

Albert H. Blumenthal Oral History Interview – RFK #1, 12/14/1973
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Biographical Note

Blumenthal, a State Assemblyman from New York and campaign worker for Robert F. Kennedy's (RFK) 1964 and 1968 campaigns, discusses his work on RFK's 1964 senate campaign, including his first meeting with RFK, attempts to drum up support for RFK's candidacy, and objections people had to RFK's candidacy, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Albert H. Blumenthal

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Albert H. Blumenthal—RFK#1

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First of Four Oral History Interviews

with

Albert H. Blumenthal

December 14, 1973
New York, New York

By Roberta A. Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: I think the logical place to begin is when you first met the Senator [Robert F. Kennedy] and how your relationship developed.

BLUMENTHAL: I don't remember the date. It was shortly before he ran for the United States Senate. I had managed Bill Haddad's [William Frederick Haddad] primary campaign for Congress. At some point Bill asked me if I would be willing to talk to Bob Kennedy because he was thinking about coming to New York and running for the Senate and he wanted to meet some of the reformers in the city. He apparently had asked Haddad and several other people to suggest some people he might talk to. So I flew to Washington. As I said I.... the election was '64?

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: I guess it was in the early spring or late winter. My recollection is February or March of that year. I met with him in his office—he was attorney general at that time—and we talked about an hour or so, maybe a little longer. He asked if I'd help. I said that I would be willing to talk to some people in the city and pull together several meetings for him at which he might be able to meet people on different circumstances than apparently he had met with them in 1960. I had not met him at that time, but I had heard that as a campaign manager he had managed to

aggravate just about everybody. These were the people he would want to be working with or against and he might as well meet them as a candidate rather than as a campaign manager.

GREENE: It was clear at that point as far as you were concerned that he was definitely going to run?

BLUMENTHAL: I think reasonable clear, although he said he had not yet made a decision and a great part of his decision would depend upon his reception by reformers in the city or by liberals, independents, whichever

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word, I don't know which word you use.

GREENE: What was your initial impression of him?

BLUMENTHAL: That despite the fact that he was a tough little bastard, I liked him.

GREENE: Did he seem like a "tough little bastard" to you when you...

BLUMENTHAL: Well, in some respects. He seemed as to look not at all like I had imagined he might look because I really had literally never met him before. He spoke very softly, but he had an expression which some time later on Ronnie Eldridge [Ronnie M. Eldridge] coined as the "steely blues" which gave me the conclusion that he could be tough when he wanted to.

GREENE: Was there any real substantive discussion on this occasion as far as, did you question him at all about the kind of candidate or senator he might want to be and did he ask you about what the situation was in New York?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, we did talk about it. I told him that I thought we had some differences in attitudes as to how you deal with people and that that was reflected in some of the things he'd done in both public and political life. We went into that in some detail. I pointed out to him that I had worked closely with Bill Ryan [William Fitts Ryan] and that that was the wing of the party in which I was involved; that we were unhappy at that point with the involvement in Vietnam in which his brother [John F. Kennedy] had begun the effort and that that would be one of the questions that would be put to him all the time; that while many of us shared his dislike of Hoffa [James Riddle Hoffa], many of us didn't share his methods of getting the guy. We talked about politics in New York at some length, comparing it to Massachusetts. He said that the only difference between New York and Massachusetts politics was that New Yorkers lied a lot more. I allowed as that was probably true. I'm trying to think of other things we discussed.

GREENE: How did he react to that criticism?

BLUMENTHAL: Very calmly.

GREENE: He didn't argue about any of that.

BLUMENTHAL: He said he didn't agree on Hoffa. I don't remember his exact quote but to paraphrase it, that he was the kind of a guy you had to get while the getting was good. He said he was willing to listen on the Vietnam situation, that that was not a decision that was made lightly and

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they realized that there were other points of view.

GREENE: That's interesting that you would have brought that up at that point because that was really quite early.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes it was. But many of us felt at the time that President Kennedy moved in the direction of major Green Beret involvement that that was a mistake, that we were misreading Ho [Ho Chi Minh] at that time, that we were simply consigning the whole Indo-China theater to the communists by doing what we were doing, by aligning ourselves as we were, and that it was a tactical mistake. Didn't make an awful lot of headway at that stage but he did say that that was something he was willing to discuss and talk about.

We told him in more detail.... He asked me questions like how the reform movement worked. His recollection of the '60 campaign was that there were a lot of talkers but not much by way of doers. I told him he was all wet and I read off a list of wins that we had had. I said with all the talking we still had made maybe the best troops in the city and they could win the election if they put their mind to it. I went through some of the local elections. He was under some misapprehension as to who really ran Manhattan and I pointed out that they were the regulars who wanted to run Manhattan, that the Bronx was probably the next. He didn't believe me on that one. He did the next year when it happened.

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: But he didn't really believe me in '64. He wanted to know if people were interested in party or not in party and whether they'd were disciplined. I said discipline comes from your leader, not your boss. It all depends on how you do it. It was a good talk and lasted a little more than an hour.

GREENE: It sounds very interesting for a first meeting.

BLUMENTHAL: I came back rather enthused, I can recollect.

GREENE: What was his reaction to your pointing out that you were aligned with Fitts Ryan? Did he have much of an impression of him at that point?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, he had something of an impression of him. Bill had been in Congress since 1960. Bill had supported President Kennedy in 1960. Bobby knew that he was at war with Carmine [Carmine G. DeSapio] and with the regular organization. I had made the point because those of us who were so aligned didn't want to be smothered under some flag of regularity; you know, for-the-good-of-the-party kind of

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argument. We wanted him to understand that if he was coming there at least in part at our invitation, he was coming there to fight in which event we'd fight. He made very clear that he didn't want to come to pick a fight, that he wanted to come with our support, not with our opposition. I think it was the way he put it that really impressed me the most. The political part of the discussion.

GREENE: This might be premature but did the possibility of a fight between the regulars and the reformers with him caught in the middle...

BLUMENTHAL: Yes?

GREENE: ...was he worried about it?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. He was quite concerned.

GREENE: Did you question him as far as what he would do in that situation?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I asked him what kind of allegiances he had and how strong they were; whether he was going to choose up sides; how much loyalty was a two-way street with him. We went into some of it in great detail.

GREENE: Do you remember the profile of what came out of that?

BLUMENTHAL: Generally speaking, he said he didn't want to get involved deeply into intramural local politics. That was his first line. I said that wasn't good enough; that if reformers were going to put themselves out for him then just in pure loyal terms those who worked for him had to have some other way to call on his loyalty. Everybody understood that he wasn't—I don't remember the exact phrase but I said you don't give out blank checks every time. We're not asking for blank checks, we're asking for sure knowledge that you don't end up—at that time Buckley [Charles A. Buckley] was still alive—you don't end up beating us over the head in the Bronx because that's where we're going to go next. And he said, “Well, you can't beat him,” and I said, “You're wrong.”

GREENE: Did you question him as to just how obligated and how close he felt to Buckley and some of the other regulars?

BLUMENTHAL: A little bit with respect to Buckley and he said he had great gratitude to Buckley; that Buckley had been very responsible for John Kennedy's nomination and that I should understand that there was great personal affection there, but that he could separate his personal

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affection from his political responsibilities.

GREENE: Very interesting conversation. Okay, did he ask you anything specific, beyond to suggest some more people?

BLUMENTHAL: He asked me if I would set up a meeting for him, at least one and preferably several, and that if I could set them up as quickly as possible; that he did not want to make a final decision until he could see how he did at one or two meetings. I said that I thought I could. Then we just had some general chit chat. I remember he had some crayon drawings that some of his kids had done and I was comparing them out loud with the crayon drawings my kids were doing. He was defending his, and I said he had more to draw because I had fewer children. But that was the session pretty much.

GREENE: Okay, then you went ahead and set up a long series.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. Well, I set up a series in the end. We set up one very large one, then a series of smaller ones.

GREENE: Okay. Do you want to describe how those went? Who was involved?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't remember all of them. I remember one large one that we got Bob Wechsler [Robert Wechsler] to use his home for.

GREENE: Right. I've heard about that one.

BLUMENTHAL: I know it was a very good crowd. It was standing room only, as a matter of fact. Had a lot of resistance. A lot of people apparently remembered him from '60. Didn't like him.

GREENE: Did they like him any more after the meeting?

BLUMENTHAL: I think there was some begrudging liking. I recall, although he was very uptight before the meeting started, he warmed up as it got under

way. Very nervous. It never had occurred to me that somebody with as much background as he had had in public life would get that nervous. But he was very nervous.

GREENE: I think it was Ronnie Eldridge said that everybody at that meeting or many people at the meeting were sort of waiting for this, you know, fiend to come into the room...

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think that's probably...

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GREENE: ...and then instead somebody rather meek and withdrawn...

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, right, he came in. He had the same, a similar problem to the one I do. People sometimes think I'm tall. When they meet me and find that I'm short, they are absolutely shocked. People thought he was very tall. I don't know why they did.

GREENE: Well, at least they didn't think he was as small as he was.

BLUMENTHAL: That's right. When they first met him there was this little guy walking in, rather skinny. It just didn't seem like this big bad wolf that they had imagined they were going to meet. So I think this was part of that thing I... My recollection is that people took some time getting the physical impression of him before they could really get down to the business at hand.

GREENE: Do you remember the substance of what went on and the kinds of things that.... No? That was a long time ago.

BLUMENTHAL: That was a long time ago. They asked him every question under the sun. That's all I remember.

GREENE: Did he do fairly well?

BLUMENTHAL: Fairly well, yes. I think he impressed a good number of people there. The haters I think probably walked out hating, as I recall. Although, as I say, I think some of them came up with a begrudging respect, several in particular. But it never converted several of them. Nothing ever converted several of them, as a matter of fact. They went on hating him as long as he was alive. Strange.

GREENE: Did you just learn to work around them?

BLUMENTHAL: We had no choice.

GREENE: Okay. As far as I know, the circle of reformers that really worked hard for him from then on was you and Kretchmer [Jerome Kretchmer] and Ronnie and Ohrenstein [Manfred Ohrenstein]. Is there anybody else that really was...

BLUMENTHAL: Well, Fred wasn't that much of an influence. It was....

GREENE: No?

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BLUMENTHAL: When I got back to New York, I called Ronnie. Ronnie was my district leader; over her protests I had made her district leader. She's a hell of a good worker and a fine organizer. I told her what I had gotten into and we got excited by it. So she agreed to help. We were very friendly with Jerry at that time and I corralled him. It was the three of us. Ohrenstein had almost nothing to do with it.

GREENE: Okay. I'm trying to place this in time. It sounds rather early. How long after the meeting in Washington do you think that Wechsler session might have been?

BLUMENTHAL: Less than a month. If you'd tell me when the state committee convention was, I can back up from that. I'm sorry, I meant to think things out.

GREENE: You mean the nominating convention?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: That was September first. The reason it confuses me is because July 27 was when Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] said once and for all that Kennedy, remember he took nobody in the cabinet. Then there seems to be a period of withdrawal where he loses interest in New York, partly due to Senator Kennedy's accident—Ted Kennedy's [Edward Moore Kennedy] accident. Do you remember whether your talk with him in Washington would precede that or follow it?

BLUMENTHAL: It did, because I remember it was very cold and very windy and I had worn a coat that was not warm enough and I froze my butt off getting off at the airport. There was a mixup.... He had sent a car and there was a mixup as to where I was to meet the car and I damned near froze to death. So it must have been, I would guess, in March.

GREENE: In March. Okay.

BLUMENTHAL: It was still during the congressional primary which as I recall in '64

was in June. I wouldn't swear to that.

GREENE: I'm not sure of the date of the primary.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, my recollection is that because that was a presidential year, the primary had to be in June. Presidential primaries are in June, because the conventions are in July.

GREENE: Probably the first week in June.

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BLUMENTHAL: Something like that. My guess is, without totally remembering, that I probably saw him sometime in March and that the Wechsler meeting was in late April or May. That's just a guess.

GREENE: Okay. What did you do from that point on? Let's say up until the time of the...

BLUMENTHAL: When was that nominating convention, in September?

GREENE: September first. Right after the Atlantic City.

BLUMENTHAL: I don't think an awful lot. I think I talked to people. I'm trying to remember who his New York guy was, with whom I stayed in contact. Was it Steve [Stephen E. Smith]? Did Ronnie remember?

GREENE: It probably was Steve, unless it was Jack English [John F. English] or someone like that. Most people at that point seemed to have been working through Steve.

BLUMENTHAL: I guess it was Steve Smith. I wouldn't swear to it. But I talked to a variety of people and I guess I reported to Smith. A couple of times I had major questions and I think I called Kennedy in Washington. Now that you mention it, I think there was a period where I was no longer sure that he was coming to New York and people would call and ask and I would say I really don't know any longer. Also, we were at the tail end of that congressional primary and I had very little time. I have a vague feeling that it was sometime in July when I really got back to Kennedy's coming to New York. Stratton [Samuel Studdiford Stratton] was beginning to accelerate his candidacy. I believe I called Kennedy because I found Stratton beginning to catch on. He was then a very young and really an attractive guy in his own right—articulate although conservative. He came down to New York with the argument that he came from conservative country, but that he could be as good a liberal as Kennedy. And a lot of people who were Kennedy haters or dislikers or unsure had begun to form around Stratton. I told Kennedy that he ought to make up his mind fairly soon or he would find that too many of the reformers had gone to

Stratton; either out of not knowing or, using the argument some of them were using, a stop Kennedy movement would develop around Stratton, and that he had to move pretty quickly.

GREENE: What was his reaction?

BLUMENTHAL: My recollection was that he reacted—that he reacted fairly spontaneously to that one phone call. He said call Steve and begin to set up some more meetings, which is what we did.

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GREENE: Could you get much movement at that point? Were there people that had been against him in the beginning who started to take a real interest?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, the ones who had liked him when they met him at the Wechslers, as I recall, were the ones who were agreeable about helping. You know, it's sort of, is it pyramiding—is that the right word? I guess—you convert one and he converts one and she converts another and you begin to develop a circle.

GREENE: Right [Interruption] Did you have any part at all in attempting to convince Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] to support Kennedy or do you know anything about how that was finally accomplished?

BLUMENTHAL: No. I know a little bit about what occurred, but I didn't have anything direct to do with convincing Wagner. Although I had supported Wagner in '61 in his fight for re-election to mayor. For reasons which were never clear to me, those of us who were West Side reformers never really had a very good relationship with him. I think it came as a result of this difference of opinion over who should be the county leader in Manhattan. So I never had any real clout with Wagner.

GREENE: What's your understanding of the way that happened though, how they finally got him to.... Do you remember he was toying with the idea himself and vacillating?

BLUMENTHAL: There are two different stories going around. One is that he would have no support from any of the Kennedy organizations. Kennedy did have major support all over the state from county leaders. Of course outside the city that means something. He also had very heavy support in both Bronx and Brooklyn. I think Steingut [Stanley Steingut] was very heavily supportive of him and Buckley was heavily supportive of him. It would have meant that Wagner would of had to go to that convention, if you recall, we didn't have primaries in that day, you understand contest—as an incumbent mayor and risk the possibility of being turned down by a Democratic convention. The story that I believe most is that he did a fast count and came to

the conclusion that he couldn't win. The other story I have is that he really didn't want to run. You can pay your money and take your choice.

GREENE: Right. What do you know about efforts to get Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] to support Kennedy coming in? Did you get involved in that at all?

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BLUMENTHAL: Nothing to do with it.

GREENE: Do you remember anything prior to the convention? Anything particular about the convention?

BLUMENTHAL: I remember how aggravated Ronnie was when the Kennedy people selected an East Side district leader to be one of the nominators, when we had done all the work. The Kennedys had asked for a woman for a nominator. They decided to take somebody from the East Side on the theory that that would bring in people who weren't there, while they had us on the West Side and Ronnie was climbing the wall. That I remember very vividly. Other than that, not an awful lot. We worked very hard on the phones, New Democratic Coalition.

GREENE: Was there really any question by the time you went into the convention?

BLUMENTHAL: No, by the time we got there, there was no question. It was all over.

GREENE: What about Stratton? Did you have any part in trying to keep him out? I don't mean keep him out, but trying to get him to make it unanimous, which he refused right from the beginning to do.

BLUMENTHAL: I tried to convince the Stratton people—I'm trying to remember his; I saw him just the other night at *Pajama Game* at the opening—what's?

GREENE: He's very well-known himself, right.

BLUMENTHAL: Committee for a More Effective Congress. Used to be with the CDV [New York Committee for Democratic Voters] before the NDC [New Democratic Coalition].

GREENE: I don't think we're thinking of the same person. I know the name, it's just....

BLUMENTHAL: Hemenway. Russell Hemenway.

GREENE: Russ Hemenway, that's right.

BLUMENTHAL: He was one of Stratton's promoters. I remember trying to convince Russ that it's be better for everybody's sake if Stratton either didn't have his name presented at all or, if having had his name presented and the speeches made, he would then call for a unanimous nomination. I struck out.

GREENE: Well, he never liked Kennedy, did he?

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BLUMENTHAL: No.

GREENE: He opposed him all over every time. But what was Stratton's campaign manager's name?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't remember.

GREENE: I have the wrong guy. My understanding was that he actually himself tried to get Stratton to withdraw.

BLUMENTHAL: Don't remember.

GREENE: All right. What happened after the convention as far as you were concerned? Do you remember a problem by the way with Fitts Ryan?

BLUMENTHAL: Oh yes.

GREENE: Okay.

BLUMENTHAL: Bill was a good politician, but an insecure one. I guess that's one of the fatal flaws in most political figures. He wanted to run for mayor in '65. And then while he knew he would never get regular support and he was reasonable sure he wouldn't get Kennedy's support, he wanted at least enough of a prominent role in the Kennedy campaign so that he could build some support for himself. I thought we had had an understanding with Steve and with Bobby that he would be given that prominent role...

GREENE: As coordinator?

BLUMENTHAL: As a coordinator so that he could, you know, the harder he worked the better it was for Bobby and the better it was for Bill. I still don't know exactly what happened. Part of it, I think, had something to do with Bill's personality which was difficult, but more of it I think had to do with the fact that to some extent we were submarined by other elements—the group that was supporting

Kennedy—so that I must have tried to mediate it nine times. It never really worked out to Ryan's satisfaction, nor for that matter to mine. I really felt that Steve broke his word, at least in part. He may have had real problems in delivering on this word, but...

GREENE: And that was a wound that didn't heal, wasn't it?

BLUMENTHAL: It did not heal. Never healed, not for Ryan anyway. Never felt that he got a fair shake.

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GREENE: As I understood it—I was wrong. He didn't really want the coordinator's job for himself. What he wanted was the right to choose the Manhattan coordinator. Does that sound right?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, he wanted two things. He wanted a prominent role in the campaign with the title to be discussed. And that role would give him an opportunity to get himself around. And that was supposed to be, as I recall, sort of a city-wide coordinator. Coordinating what or whom I'm not clear, but it was supposed to be a title close up to Steve's title. I think he was supposed to have the highest title of any elected reform official available. Secondly, he wanted to be able to designate the Manhattan coordinator, at least of the reform clubs, of the reform effort. That brought a lot of opposition from East Side reformers as well as from the regulars. It was that breakdown in communication that got the rest of it off on the wrong foot.

GREENE: He picked a guy named Mike Cohen?

BLUMENTHAL: Bill did, right. Myron Cohen. Myron's _____. He had run several of Bill's congressional campaigns. As a matter of fact, he managed Bill's mayoral campaign in 1965. He's a very talented political guy. What is more interesting is that Mike ultimately went into the campaign, not in exactly the role that I think Bill envisioned for him. He became pretty close to the Kennedy people, particularly to Steve, and has helped out on a number of occasions since then.

GREENE: But is it that Fitts Ryan lost hold of him?

BLUMENTHAL: No, I don't think Bill lost hold of Mike. I don't think Mike got exactly the role—and at the time he was supposed to get the role—that Bill had in mind. And of course Mike isn't owned by anyone. But Bill knew that. No, I think the main problem...

GREENE: He moved into a place of prominence but it had nothing to do with...

BLUMENTHAL: Had nothing to do with Bill.

GREENE: Fitts Ryan, yeah.

BLUMENTHAL: I think the main problem was that Bill himself did not get a designation and he wouldn't go in there and fight for it. He would insist that somebody act as his agent and it usually ended up being me and that meant that I'd end up getting caught in the middle. It never really worked out for him.

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GREENE: How about other Kennedy people? Did you get along, by the way, with Steve Smith?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: Was there ever any problem with that?

BLUMENTHAL: No problems.

GREENE: What about some of the other Kennedy people that came in: Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman], Douglas [John W. Douglas], vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel], Haddad, Nolan [John E. Nolan]?

BLUMENTHAL: Knew them all and worked with them.

GREENE: Was there any problem with any of them?

BLUMENTHAL: As far as I was personally concerned? No.

GREENE: How did you feel about all these out-of-towners coming in?

BLUMENTHAL: Apparently, I got less hung up by it than most other people who felt somehow that these people were coming in to take over and possibly oust them. From my point of view it had been so long since we had a reasonably well run campaign by people who were even semiprofessional never mind professional, it was a sheer delight to watch a group of people come in and do something that they knew how to do. The regular organization in the city at that point had no talented people to speak of. Other than somebody like Buckley who himself was a talented politician, there were very few managerial types who were talented. I had believed from the beginning.... I think Steve and others felt that Kennedy could just come in and take it away from Keating [Kenneth B. Keating]. I had to lean to the contrary, that Kennedy could well lose. If I had any disagreements with Steve and some of the people around him, it was in trying to convince them that they were in a very tough fight and had a long road to go. I think what finally convinced them, was it the *World Telegram* that did that story?

GREENE: I'm not sure which story you're referring to.

BLUMENTHAL: What's the name of that guy, the political reporter who wrote for the *Telegram* and who did sort of semiformal polls? Isn't that terrible? A good friend of a friend of mine, Marty Rogan, who's now dead. Oh, shoot.

GREENE: I lose these names, you know, from one interview to the other.

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BLUMENTHAL: Well, you'll find it someplace. It was the turning point in Kennedy's campaign.

GREENE: The second week in October, is that what you mean?

BLUMENTHAL: Right. Yes, because it showed them running behind.

GREENE: Well, that was the point when they were behind.

BLUMENTHAL: That's right. It showed him running behind.

GREENE: That was a *Daily News* [*New York Daily News*] poll, wasn't it?

BLUMENTHAL: No. It was not. It was the *World Telegram*. He was a political writer and he used to run one of these very unscientific but uncannily accurate polls. He had a reputation for being totally honest. It confirmed what many of us felt. Because in my West Side district, probably the single most liberal district in the city, there was a lot of Kennedy resentment. It's a very Jewish area. They still hadn't forgotten Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy] when he was ambassador to England. They were unconvinced that the Kennedys were no longer anti-Semitic. A big problem. Thought Keating was a nice man and here was this young whippersnapper coming in and trying to take away his seat. A lot of problems. Couldn't get a lot of the people around Steve to believe that until that article, and then I think even Kennedy finally believed it.

GREENE: Of course there was a big shift in emphasis and strategy at that point too...

BLUMENTHAL: Sure was.

GREENE: ...they got off the defensive for the first time and stopped coasting.

BLUMENTHAL: Sure was. And they launched the attack. That's right.

GREENE: Okay. Was it just a matter of day-to-day contact with these people in

your own district and other West Side areas to try to break down the resistance?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. Ronnie and I coordinated a hunk of the West Side. It was my assembly district—with Jerry. Pretty much my assembly district, Jerry's assembly district and a little bit further north and a little bit further south. I guess it was from roughly above the Village [Greenwich Village] maybe up to Columbia [Columbia University]. Roughly that area, west of Central Park. In addition, I did speaking for him outside of the

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area but our main job was to organized that area.

GREENE: Can you remember people whose support you finally did get after breaking down the resistance and those of some importance that you couldn't get? Do the names come back?

BLUMENTHAL: Well. In the original organizational meetings I had recommended and they had agreed to set up a surrogate system. I felt that while we politically could put together a good organization for communities like mine—I'm talking about the West Side to East Side, Brooklyn Heights, Riverdale, Flatbush at that time, Forest Hills at that time. I mean, times have changed but those were the kinds of areas. What we wanted essentially was the *New York Times* reading public. He was going to need a group of people who in effect would vouch for him. Stanley Lowell [Stanley H. Lowell], I believe, helped in that committee. There was a special committee set up. A guy by the name of _____ White from Long Island. It was a very intensely run speaker's bureau which people were brought in from all over the country, not to make speeches to large groups but to make living room speeches to small groups. We came to the conclusion earlier...

GREENE: New Frontier type people.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr].

BLUMENTHAL: Arthur was all over the place and he was terrific. He would do three or four a night. He'd be about ready to drop when he was finished, but there was no schedule that he wouldn't handle. He was one of the most faithful of the group that we had there. We had a very large group of people and we tried to put them together in the living rooms of prominent people. The Belafontes [Harry Belafonte], I remember, ran several. And I don't know, anywheres from thirty to sixty what we would call opinion makers for that community would be invited to those and we had a planned performance for them. And it worked. It really worked because we polled the district and each of these areas periodically and you could see the votes beginning to change. Then when

the onslaught came with the piece called *The Myth of Keating's Liberalism*.... And that hit the streets. You could see the change coming. It was discernible. It was one of the few campaigns I have ever been in where...

GREENE: Where you could feel it.

BLUMENTHAL: ...where you could chart it—not just feel it, but you could chart it. When Kennedy came to the West Side the first time, he did a Broadway walk. It was around the Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana holidays. Of course he drew very large crowds, but he was so nervous I thought he was

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going to have a heart attack. The crowds were very divided: some of course very admiring and some extremely hostile. When he came back to the West Side it had all changed, towards the end of the campaign.

GREENE: Did you find him difficult to deal with in that first visit? Was he uncommunicative?

BLUMENTHAL: No, I found him very quiet and subdued, but not uncommunicative. Once we got to talk, he was fine. I found him relaxed—although still quiet and semi-withdrawn but not.... He became noticeably less tense as the meeting went on.

GREENE: And what about as the campaign went on?

BLUMENTHAL: He got more at ease with what he was doing. At the beginning he used to make me nervous he was so nervous.

GREENE: Did you have much to do with Jack English in this period?

BLUMENTHAL: Some. Not a huge amount.

GREENE: How were your dealings with him?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I like Jack. I liked him then. I thought he was bright, I just thought he went too fast.

GREENE: In what respect?

BLUMENTHAL: In every respect. Jack was then and still is a very positive person; I'm not quite so positive. He was always in a hurry not only to make a decision but to carry it out. I'm much more slow to come to decisions, although I can carry them out when speed is indicated. I just always felt he pushed too far,

too fast and you tend to make mistakes that way and I didn't think that Kennedy could afford any mistakes.

GREENE: Can you be specific on incidents that'd come up?

BLUMENTHAL: No, I really can't recall. There were things he wanted him to do to establish his liberalism, as I recall. I'm trying to remember because there were a couple of sharp disagreements with him. I don't really remember what they centered around. I just don't remember, it's too long ago.

GREENE: Okay. Getting back to this business with the outsiders coming in. Do you think that, was the

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carpetbagging as much of an issue...

BLUMENTHAL: Early, it was an issue. It was...

GREENE: Among the reformers too, that was a major concern?

BLUMENTHAL: A little bit, yes, it was used.

GREENE: An excuse.

BLUMENTHAL: You know, those were issues that are used by those who want an issue.

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: I think in terms of the public, it did bother the public in the beginning. It was kind of interesting though the way they—the public—kind of switched away from it. Well, there were many people who never changed, who thought he was a carpetbagger but didn't vote against him just because he was a carpetbagger. They just didn't like Robert Kennedy.

GREENE: What were the kinds of things the reformers were saying?

BLUMENTHAL: That he was untrustworthy. That he was anti-Semitic. That he was for the regulars.

GREENE: Did the Hoffa thing come up?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, the Hoffa thing came up. That he had no scruples. I mean a whole variety of things.

GREENE: Did you have much problem responding to this?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I guess I had to start off, to be truthful with you, that intuitively I walked away from that first meeting liking this guy. So I suppose I was a lot more willing to, quote, forgive him things than I would have had I not liked the man, but I really liked him. I came away from that meeting deciding that this was a person who had great potential. I liked the fact that he had suffered and I liked his kids' drawings. I just kind of liked him.

GREENE: It sounds also that he was very frank in that conversation.

BLUMENTHAL: Very frank. I like honest people. I don't like liars. I can stand a cheat better than I can a liar.

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GREENE: You mentioned *The Myth of Keating's Liberalism* as having been a major factor. Do you remember the filming at Columbia and everything that came out that as also being important.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. He came out of the Columbia thing with the law students with a press reaction which impressed the public noted in his ability to relate to young people.

GREENE: Did you use that film, the biography, around the district?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. All of the district. We had it on those portable television machines.

GREENE: You know, I interviewed Dick Wade [Richard C. Wade] yesterday and he mentioned that they used that extensively in the Monroe County area. No one had ever said that before and I didn't realize that that was the regular technique.

BLUMENTHAL: They had a machine outside of the club on a daily basis at 72nd Street and Broadway, right next to the Embassy Theatre and we had two or three other machines around the area.

GREENE: Excellent use of it.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes it was and people used to crowd around it. No matter when it was set up, you always had a crowd around that machine.

GREENE: He said they also used it for programs. In Monroe County they had a lot of trouble getting speakers, so they'd use it instead of having a

speaker come; they'd bring it into the ward meeting.

BLUMENTHAL: People did outside of the city, but we had no trouble getting speakers.

GREENE: So you didn't need that.

BLUMENTHAL: No, we didn't need it. We had a good list. I don't remember who was directly in charge of that speakers' operation; my memory fails me for some reason. But I do remember that I got the best cooperation from that unit. I mean, as soon as we got a party together—Ronnie, Jerry, or I, or the three of us—we got speakers, and we got good speakers. That was one fight we did win. That really worked very well.

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GREENE: Remember the “empty chair” debate?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: Do you remember that as being of significance?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. It was.

GREENE: Did that impress the people in your area particularly?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't know whether it.... It's one of those things that happens towards the end of a campaign; it gives it another little push and tends to the excitement, and helps people to cross lines or reaffirm their position. I wouldn't want to call it a major event. It's one of those helpful things that occurs and converts a few more voters although we never will be able to account as to how many. I think the two most significant things that happened from my recollection for communities like mine was (1) whole quality of Kennedy himself after that *World Telegram* article when they suddenly realized and when he suddenly realized, yes Bobby, you could lose. I think he changed. That would be my view as the most important change that occurred. Everything that happened thereafter occurred only because he changed. And the most significant written piece was that *Myth*. For the first time Keating's liberal challenge, his *New York Times* image was suddenly under attack on some very key questions for people, like the ones I represented. So those two events I think were the most significant.

GREENE: The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty criticism was another.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, it was.

GREENE: And what came out of that, and the attack by the Fair Campaign Practices Committee and that whole exchange?

BLUMENTHAL: It kind of got swept aside. It was uncomfortable. I think my best recollection at the time was that the momentum was already underway. And that while it is something you don't want to have happen either on the merits or on the politics of it.

GREENE: By then the momentum...

BLUMENTHAL: ...I think it was.... By then the momentum was there. It became insignificant even though to many at the moment it seemed like, "Agh! We just got clubbed."

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GREENE: What do you remember about the election day activities, organizing to get out the vote?

BLUMENTHAL: Very intensive. We organized it as if it were a primary, which is something that does not ordinarily occur in general election.

GREENE: What does that mean?

BLUMENTHAL: That means that we had a huge telephone operation. Expense was never a problem then. They managed their money well. That is, you had to account for what you were doing. We at least didn't get bags full of money just to get bags full of money. I think other areas may have, but we didn't. Money was never a problem.

GREENE: Where was the money coming from in your case?

BLUMENTHAL: From Steve.

GREENE: Steve, directly.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, from him and his treasurer.

GREENE: From his office.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. See we were not part of a county organization so they weren't funneling money to us through the county as it happened in the Bronx and the regular organization, all the clubs and all workers got their money through the Buckley organization. Manhattan, I mean, we just didn't have that kind of operation.

GREENE: And you ran the phone banks yourself?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. They also had central banks, but we had funds for our own phone banks. We had divided the area up into parts and we concentrated the phones in one clubhouse from each general area—stupid too, you know, each dinky club given ten phones.

GREENE: Was there ever any problem in getting people to man them, did you have plenty of volunteers?

BLUMENTHAL: No. As time moved, Marty did an excellent job in organizing people to work, rally a good job.

GREENE: What about preparing for efforts by the opposition to...

BLUMENTHAL: We weren't concerned about the organized opposition; we were concerned about getting out

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our vote. We had had a heavy canvassing operation. Very heavy, door-to-door. We had a good street operation, doing street speakers. We did a coffee klatch operation beyond these parties where local people would speak, Fred Ohrenstein, Ted Weiss [Theodore S. Weiss]. Local legislators would come. Out of all this we came up with a favorable voters list. It was a very good favorable voters list.

GREENE: How many times would you have gone back to most of these? Would you go back to the favorable voters?

BLUMENTHAL: We re-called the favorable voters list the weekend before election.

GREENE: To make sure they'd get out.

BLUMENTHAL: To remind them about election day and to make sure they'd get out. On election day we had watchers at the voting places with lists, runners who would take marked lists as people voted back to people who were either manning phones or going through buildings.

GREENE: To call those that hadn't voted.

BLUMENTHAL: To call those that hadn't voted, to drive them out of the house—I mean we literally drove people out of their homes.

GREENE: Did you have baby-sitting services?

BLUMENTHAL: Everything.

GREENE: And chauffeurs and all of that?

BLUMENTHAL: We had cars, volunteer cars. We had baby-sitting services. We had an escort service for the elderly.

GREENE: Were you worried about machine breakdowns, accidental or deliberate?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. We weren't worried so much about deliberate breakdowns because you must remember that this is a Democratic city. The Board of Elections, even though it had Republicans on it, was essentially Democratic. So we weren't worried about was an inefficient board. The machines would break down and we couldn't get inspectors. Ours was considered a prime area; it was a very heavy it was a very intensive voting area. We had to keep those machines running.

GREENE: So did you have a crew and a truck or something

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like that traveling around?

BLUMENTHAL: We didn't have a crew. We personally couldn't have a crew, but we had a crew from the Board of Elections in the general area traveling from place to place. We had it fairly long. It was good, really good.

GREENE: Do you have anything special about election night? Anything further on the campaign?

BLUMENTHAL: No. I remember Kennedy came into the district election morning for breakfast.

GREENE: How was his mood then?

BLUMENTHAL: Pretty good. Nervous, nervous-good, I think is the best way to describe it. It was early in the morning and he was tired, but he was in a very good mood.

GREENE: I know one thing I wanted to ask you about and that's the whole thing of whether or not to tie himself onto Johnson and Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], which I guess is a decision that is also made around the time of that poll when Johnson is looking a whole lot better than Kennedy is. Do you remember that?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, I do. I think there was a lot of discussion. I cannot claim—

because I was not, I didn't attend every meeting of the handful of people who ultimately made the decisions. Occasionally I went to some of those meetings and went to larger meetings. Frequently talked to Steve one-to-one and Kennedy himself one-to-one. I think the feeling was—and I think I endorsed that feeling—was not so much that he had to run as Johnson's candidate but that it would be certainly better that he didn't run as Johnson's enemy, and that what he had to be able to take advantage of was what was becoming clear, that there was going to be a real Johnson win. At that moment we had no idea there was going to be the landslide it turned out being but we knew he was going to win and that he had a benefit from the Johnson vote. He wasn't going to get it all. People were going to vote for Johnson and then vote for Keating, but he had to benefit from some of it. And so that the relationship should be at least cordial. I think that's ultimately the tactic that was implemented.

GREENE: Did you promote that in your area? Did you go with the vote for the Johnson-Humphrey-Kennedy team? Did you use that line?

BLUMENTHAL: We did, in part. Our final literature was vote for Johnson-Humphrey-Kennedy. As I recall—and you'd

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have to recheck Ronnie to be absolutely certain—I think Ronnie and I were a little crazy. We wanted Kennedy to win. We weren't concerned about Johnson. I think we spent an awful lot of time emphasizing Kennedy. I think the reason we used, as I recall the Johnson-Humphrey-Kennedy literature, was because at that time that was about all that was available. We printed a lot of our own stuff on the West Side. Haddad is a good craftsman and he was very good then. He created, he did *The Myth of Keating's Liberalism*. We got him to do a variety of what we call one-sheeters. They were peculiarly West Side, that dealt with West Side issues and West Side concerns. All Kennedy. The only time that we got to Johnson-Humphrey-Kennedy was the election day literature.

GREENE: Did you find yourself liking him more as the campaign went by and you watched him?

BLUMENTHAL: It wasn't so much liking him more as the campaign went by. I already liked him when the campaign got underway. I really didn't get to like him more in a qualitative sense of the word... [interruption]

GREENE: Well, if you could just finish your sentence about...

BLUMENTHAL: I don't know what I said.

GREENE: I asked you whether or not you found yourself liking him more as the campaign went by and you said...

BLUMENTHAL: That happened I think after the campaign was over and we got into some other things. He turned out for me at least to be a very responsive individual. There were times within the year or two after that where he went out of his way to do some good things for me, unasked for by me. A couple of times when I got into some trouble over the abortion law—I got into some real trouble in '67 including getting fired as chairman of the Democratic Policy Committee where he really went to bat for me, so....

GREENE: On the abortion issue?

BLUMENTHAL: On the abortion issue.

GREENE: I didn't realize that.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, he did.

GREENE: I didn't realize that you had gotten into trouble on that.

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BLUMENTHAL: I got into a lot of trouble in '67. He worked to some extent with Travia [Anthony J. Travia] who became speaker in '65. We had supported Steingut [Stanley Steingut]—Jerry and I. Travia didn't have much use for Jerry and had almost no use for me. Kennedy used us to keep him informed on the legislature. I would fly with Kennedy from time to time. He'd call and say, "I'm flying some place. How about flying up to Albany or how about going to Schenectady with me and use the trip to talk?" I think it was in late '65 he began to push Travia to give me some recognition and also after that to give Jerry some recognition.

GREENE: You're talking now about the whip's post?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: We'll have to go into that next time. We also have to do the leadership fight which is even ...

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, it is even isn't it?

GREENE: [Laugh] Even something.

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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