

William O. Douglas Oral History Interview – RFK #2 12/12/1969
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Douglas, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice from 1939 to 1975 and Kennedy family friend, discusses his impressions of Robert F. Kennedy as Attorney General and Senator, and Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, among other issues.

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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

William O. Douglas

December 12, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Roberta Greene

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

GREENE: The last time we were talking about the Justice Department and about the changes that took place in the Kennedy Justice Department in terms of civil rights and organized crime. What were your impressions or perceptions of this?

DOUGLAS: Well, the Department of Justice under Bobby became, I think, much more streamlined and efficient, in that sense, than it had been. It's hard to know on the outside how much internal energy was being spent on organized crime, but I gather that there was, that that was a new emphasis. Civil rights began to emerge as a new emphasis also. Both had been there before, but these were matters merely of emphasis. I judge it from this point of view, from the Court's point of view, more on the basis on the types of cases which began to appear in the federal courts.

GREENE: Were there other civilian -- I don't mean civilian -- matters outside the Justice Department which you and Kennedy came in contact on? You mentioned the one on the Shah of Iran [Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi]. Were there other things like this during the administration when you came in contact with him?

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DOUGLAS: Not very much. Bobby and I, when we met socially, would often talk about State Department problems, foreign policy questions. "Is the president doing the right thing? Is he doing the wrong thing? What do you think should be done about this country, that country?"

Bobby was very active with the foreign students. I had been chairman of the Foreign Student Service Council in Washington, D.C., for a number of years, and persuaded Bobby to take my place. He was interested in foreign students, interested in their ideas partly because they were young, partly because they were foreigners, partly because he felt a new birth of ideas in that generation coming along clear across the world. It was an atmosphere of dissent, of protest not only here, but in almost every country among young people.

GREENE: Would he speak to you about specific problems they might be having in the administration, or just...

DOUGLAS: Not particularly, no.

GREENE ...more interested in your general impressions.

DOUGLAS: General impressions.

GREENE: Was there anything else in the administration that we should talk about?

DOUGLAS: I don't think of anything offhand. I think I've mentioned already that I talked to Jack about making Bobby secretary of state. Bobby was very much interested in that.

GREENE: How late in the President's term was that?

DOUGLAS: Well, I think it was in the spring of '63 that I talked to him about it. And I think that probably if he'd lived he would have done something about it by '64.

GREENE: Had you also spoken to Robert Kennedy about that, about the fact that the President was actually considering it?

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DOUGLAS: I spoke to Bobby and Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] after I had spoken to Jack, in a sort of a semi-jocular way, saying that I had a talk with the President and was arranging for his promotion, you see. Ethel, I think, was very excited about the idea; I think Bobby was too.

GREENE: Then maybe we could talk a bit about the post-assassination period, and how you saw Robert Kennedy in that period, which I guess was very difficult for

him.

DOUGLAS: Yes. The longest talk I had with Bobby was probably the first part of 1964; it might have been as late as March of '64. He came over to my office, we had lunch, and we talked for a couple of hours. The question was what should he do, what should he, Bobby, do? This was before.... I may be wrong, maybe it was later. Let's see, Johnson ran in '64, didn't he?

GREENE: Right. Was this before the Senate nomination in New York became a distinct possibility? Do you remember that?

DOUGLAS: We had talked about that earlier, so I'm wrong when I said it was the early part of '64. Bobby and I talked about him running for the Senate and I'd encouraged him to do it; I was sure that he could win in New York. At that time the press was saying: He belongs to Virginia because that's where his home is, so on and so forth. So what I started to talk about is after the '64 election. Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] was president and Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was vice-president, so I guess it was '65 instead of '64. We had this long talk. Now when was Bobby elected to the Senate?

GREENE: '64 also.

DOUGLAS: '64, yes. He was in the Senate, at the time of this talk. I told him I didn't think it was too early for him to start making general plans. I said that at the next election for president, if Johnson wanted to run again, it was virtually impossible for anybody to get the Democratic nomination away from the head of the Democratic Party. It was possible, however, I thought, for Bobby, if he got under way in ample time, to take the vice-presidential nomination away from Hubert Humphrey, assuming that Johnson was going to run. I said, "It would be a great convention, wouldn't it Bobby?" and he laughed. He said, "It would be a hell of a convention. That would really be something." He hadn't, of course, made up his mind what he was going to do, except that by that time he was looking ahead to '68 and trying to make up his mind whether he should do

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anything or not. He was thinking in terms of '68 and his own place in the scheme of things.

GREENE: This would have been, you think, in '65?

DOUGLAS: I think it was in '65.

GREENE: When you said that about possibly taking the vice-presidential nomination from Humphrey did he express any real interest or seriousness towards that?

DOUGLAS: He didn't say, "Well, let's do it," but he was interested in the idea. It was an idea that appealed to his combative instincts; it was a challenge. He had no

particular regard for Johnson, and I think the prospects had an appeal to him. Whether, in terms of practical judgment, he'd ever be carried through I don't know. Of course, things later changed, and then Johnson didn't run and all that. Bobby was in the middle of it, and if he hadn't been killed he would have made it; he'd be in the White House now. He was at least thinking; he was weighing the prospect of getting into the '68 campaign in one way or other in a manner that would not be appealing to Johnson.

GREENE: But at that point you don't think he was thinking in terms of running for the presidency? It was more like...

DOUGLAS: Well, we talked about that, but he seemed to agree that if Johnson wanted to get the nomination again, being the head of the party, that it was, without withdrawing from the party....

GREENE: In '64, just to go back a minute, had he discussed other possibilities other than the Senate with you? The vice-presidency, ambassador to Vietnam, or any of these other things that had been mentioned?

DOUGLAS: He had talked generally about an ambassadorship to somewhere; I forget whether it was Vietnam. He talked about the possibility of heading some newspaper, being a publisher or editor, I think, in the New England area. He talked about possibly heading a foundation or being with a foundation. He threw out these things, nothing specific, just general ideas.

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GREENE: What about the vice-presidency? Is it your impression that he would have been interested had he been asked, or he really didn't even consider it?

DOUGLAS: In '64?

GREENE: Yes.

DOUGLAS: I don't know whether he would have.... He never talked to me about it. I never talked to him about it because I never thought he had any prospect of being offered it by Johnson because Johnson held him in such low esteem; he had no love for the Kennedys at all.

GREENE: Back in '65 did you discuss his future in terms of issues at all, the things that were making him even think in terms of '68, or was it....

DOUGLAS: I told him that I thought that he ought to have a plan and stick generally to it, a plan whereby he would in time become president. It can't happen accidentally;

it can't happen to a man who doesn't want it deeply. He has to want it with all of his being, and if you think that you do in time, then it's never too soon to start making plans.

GREENE: What was his response?

DOUGLAS: He didn't say he wanted it, but it was obvious to me that there's where his future lay: in the contest for it, getting it, and being president.

GREENE: Were there other conversations of this type between then and let's say middle '67, when he seriously began to consider it?

DOUGLAS: Nothing that long and as detailed. Every time I'd see him -- it might be just for ten seconds, or a minute, in a crowd -- there'd be some passing reference to it, you know, in some disguised fashion. "How's the big plan going, Bobby?" or something like that.

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GREENE: What kinds of other things were you seeing him on during this period, his time in the Senate?

DOUGLAS: I very seldom saw him, except just at the Foreign Students Service Council, or at a meeting for foreign students, or at some party, some reception, or just a chance meeting on the street. We had lots of telephone talks. But Bobby was just too damn busy between '64 and '68 to see very much of me.

GREENE: Well, then when in....

DOUGLAS: And I had no particular mission; I had no assignment or anything. I was just on the sidelines as a friend and an admirer.

GREENE: There's one thing that I had, which may or may not have brought you in direct contact with him, and that's the Italian peace effort, which would have been in 1966 I believe -- I hope I have that right; yes, '66 -- when Giorgio La Pira went to Hanoi and brought back a supposed peace offering, and he communicated this first to Fanfani [Amintore Fanfani] at the U.N. [United Nations] and then indirectly to you, the senator, Jonathan Bingham [Jonathan Brewster Bingham], Fulbright [J. William Fulbright], and McGeorge Bundy. Are you clear on what I'm talking about?

DOUGLAS: Yes.

GREENE: Did you have any contact with him about that?

DOUGLAS: Yes, we talked about it not at great length, quite by chance, perhaps a telephone call, "What do you think? Should I pursue this? Do you think it's some kind of a trap," or whatnot? And I'd say, "No, I'm pursuing it; it may be something very important." I had no personal knowledge at that time about the genuineness of it, but it seemed to me that it had the proper credentials.

GREENE: Do you know what he did with it?

DOUGLAS: I don't know.

GREENE: Did you pursue it yourself at all?

DOUGLAS: No. I had no occasion to, except through Bobby.

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GREENE: Well, then when did you first talk to him seriously about the real possibility of running in '68?

DOUGLAS: The first time was, as I mentioned, in '65. We had that long talk.

GREENE: I'm thinking actually of the later period, from mid '67 on, when he began to think more specifically about it.

DOUGLAS: It was sometime after Johnson had made his statement. When was that, in March?

GREENE: Well, by March Robert Kennedy was already a candidate. He announced in mid March.

DOUGLAS: He announced...

GREENE: In March '68.

DOUGLAS: ...before Johnson's....

GREENE: Right.

DOUGLAS: That's right. McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] had.... He came out earlier than that.

GREENE: He came out in November, and the New Hampshire primary was March 12. Was there anything prior to that?

DOUGLAS: These are all very casual, transitory things. About the time that McCarthy

announced I talked to Bobby maybe for a minute, "Bobby this is something you should be in." Then everytime I'd see him I'd say, "Bobby, you should be out there."

GREENE: How would he respond to that?

DOUGLAS: Well, he responded in a rather thoughtful way as if he was trying to think it through, what to do. He never said, "You're right, I should do it." He was trying to make up his mind as to whether he should or not.

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GREENE: Did he call you, or did someone from his office call you to tell you that he was about to announce?

DOUGLAS: No, he didn't. I didn't know it until I saw it in the paper.

GREENE: Well, was there anything during the campaign? Did he seek your advice or help in any way?

DOUGLAS: No, not really. These would be casual conversations, chance conversations. Whenever I'd run into him, "How are things going? What are you going to do about my state, the State of Washington? Do you think you can carry it? Why don't you get up there?" things like that.

GREENE: Did you have any contact with Jim Whittaker [James Whittaker] who was...

DOUGLAS: No.

GREENE: ...running the campaign up there?

DOUGLAS: I knew him, but I... Being on the Court, I was just too far removed on the sidelines to be of any great help or to have any really competent suggestions.

GREENE: Well, I really have only one last question, and that's more or less an opinion question, about how, as a longtime observer of the judicial, political scenes in this city and this country, do you view Robert Kennedy's place in the whole thing? How do you see his role in retrospect?

DOUGLAS: Bobby, I think, unlike any other man in politics in this period of American history had bridged the gap between the young generation and the old. McCarthy did in part, but only in part. He did it on the war, but Bobby did it in all sorts of things. He was the symbol of youth. His young family, his wide interests, his world travels, his talks to students around the world had excited the younger generation. I think that this terrible abyss that has grown up between the adult group so-called and the

younger group wouldn't have existed, I don't think, if Bobby had lived. He would not have fed the youngsters tranquilizers but he would have produced an adult unrest too, I think. Will that about do it?

[-18-]

GREENE: Yes it does, unless there's something you'd like to add.

DOUGLAS: I don't think of anything.

GREENE: Okay. If you do at a later time just let me know.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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