it was to our benefit.

Sunstone: Do you think it is hard for Mormon voters when two faithful Saints are running against each other or do you think it clarifies the issues?

Bennett: I think it should make it a lot easier for those strongly motivated by religion to have two men of equal religious credentials; the religious credentials therefore become immaterial, and you can make your choice on a sound political basis. I remember a remark made about a candidate who was not as faithful in the Church as he might have been, at least in terms of some of his personal habits. Some of the people in the party complained bitterly that he wasn't living up to Church standards. One of the wiser heads, in my view, responded, "Look, we're not running him for President of the Church; we're running him for that particular political office." I think that members of the Church should remember that the man can be a smoking elder or a drinking seventy and still be an excellent congressman. At the same time, if he professes to be a good member of the Church while he's in Utah and then sheds his religion when he crosses the state line and gets back to Washington, I think voters of any religious stripe should seriously question his intellectual honesty.

Sunstone: Did you ever receive advice from Church leaders on how to conduct a political campaign?

Bennett: Shortly after I had taken the assignment in Dad's '62 campaign, I went to President Henry D. Moyle, a member of our ward who had run for public office himself as a Democrat. He had also worked in Hugh B. Brown's unsuccessful campaign for the Senate and had a very definite political knowledge. I told him, "I'm launching a fulltime assignment for the next year aimed at getting my father re-elected, and that means I must do whatever I can to see that David King, a fellow holder of the Melchizedek Priesthood, is defeated. Now, I'm not in the habit of tearing down my fellow Priesthood holders, and I wonder if there are any guidelines that should be laid down at the beginning of the contest. Since you have a political background and understand the process, I think you could give me better counsel than just about anybody."

Well, he laughed and said, "I think if you want political advice, you ought to talk with someone who's been successful. Every campaign I ever had anything to do with was a loser."

I said, "No, I'm not asking for political advice. I'm asking what church guidelines there are in a situation of this kind where two faithful brethren are competing for the same office."

And he said, seriously then, "Bob, you can't be thin-skinned in politics. You go out and do what you have to do to win that campaign. Just be sure you always tell the truth. I trust your conscience and your sense of propriety enough to know that you won't do anything that would be improper." He again repeated that you can't be thin-skinned in politics; you have to do what the demands of the campaign are within that parameter. I remembered that throughout that campaign. We did take the gloves off and we did attack King's political record vigorously. But we always made sure we researched the matter very thoroughly so that we were on absolutely sound ground in anything we said about him. I have tried to live by that counsel of President Moyle in any political activity that I've been involved in.

Sunstone: Tell us about your experience as a Washington lobbyist.

Bennett: In 1964 I became the Washington representative for the J.C. Penney Company. Penney's had a variety of problems or issues with which they were constantly concerned. For example, various regulations relating to consumer credit were being periodically proposed. My function was to report to the company what the government was doing so they could understand authoritatively what the climate was and how they should react. When necessary, I would represent the company to the government with the thought that we might be able to influence some decisions by giving them information that they didn't otherwise have or couldn't otherwise get.

Sunstone: How did you come to work for the Nixon administration?

Bennett: After a leave of absence from Penney's in '68 to run my dad's campaign, I was offered a variety of jobs in the Nixon administration. I decided that I had had campaign, Capitol Hill, and corporate experience, and I wanted the opportunity for executive branch experience. So I left Penney's to become the director of congressional relations at the Department of Transportation under Secretary Volpe.

Being less than two years old, Transportation had not really been properly organized. Congressional relations were scattered among the various components of the department—FAA, Highway Administration, and so on. These people hadn't even met each other. My first day on the job I called them together and introduced them to each other and told them that from now on we were going to operate as a department under a single leadership, instead of as individual administrations. A number of them didn't like that at all, but we were able to put together a very effective team that helped Congress to understand and pass a variety of pieces of legislation.

Sunstone: What about the church situation in Washington? Were Washington Latter-day Saints different from Salt Lake Saints?

Bennett: Oh, I don't think there's anything different about

Latter-day Saints anywhere in the world. A faithful Latter-day Saint is a faithful Latter-day Saint anywhere you put him. It was interesting to be in a ward where you would have a variety of governmental and corporate officials in the membership. In our ward we had a former senator, Arthur Watkins, and some incumbent congressmen. We had a number of very active Democrats in the ward who held jobs in the Johnson administration and were held over in the Nixon administration. When I became a member of the administration myself, I found that I could understand their attitudes more than I could when I had been out of government.

There was far less partisan debate in the ward there than I had found in some other wards away from Washington. You didn't ask a man's politics when considering him for a Church job. You didn't pay any attention to what he did for a living. So you ended up with a rabid Democrat as bishop of a ward which contained arch-conservative Republicans as Sunday School teachers and vice versa. It had to be that way or the Church couldn't function.

Sunstone: Did you ever find any class distinctions between those serving in high government positions and those in lower, more clerical types of work?

Bennett: No. David Kennedy was a member of our ward, and as a cabinet officer he would come to church in a block-long Cadillac. That wasn't a matter of vanity; he had to stay within reach of a telephone and there was a phone in his car so that he could be called at any time. His driver would wait outside by the phone in case the President wanted him; then he could come in and tap him on the shoulder during Sacrament Meeting and take him out.

Sunstone: Did that ever happen?

Bennett: No, not to my knowledge. The point is, he would come to church faithfully and mingle with us in the high priests quorum in that capacity, and people who worked for him in the Department of the Treasury would refer to him as "Brother Kennedy" and deal with him as a high priest rather than as a member of the President's cabinet.

Sunstone: After you left the Department of Transportation, you worked for a private firm.

Bennett: I bought the Robert R. Mullen Company, which had been in existence for about fifteen or twenty years. Bob Mullen was nearing retirement and was anxious to sell the firm. I had first met him while on my mission. He was the PR counselor for the Church, although he was not a member of the Church, and he handled all the public relations for the Tabernacle Choir's tour of Europe in 1955. Their first concert was in Scotland where I was District President, and I became heavily involved in the promotion of the concert. We renewed our friendship when I moved to Washington.

Sunstone: What kind of work did Mullen do for the Church?

Bennett: As part of his public relations advice to the Church he said that they ought to have an objective, historical book that was not propagandizing or proselytizing

in its attitude. The Brethren said, "Fine. We agree with you. Go write it." So he wrote *The Latter-day Saints*. He is very well informed, and I think it has done a lot of good for the Church.

The Mullen Company also promoted the Palmyra Pageant, and in 1971 I handled press relations for the first Area General Conference in Manchester, England. That was about the time the Church's Communications Department was being organized under Wendell Ashton. We worked with him about six months before turning all the PR work over to him.

Sunstone: How did you become involved with the Hughes organization?

Bennett: Prior to my coming to the Department of Transportation I had met Bill Gay [Hughes's chief executive, and also a Mormon] through mutual friends in California. When Robert Mayhew was fired, Bill called me and asked if I would be willing to take his place handling public relations for Hughes. Mayhew had hired Larry O'Brien to represent Hughes Tool in Washington, but that was terminated when I was hired. I brought the Hughes Tool account (now Summa Corporation) with me when I joined the Mullen Company.

Sunstone: What other public relations work have you done?

Bennett: When I bought the Mullen Company in 1971, I also bought a New York firm, the Sidney Morrell Company. Their principal client was the state of Victoria in Australia. So I went to Victoria, met the Prime Minister, and attended a session of two of Parliament.

It was interesting to be a Mormon in these situations. I found it was a subject of easy conversation. The Australians that I met did not know very much about Mormonism, and I had the opportunity to explain it to them. On one occasion the Attorney General of Victoria came through Washington with his wife, and Joyce and I spent the evening with them, as part of our assignment to welcome them. We spent the entire evening talking about the Church.

It started out with polite conversation—they asked us how many children we had and where we had come from, and that led to conversation about the Church and by the time we finished answering their questions, the evening was gone. I apologized to him for not showing them more of Washington and he said, "Well, I can come to Washington and see it officially anytime, but it's not often that I get to spend the evening with a couple of young Mormons." There were other opportunities with government officials in Australia and elsewhere to talk about the Church. This had nothing to do with the Church account; I had long since given that over. These were just the normal missionary opportunities that all members of the Church are supposed to take.

Sunstone: Did you ever have any really "sticky" ethical decisions regarding your work? Some people have the idea that PR is basically covering up things.

Bennett: I say yes to the fact that many people think that, but no to the question about ethical dilemmas. Public relations does attract more than its share of charlatans and con

men, and there are a lot of people who use public relations to mislead and misinform. I always told my clients that public relations is mere cosmetics if the substance is not there. There were several occasions, for example, with the Penney Company where I refused to back a particular position within the retail industry because the position was not defensible. In every instance, the Penney Company agreed with me. They never asked me to support a position on a matter of public policy that was not wholly defensible on its merits. I can't say that for some of the other retailers.

There were times when other large retail firms wanted something that would be good for them financially, but would have been bad public policy and couldn't be defended as a sound position. In every case, quite aside from the ethics of the thing, the practicalities of the thing hurt them. The support that they gave to that position rebounded against them and caused them grief.

Sunstone: Didn't the Clifford Irving biography of Howard Hughes come out about the time you were buying the Mullen Company?

Bennett: Yes. I remember that quite well because the chief investigative reporter for Time, Inc. spent a number of hours in my office saying that the autobiography had to be genuine because the handwriting experts were unanimous in insisting that the handwriting on the manuscript was Hughes's. I said it couldn't be genuine because I knew that Howard Hughes had never met Clifford Irving. Now, of course, no one wants to admit that they ever believed the Irving hoax, but McGraw-Hill had galley proofs and *Life* magazine had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for the privilege of excerpting the thing. They were very much on the hook.

The most prestigious handwriting experts in New York—Osborne, Osborne, and Osborne—had stated categorically that there was absolutely no question but that the handwriting was indeed Howard Hughes's. Of course when it turned out Clifford Irving had tossed it off without much practice, it convinced me that the handwriting experts are not nearly as expert as they are cracked up to be.

I was interested when the so-called Mormon will came out and handwriting experts were marshalled to prove that it was genuine. Clifford Irving was asked to comment, and he said he couldn't understand how the will could be considered seriously by anybody; that he thought he had laid the handwriting question to rest long ago. For once I agree with him. To depend on handwriting experts when there is overwhelming evidence from other sources is ridiculous.

Sunstone: What kind of work do you do now?

Bennett: In late '74 I sold my East Coast interests and left Washington to become director of public relations for Summa Corporation. I am also president of public affairs for Hughes Airwest, a Summa-owned subsidiary. At Summa I am involved with advertising decisions, the whole question of corporate image, press relations, and general public relations counseling.

Sunstone: Since the death of Howard Hughes, Summa has received a lot of publicity. Are you responsible for all of that?

Bennett: Well, I am not the corporate spokesman. When the media call Summa for comment or interviews, I refer them to Arlo Cederburg and other executives.

There's a fascination with Howard Hughes that neither I nor anyone else with the corporation can do much to alter. He was one of the great American figures of his time. He contributed enormously to the country's benefit and behaved in a way that interests a lot of people. There's just no way you are going to stop that combination from attracting press attention.

Sunstone: Finally, your wife is a granddaughter of President David O. McKay, and he performed your marriage ceremony. . . .

Bennett: Yes, our families have been close for many years.

Sunstone: President McKay was also a counselor to Heber J. Grant—your grandfather, wasn't he?

Bennett: Yes, but I didn't know him in that capacity. I was only twelve when Grandfather died. But I did get to know President McKay a little better when he came to Scotland with the Tabernacle Choir, so I had a very warm affection for him and feeling of friendship before I started courting his granddaughter.

It was interesting to court his granddaughter and see Sister McKay bustle around to make sure that the best china was out to make a good impression on Joyce's boyfriend. Part of our courtship occurred during the '62 campaign, and once, while the women were in the kitchen preparing dinner, we discussed politics and the current campaign. As a matter of fact, I successfully solicited a \$100 campaign contribution from him.

Sunstone: What do you advise young Latter-day Saints interested in getting into politics?

Bennett: Well, I would say, develop a skill that will allow you to earn a living independent of politics. It's tragic to see someone who depends upon politics to earn a living. He's subject to the pressures; he's subject to compromise; he's willing to cut corners because he needs the job to eat, whereas someone who has something else to fall back on can be far more responsive to his conscience.

And the more I have seen of the world outside of the Salt Lake Valley where I was raised, the more convinced I am of the worth of the Church as an anchor to your life. After the various experiences I've gone through, problems that I've survived, I look around at the people that have been unable to deal with those problems and experiences, and I recognize that the great difference has been the value of the Church. It helps you get your priorities straight. It gives you a value system so that you are not as apt to compromise as you might otherwise be. And of course, the practical side of the religion—you don't turn into an alcoholic or get cancer from tobacco. A lot of people under the pressures of modern life end up with those problems. You don't have the marital problems, if you have the right kind of marriage—a temple marriage that's built the right way. The whole experience just makes you more cognizant of how valuable, in a practical way—aside from the eternal implications—of how valuable active membership in the Church is. It is an enormous asset for success in any kind of endeavor.