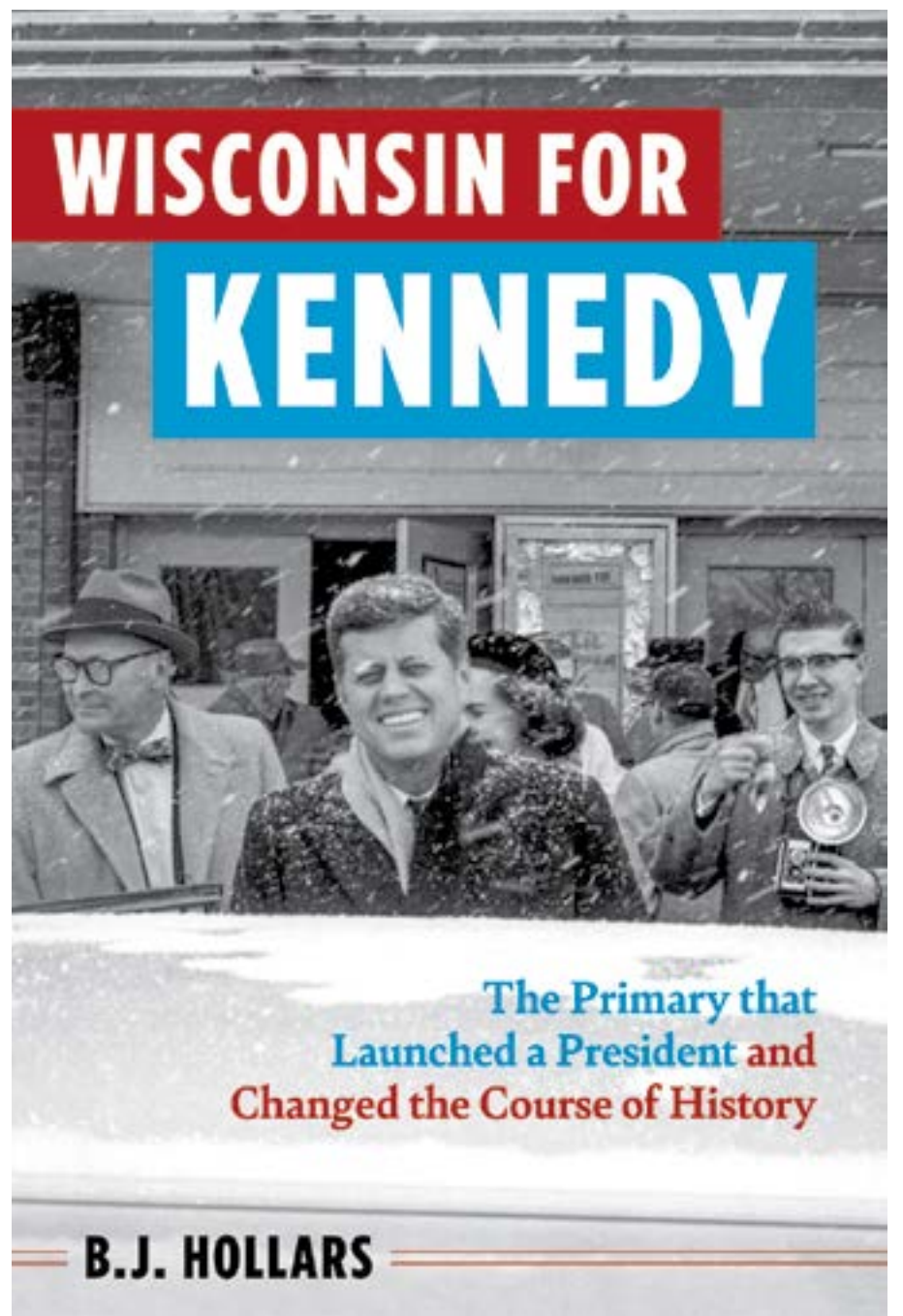


Wisconsin for Kennedy

The Primary that Launched a President and Changed the Course of History

by B.J. Hollars

Shortly before she arrived at the American Legion Hall, Jackie had stopped inside a local Kenosha supermarket. As she watched the shoppers meander the aisles, she was suddenly struck by an idea. She had a captive audience, she realized, so why not make the most of it?



Strolling toward the microphone for the store's loudspeaker system, Jackie asked the manager if she might say a few words to the shoppers. The manager, who'd surely never received such a request, handed over the mic without question. Jackie thanked him, smiled, cleared her throat, and began.

“Just keep on with your shopping,” Jackie said, her voice echoing throughout the store, “while I tell you about my husband, John F. Kennedy.”

What happened next would remain legendary for years to come. Decades later, shoppers in the store that day would tell their grandchildren how, on Tuesday, February 16, 1960, while picking up produce, or canned yams, or Ovaltine, they heard

the voice of Jackie Kennedy drifting down upon them like a gentle breeze. How, underneath the store's fluorescent lights, they'd halted their carts in their tracks and tilted their ears toward the loudspeakers. No one could quite remember her exact words, though everyone seemed to agree that she'd spoken to them in a language they could understand. They listened carefully as Jackie Kennedy—*the* Jackie Kennedy—spoke plainly and earnestly about her husband's navy service, his public service, and his commitment to the country at large. There was something to be admired, too, in how this woman—so far removed from the world she knew best—had come to them humbly with a single message.

“Please,” she said, “vote for him.”

Now, at the Kenosha American Legion Hall, Jackie shared the stage alongside several others: her sister-in-law, Eunice Shriver; Kenosha's mayor, Eugene Hammond; and, possibly an even bigger draw than Jackie, twenty-six-year-old Alan Ameche, a college football Heisman Trophy winner, full-back for the Baltimore Colts, and Kenosha's hometown hero. At six feet tall and two hundred pounds, his boxy frame barely able to fit into his suitcoat, Ameche made for an odd pairing next to Jackie, as stately as ever in her dark dress and pearls.

Before them, a packed crowd stood shoulder to shoulder as another two hundred people waited outside. Ameche bravely approached the mic, putting his hometown hero status to good use. Apparently, Jackie thought, the proceedings would begin with

or without her husband. Which was just as well. These people had waited long enough.

Ameche waved and grinned and launched into a speech, and the crowd reveled in every second. Ameche said all the right things, though, in truth, he could have said just about anything and received uproarious applause. But he said the words that would most help Jack Kennedy, that it was his firm belief that Kennedy would be the country's next president.

The crowd cheered.

Next, still trying to buy Jack time, Mayor Hammond took his turn at the mic. He described how he'd met Kennedy on three occasions and how his admiration grew with each subsequent visit. Jack, he said, could talk to people "in a way to make you feel proud to call yourself a fellow American."

The crowd clapped politely.

And then, all eyes turned toward Jackie, who stood slowly and then gamely approached the mic.

"I apologize for my husband's tardiness," she began. "But in the meantime, I'd be glad to take any questions of a nonpolitical nature."

Questions came from all corners of the room.

What does the senator like to eat?

Tell us about Caroline!

Tell us about the Kennedy family!

Once the questions wound down and Jack was still nowhere to be seen, Jackie tried another tack.

“Let’s sing a song,” she said. “Does anybody here know ‘Southie is my Hometown’?”

The crowd’s expressions turned blank. What did they know about some song about south Boston?

But there was at least one song they all knew, one that had been sung over and over at rallies throughout the state, a version of Frank Sinatra’s “High Hopes.”

Jackie and Ameche led the crowd in singing the tune, the lyrics of which the campaign had cheekily altered:

*“Everyone is voting for Jack
Cause he’s got what all the rest lack
Everyone wants to back—Jack
Jack is on the right track . . .”*

Thankfully, that “right track” had finally led Jack to the American Legion Hall. With a bit of coaxing by Jerry, Jack had finally left the AFL-CIO meeting hall and was now making his way into the American Legion.

PURCHASE

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