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Thomas M. C. Johnston  
May 20, 1973  

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HACKMAN: You might, looking toward ’68, go back over the whole period of ’64 to ’68 and recall any conversations you might have had with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] about his political future, anything at all in terms of ’68 and what he might do, vice-presidency, presidency, or would he have talked to you about something like that?

JOHNSTON: I think rarely until the time at which he really got into talking about this seriously, which really, I suppose, was sometime in the fall. Up until the time he announced it was very infrequent that he really discussed this question of his future and what he was going to do. He often joked about it because there were so many articles and speculations. But I think generally he was much more… I think two things: one, he was deliberately very much absorbed in what he was doing now. And my relationship with him, in just about every regard, grew out of his involvement in what he was doing as a Senator and that’s whenever we had any time together, and I think generally most of the people he spent time with, in his work in any case, he was busy on whatever. He was not given just generally, I think, temperamentally probably, to speculating about the “if” and “maybe.”

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The second thing, which is probably even more important, is that I think the experience with his brother [John F. Kennedy] and what happened, seeing so much well-laid plans really go
up in one afternoon to nothing, I think that made him—and he did talk to me about that a couple of times—it just made him very skeptical of any kind of planning for the future. This is a hard thing, really a hard thing, for people who were writing about him at the time to believe, that he wasn’t planning and calculating and organizing for the future. And there wasn’t any way that you could convince a lot of people. There were lots and lots of these journalists and lots of people that were just watchers of it, that in fact he didn’t have a scheme, but I think, in a most profound sense, that he was one of the people who planned ahead the least in the sense that we ordinarily think about it. He did things. He avoided doing things that would hurt his political future; he did things that would help him. But compared to so many people who sort of aim at something in the future and build toward it, I think he was relatively skeptical about it.

I remember once we were in New York riding down Park Avenue and Reston [James B. Reston]—well a couple of them—one was a Times [New York Times] editorial which one time referred to this well-laid plan, and something that he had done of which they were critical was supposedly part of that. And he turned to me as we were looking at it, and he said, “Isn’t it amazing that people would think about that when it’s so unsure that we will even be here two or three years from now?” And he said, “Or tomorrow.” And he was very, very amused, almost bemused, by the passion with which people analyzed all these things and figured, for instance, his courting the young people was supposedly part of all this.

Another time, when he was giving a speech on Latin America, Reston wrote an article about the well-organized Kennedy machine. And it was awfully hard; it just exists as a myth. And nobody that’s persuaded of their ability to organize could really believe that they weren’t planning things on into the future. And I think that the fact is that two things grew out of this: one which is his greatest strength, and I think the other probably, from my view, was his greatest weakness, his greatest strength being that he really threw himself into immediate, into the present of whatever he was doing. He had the freedom that a good athlete has or a good artist when they are just involved in what they’re doing, and they’re not conscious of the implications of the consequences. They’re doing it. And whether it was when he traveled on some of these trips and getting into really learning about it, or Senate hearings, or getting into Bedford-Stuyvesant [Brooklyn, New York], almost every instance there was a very good argument for not taking the position he took and often for not taking the trip or even getting involved in the project. He could make a very good case that it was unsafe, that it was unsound, that it was, in fact politically unwise and would jeopardize his future. And in some cases it did. But in fact, in most cases, I wouldn’t say it turned out to be so much good politics, but it was what distinguished him as a public leader of a different caliber and just a different quality from most of the others, I’d say from any of the people that were around in this time. On the other hand, I think when people refer to his quality as somebody, “existential” is used a lot, or somebody who’s drawing a lot, and putting in a lot more than customary, out of their experience. I think that’s, to some extent that has a….The fact that he didn’t believe that there might be a future a week or a year hence is very important.

Another way you could see this was in his attitude toward his family, the fact that you see almost all the other politicians, Senator Javits [Jacob K. Javits] and Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] and Lindsay [John V. Lindsay], spend their weekends pounding away at something or other, while he would put in some weekends, but it was very hard to persuade him to spend
that time or to spend an evening anywhere unless it sort of really was just almost a necessity. He really had to be prevailed upon to give up the time that he otherwise would spend with his family. That didn’t make any sense in terms of his own ambition, in terms of his own planning.

I’m sure if he’d worked on, he knew it, if he’d really worked on it, he could have had a really solid control on the whole New York political situation. He was certainly capable of getting it. But he just, I think, felt that he didn’t know. Doing that was in a sense deferring, sacrificing that much of what he knew was real and good in life for something that might be down the road. And in a sense, I don’t think he wasn’t willing to make it. He’d seen what happened to his brother. I think that’s a big part of it. And I think he just felt that you’d better take life when you can and enjoy it. I think this is what gave his life, at least the part of the time that I shared with him, in addition to these qualities of humor and intelligence and irony and fun, that gave it a kind of a sense of, maybe the source of the immediacy that he brought to the things that he did.

On the other hand, though, I think it probably accounts for what I’d call the real weakness in his political operations. In that sense, he was one of the most really unpolitical politicians around. I’m sure his instincts about politics were very good. I’m not talking so much now about any of his judgments or his positions on things, but getting into the question of political organization. I think he really was not very interested in that. He was interested in getting a specific job done, but when he got into the campaign, I felt that then we really fell heir, he did, to the negative side of this lack of interest in planning and in the future because I think he then at that point felt that we’ll just….I don’t think he felt we’ll handle these. I mean, he appreciated the need to organize things and to get it done well. I shouldn’t say that because it’s more complicated. It’s not as if he just thought that these things happened by themselves. He understood, as I said earlier, he used to say that setting up a national campaign for President was like organizing General Motors [General Motors Company] in eight weeks. So he knew, I mean there is no question, having done it done it for his brother, he understood the scope of it and appreciated the importance of it and knew that you didn’t win without that. But deep down in him, I don’t think the passion for doing that was there in the same way that it might be with some other people in some other situations.

As a result, I think the way he got into the campaign, I think his whole approach to it, and I think the character of the campaign itself, reflects the other side of what I think is his greatest strength. It was essentially one set of things which he had not planned ahead, which happened in a way that he had not foreseen. And once the campaign unfolded, I think he felt that the only thing he could really do was try to get through to people his reasons for being in the race and somehow to impress on them what he would do as President if he got in. And I think that was a weakness. When I say it was a weakness, I think it was a weakness which is weak when you view it in terms of the classical conception of how you organize a campaign

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and how these things are done. And I’m sure, I’m not sure, but I think it’s highly possible that this strength, the very sense of immediacy and the capacity, the freedom from that kind of mentality that does plan ahead, perhaps with television and just the campaigning ability to reach directly so many people might have come into its own after California, might well have. This is pretty much just conjecture, but it sort of makes explicit what I’m trying to say, that after California I think these weaknesses which were really quite evident throughout all of his
campaigns, throughout the stages that preceded it, might have really been over shadowed by the
very thing that created it. And he would have possibly gotten through in a genuinely new way to
an awful lot of people. I imagine that he made that, I think he probably made that judgment
himself and just decided that he would go without. And I think that in some way he was reaching
the people. It is not easy to see exactly, it’s an awfully tricky thing to measure. One would have
thought that he could have had a campaign organization that was in some way as good as he was
as a candidate. But as it looked like to me, and I think too many others, that by the time he got to
California that he was carrying the whole thing on his own shoulders personally and that he was
pulling it all right out of his own guts, and that there really wasn’t much help, and there was an
awful lot of confusion and sort of counter forces working within instead of really support from
the campaign organization.

So that in the long run, and just to finish that up, I think that had he become President
then I think this would have become a fantastic virtue. We’ve seen it. And I think we’ll see it
with President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], that this terrific organization which works very well
dealing with delegates and dealing with this maverick sort of system that we have in the
conventions is, when you get to be President, maybe not as essential as some of these other
qualities. I remember he was asked—I was talking to some students tonight, this was at the law
school—he was asked by Newsweek at a dinner in 1966, what he would do if he were President
about the problems in the city. And he—it’s a good opportunity for somebody to lay out a vast
plan of three phases over X years—he said, “Well, I’d get people in from each of these towns
and these cities, and I’d ask them to come up with a plan and come back in two months or three
months, and then we’d sit down and work it out.” And I think this really would have been his
approach to these problems. In many ways I think he would have also had some large visions and
larger programs. But I think he would have, and I think he did in his own life, get into the
specifics of a problem. And as campaign manager for his brother, he was able to do that. It was
much harder to sort of abstract the thing and plan ahead as the candidate and as the prime mover.

I think that’s probably, if you’re looking at how he got into it….Then as we worked
along, I guess there was an awful lot of speculation all along that he was planning to do
something in 1968. My experience was that he, or my sense was all along and very much up to
the end was that he would have much preferred not to, that he for a variety of reasons, some of
them personal—I think he hoped eventually to be President; I don’t think there is any doubt
about that. I think a lot of the things he did, when I say he didn’t think ahead that could be
misleading—I think he did lots of things which were totally unrelated in his thinking to what lay
ahead, just because if he felt that they were right or were worth doing at the time and that
figuring out the consequences was too complicated so just go ahead and do them. I think, on

the other hand, much of what he did also he thought was the sort of thing that would be very
helpful to him when he became President. And as I say, this was something that he assumed that
sometime he’d have a pretty good chance of doing.

For instance, going to South Africa, a lot of people said, well, this is a great chance to
win the blacks’ support. But the possibility, first of all, the interest of black Americans in South
Africa is pretty marginal compared to their interest in their own problems. Second, the possibility
of doing anything there that would dramatically impress them, aside from just going, as being a
great something that would make it important for them to vote is pretty marginal. Third, I think,
his own chances of it becoming a fiasco in one way or another were pretty large. So his interest in doing that sort of thing, I think was related to his future plans in a sense because he thought, well, this is a problem which a president is really going to have to deal with as President. He never told me this, but when I talked to him about it I just felt that this was probably, had to be ultimately the reason for this sort of a trip, because his whole approach to it was to find out generally as much about it, to just get a feel for the place, and a feel for the problems. And I think he felt anybody who’d done that, at some earlier stage when he was freer than when he became President, would be in a position to do it. So he did do a lot of things that were I think connected with what he would later, a position that he thought he might find himself in someday. As to the timing of that, I think when he looked at it he felt the possibility of running in 1968, I think initially, was just out of the question. It didn’t occur to him at all, I think, in the beginning. I’m talking about the beginning of my relationship with him, which was in the Senate, when he became Senator.

Then, I think, as time went along, and as he began to speak out on Vietnam, and as the Vietnam thing deteriorated, then pressure began to grow on him to stake out first of all just an independent position from the President [Lyndon B. Johnson], which he did in that speech which, I forget. It was on the weekend of George Washington’s birthday, wasn’t it?

HACKMAN: February 18th. That’s what comes to my mind.

JOHNSTON: What was that, 1966?

HACKMAN: Yes.

JOHNSTON: That was a rather, I mean, that was the speech Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] characterizes as “putting the fox in the chicken coop.” And that was, as I recall, publicly his first real sort of departure, his first real…. There were other times before that, but that was the most dramatic kind of break with the administration. And from then on, he had set in motion, or let’s just say there were set in motion, by that and by his feelings about that and by speeches on the subject, events and pressures that from then on, I think, were building up pretty gradually, and at first almost insignificantly and frivolously, pressures on him to really consider running in ’68.

And I think you have to think of two or three things about that. I guess the first is that he really conceived of becoming President over a united Democratic party. He’d seen his

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brother do that and still have enough problems uniting the country and pulling the Congress together. And I think it was really hard for him to conceive just in terms of really doing it, of splitting the party and then putting it back together and then putting, if he got elected, then putting the country together. So I think that was the first big consideration in his mind. And he understood obviously that taking on the President would amount to splitting the party.

Second, I think he felt that any, and these are pretty obvious—I mean they’re almost clichés—but it’s important, I think, because he did recognize them himself and talked about them, about these sorts of things. When I say he wasn’t too explicit about his plans, he still
discussed quite a bit with me and with others the arguments that people made about why he should do it. And we went back and forth on those things.

The second, I think, feeling was the fact that the way in which the press would handle this as a personal drama between himself and Johnson, and he looking at Johnson as his brother’s usurper and the terrible unpleasantness of that for him personally just to have to go through it and also part of that. And probably even more, the fact that in the end the real issues, the real reasons for his doing it, would more than likely be submerged into the feeling that he was just an ambitious and resentful heir apparent who felt impatient to get on with his role in history. I mean he was very lucid about seeing that, very clear about how other people saw that. And I think as a result he had an understanding that it could well be interpreted that way. I don’t think that he felt that people that thought that were all, that was one of the interesting discrepancies between the public image and the man was that he had a lot more sort of sense about his critics’ positions and their reasons for feeling things. While he was very often outraged by some of the critics, with the majority I think he felt that, from their point of view, these were normal and logical things to believe, and that they might even, from their point of view, be right on some of these. He was for those reasons reluctant, very reluctant, to get into it.

Third, I think he felt that he knew—I think again this goes back to perhaps his own experience with his brother and the way that ended—and I think he felt that he….It’s really difficult to be precise about this. I don’t think he could have been. But I feel that his family, his wife, his children and his friends, and things he did for fun, and just the things he did that weren’t connected directly with his work were very important to him and that he knew that, and not only very important, but were much more important than they are in the lives of most public men, at least most public men that we have around today. It’s just amazing how little real life most of these other people seem to have. I know because I’ve talked to people who have worked for other people, and just seeing them and talking to them and having spent time with them, I can just see so many of them are just totally consumed by this life. He was very reluctant to be all-consumed by it. He held back as I say, in spending weekends and nights and things. Not only that, I think it was an element in his thinking about running. I think he felt that the minute he made the decision to go that you could say goodbye really to that, not only for the campaign, but if you’re successful, while you’re President. Not that he was happy with just the way his life, I think he felt that he probably should be and wanted to be President. And I don’t mean that, if other things weren’t there, that this would have been the constraining factor. But it was an element which, among others, perhaps wouldn’t be present

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in some other people’s calculations or thoughts about this. So again it was sort of a negative pressure. Again, this was not something that he was sort of laying out, but it was whenever the thing came up, which it did with increasing frequency, it was something which he responded to negatively for those three reasons. And there may be others which will occur, but these seem to be the principal. And then finally I think he thought he couldn’t win which is, as you probably know, it’s rather important. One thing you’ve got to assume is that you’ve got a pretty good chance to pull it all off. He could not conceive of the President of the United States being in bad enough shape and being unable enough, incompetent enough or whatever, not to be able to just destroy anybody that took him on within his own party. So that and his experience, I think, well, his experience in government is clearly the most important experience he had, before or after,
were the years working with his brother when his brother was President. So it was a combination of first-hand experience, knowing the power of the presidency, knowing what you can do, being aware that if Johnson wanted to pull out of Vietnam, just to take that issue away, that he could have done this, that he could have done this in such a way as to make the critics look whatever way he wanted. He could have, not only that, but all the things he could have done with all the people in all the states, the different delegates and people with political influence domestically.

So I think he had a terrific respect just for the sheer power of the office. I don’t really know, I think his judgment about Johnson’s capacity to use it changed. I don’t think he ever doubted Johnson’s determination to use it; his will to use it against anybody, or against anybody who would take him on in that way would try to fight him for it. There were some people that worked with him. I know Kenny O’Donnell [Kenneth P. O’Donnell] always felt that Johnson would back off if there was a fight, and as it turned out I think he was right. But I don’t think Senator Kennedy believed that. I think he thought that Johnson would, well, I think he felt perhaps more than most people that, I think he sensed more than most people, the extraordinary power that a president has, and he couldn’t believe that Johnson wouldn’t use this when the crunch came.

HACKMAN: Yes.

JOHNSTON: And also I think he felt, which is a different sort of respect, I think, he felt quite a lot of respect just for the office. And it was hard for him. This was just not the way, I think, that he conceived of his becoming President, by attacking the Democratic President. It didn’t really fit in with any, not as I say again, not that he had any scheme, but it went against his feelings about the office, his feelings about his way of doing things.

And so for all these reasons, which all in a sense could be, I suppose, summed up by saying that he felt that sooner or later he would become President assuming first of all, I think, he felt….I’d better take that back. I think he felt profoundly that it was possible that something might happen that he might not even be around the next….I mean anybody that’s trying to understand how he acted and why he thought the way he did has to put that in and keep putting that in, a profound kind of a skepticism about the performance of things and of

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his own presence here. That was a very big factor, but once he, say beyond that in some sense, I think he felt, that assuming that he was going to be around and he would be alive, that there would be a pretty good chance that he would be President.

He wanted, therefore, to learn as much in the meantime, to enjoy as much as possible his family, his life, and to be in a position to be something, not just a victim of the office, not just a president but somebody who really, in a sense, comes in with the real experience and ability and control of himself and people and ideas to make something of the office. And he knew, I think, that these were in many places going to be divisive ideas and ideas that were going to generate conflict and generate a lot or provoke a lot of opposition. And so I think he instinctively wanted to get into that office, if possible, by means of the least conflict. Not that he clearly avoided fights, but it would not make much sense really to get it if you’re going to do it that way, if you had any alternative.
Now, I think that implies that he might have thought a considerable amount about this, and I’m sure he did. But I think most of these things, it’s like Socrates said that he had a voice that told him “no” on things. What I’m really making explicit, I think, is we’re just, in many cases, almost just kind of saying, “no” to certain things. People would suggest certain policy, and he would say “no.” In many cases, I think he just relied on that instinctive reaction. And so what I’m saying is valid only to the extent that it is consistent with those reactions and that pattern of reactions.

Now, that pattern of reactions, I think, I noticed it, he was clear about it. I think that you’ll find as you talk to other people that that’s very consistent as he went along, and yet it clearly was not the season for that attitude, that approach to the thing. The Vietnam War was too profoundly divisive to. It made all of these considerations just seem in the light of what, especially after the Tet Offensive but even before then, seemed to be rather private, personal reasons which they were and which nobody contested. And I think that most people who became very critical as time wore on would have found it very laudable had the circumstances been different. And I think he was very, very sensitive to that change clearly. He met it at every corner. He couldn’t go anywhere without hearing by the end of 1967, somebody would tell him that he had to do it, that it was very important to do it. So that by the end of the year and into January and February, he was barraged with it.

It wasn’t just a question of his being the sort of object of a lot of pressure either. He himself felt very strongly about the war and felt very strongly about what was happening in the country, not just the Vietnam War but these other things. I think the Vietnam War though, the fact that the President didn’t seem to be more sensitive to the problems and be in better control of it, made all these other things come into very sharp focus for him. He was very, very clear about the things that needed doing, that needed a different approach from the President and implicitly, I suppose, a different president. I think the classic, and it ought to be certainly, it obviously will be quite an interesting document for anybody looking at this period is the “Meet the Press” interview in December of that year. I think it was December. He was interviewed by, I forgot, Tom Wicker [Thomas G. Wicker] and two or three others. They asked him, “What do you think about...” It was just sort of an open question about the Vietnam War, and he went on for quite a while. And the people that were there, I remember

somebody said, Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] or somebody said that the reporters said, well, they’d just almost never seen anything as eloquent, and it did leave them kind of completely breathless. And he went on and on about the war, and it was really, it was sort of equal to, I believe, to the speech in February 19, 1966, in terms of a public sign that he was moving way away from the administration.

But what was very interesting was that it was a conflict clear and evident, and would be in the text of that interview, between his feelings about what was happening in the country and his real conviction that we were heading down a disastrous path, and all these things I’ve just described, this unwillingness to rock the boat, not rock, that makes it seem a little…. Just the things I’ve just gone through really. I remember it was interesting because he went through this long thing, and as I say, very eloquent, very, very persuasive, and very moving, asking why we were doing these things, and citing an awful lot of instances of just sheer incompetence in terms of the negotiations, the missed opportunities that had come out, U Thant and that whole set of
circumstances. And at the end somebody said, “Well, if you feel this strongly, why don’t you run for President?” At which point he said, “If I did that, I would destroy the Democratic Party.”

I remember meeting him at the airport four or five days after that. And he said—he was changing a suit or something to go to a speech—and he asked me, he said, “What did you think of that interview?” And I said, “Well, it seems to me that it was probably a mistake to have done it if you aren’t going to run because all you’ve done, it seems to me, is up the pressure on yourself. And your answer about not destroying the Democratic Party was to me not very adequate.” It had been the only, I guess there had been one or two times in our whole relationship where I really thought he was annoyed and really irritated with something I told him. I had the habit, I mean we used to joke about it that I’d tell him things that were, sometimes just tell him whatever it was and often it wasn’t so jolly, whatever was going on in New York. So often it was sort of bad news. This really got under his skin, and you could see that he was….

And it wasn’t only that instance. But that was a clear to me, clear moment publicly and in this private instance when the two sides of this position, really irreconcilable sides within himself, were hitting head on. From then on, in January and February on up to the time and St. Patrick’s Day when he finally announced one way or another, just about every day saw the clashing of those two sets of pressures. At one point, he said to me, “If I could just spend this year off the planet that’s where I should really be.” He said, “I can’t be here doing this and…” I remember once we walked to Mrs. John Kennedy’s [Jacqueline B. Kennedy Onassis], and he was talking about a trip exploring off some place in Africa or in the Antarctic—I forget where exactly—and it was obviously just a thought, but it was the kind of problem in a way that the only real solution was daydreaming. There wasn’t any way out of it because any way you went was wrong. Now a lot of people at that point, as I said up until then he had not been seeking or initiating discussions and advice-giving about all of this, and then back in the fall of ‘67, no, I’m sure you’ll have…

HACKMAN: You mean the Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] meeting at the Regency?

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JOHNSTON: …yes. You’ll have this sort of sequence of all this and Salinger will, I’m sure, go into it, and all will be clear. And I don’t have it. I was in on quite a bit of it, but I don’t have as clear an idea how it got started and how, but I went to a meeting that Pierre set up, I believe in the Delmonico …

HACKMAN: The Regency.

JOHNSTON: …yes, the Regency in New York at which there were fifteen or twenty people and at which this subject was discussed. Well, it was a little, it was a tiny bit like science fiction at that point, because that was earlier than, what date was that, do you remember?

JOHNSTON: It was a Sunday afternoon. I know that.

HACKMAN: I’m seeing Pierre next week, so....

JOHNSTON: Well, he’ll give you all of this. And he was very much in on, I think, well, it was interesting because different people took different initiatives on this matter for two reasons, I guess: one, because he would have been indiscreet and difficult for Senator Robert Kennedy to organize these kinds of meetings and take these kinds of initiatives; and second, for this sort of lack of interest in the whole thing. I think he felt that what will be, will be. Not fatalistic exactly, but just feeling that a lot of meetings.... And so when somebody said to him, Pierre would say to him, “Now look, we really ought to discuss this. We ought to see, because it may happen and it should happen, and I feel it should happen,” this is Pierre talking to somebody else. But I think there was much less effort to convince him at this stage that this was a good thing than just to say, look, is it all right to get these fellows together and we’ll just talk about it?

So they’d get together. We got together there at the Regency. And then we got together again when? There was another meeting the weekend of the Democratic dinner in New York at the Plaza; we had another meeting. I suppose there was another. In any case, there seemed to be three or four.

HACKMAN: I know you were at the meeting at the vanden Heuvel’s [William J. vanden Heuvel] client, a shipping firm.

JOHNSTON: Merdon, Horace Merdon, Yes. I was at that.

HACKMAN: Do you recall something between the first Salinger meeting and that meeting?

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JOHNSTON: Can we stop for just a minute? [Interruption]

[Unintelligible]

JOHNSTON: Well, I think Pierre will be better able, I’m sure, to give you a....

HACKMAN: I’d never heard about the meeting at the, where did you mention?

JOHNSTON: Horace Merdon?

HACKMAN: No. I know that’s the vanden Heuvel meeting.

JOHNSTON: The Regency?

HACKMAN: Well, I know those two. The ones I don’t know are the one at the time of the Democratic ....
JOHNSTON: But I think that is the Merdon one.

HACKMAN: Oh. Okay.

JOHNSTON: That’s the same one.

HACKMAN: Oh, okay, and one other hotel I think you mentioned.

JOHNSTON: Well, the Delmonico was just a mistake. It was I think, it was the Regency.

HACKMAN: No. But there was another one.

JOHNSTON: The Plaza, it was where the Democratic Party had its thing that weekend. I think that was it. There were those two sort of large meetings, I guess. Then things happened like, for instance, Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan] and I….Well, I talked to Kenny about something else. Well, without getting into all the details to begin with, these meetings went on. I think it will get to be rather clear who was at them. Somebody will have all that or you’ll be able to piece it together and when actually they happened. The important thing is they were going on more or less without his involvement, and nothing much seemed to come out of them. As I remember, they were rather big zeros as far as I could see. There was sort of a lot of talking who’d get Ned Breathitt [Edward T. Breathitt, Jr.] and, of course, as it turned out Ned Breathitt was all for Johnson and Humphrey. It was a very unorganized and kind of inchoate group of people who were dealing with the basic problem that there wasn’t any mandate to go forward and they had no way discreetly that they could do anything, I mean, effectively. They could do a lot of things discreetly, but they weren’t going to be able to really talk to anybody on behalf of anybody that mattered. Now Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] got more involved, I think, in talking to Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh] or Unruh in talking to Steve, let’s put it that way to start with. And then as it got closer and closer to the middle of March, more and more people began to fly in to New York or people began to see each other. And then the thing got to be much more real until one day he went ahead and announced.

Initially, it was the initiative of friends and supporters who were, they weren’t just off doing something frivolous and inconsequential, but they were dealing at a real disadvantage. Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] was at one of these meetings, but even he wasn’t in any real position to speak for his brother. And his brother, in a sense, wasn’t soliciting advice then. He was allowing these things to go on. He was allowing people to talk. I was with him, I think, right after one of the meetings when it was reported to him about the results. He didn’t ask that many questions. It would have been possible certainly for him to come to these meetings, probably, even though it would have been difficult with the press. I think some of it did leak out.
HACKMAN: The first meeting leaked and I’ve never seen anyone who’s….But I know a couple of people, I believe Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] and Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] weren’t at the second meeting and were at the first. I don’t know whether you have anything more on it.

JOHNSTON: Yes. I don’t know. I don’t remember. There were some speculations. Somebody thought maybe Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton]. He was at the first meeting and I don’t think he was at the second meeting. But there was no real, since there wasn’t anybody really authorized to be in charge of these things, in a sense they were all pretty loose. And actually I think Goodwin and Schlesinger met at vanden Heuvel’s apartment, I think with the Senator, with Senator Robert Kennedy later the same day of the second meeting.

HACKMAN: Before.

JOHNSTON: Or before maybe.

HACKMAN: It was brunch and a number of people including—I was going to ask you if you knew this—including a couple of people who came to a second meeting, O’Donnell, Sorensen, and Edward Kennedy, I believe.

JOHNSTON: And there was some effort, I think to keep the two separate and to keep some people that knew about the first and not the second and so on. But I don’t think that was too much an effort on the part of Robert Kennedy. It was all very casual. I got invited to the first meeting by him on Saturday, that is, by Robert Kennedy. He just said, “Well, why don’t you go on over on Sunday and just see what’s what.” I think,

just Joe Dolan and I, Jerry [Gerald J. Bruno] were the only people from our staff. And I didn’t do anything. What I’m saying essentially was it wasn’t really the kind of thing where you came out of the meeting with something to do. We sort of sat around and discussed it and got a feel for it. And at that point, as I recall—I could be all wrong about it—but as I recall, except for Ivan Nestingen [Ivan A. Nestingen], everybody else in the first meeting seemed to be very, very skeptical about his doing anything. And I think this ran through, there were people that felt as time went on, to varying degrees, that it was very important that he get involved, that either for his own personal political reasons or for reasons related to the fact that he was the only person that could do something, the impossible situation the country was in, that he had to put aside this set of considerations that I mentioned and get himself into it. And there were people, as I say there were a variety of different, I think, everybody had their own personal sort of rationale for this. I don’t mean reasons related to their own person, but something that, for instance, Kenny O’Donnell, who I think felt very strongly. I asked the Senator if it would be all right if I came up to Boston [Boston, Massachusetts] just to talk to him about it, because, I forget how he and I had gotten on it, but I felt at a certain point that the Senator was looking for people—I can’t remember the time of our lunch. But I came up and had a three hour lunch with him—and he was
looking for people whose political judgments—this is getting a little ahead—but as he was getting closer—this was towards the end—he was looking for people whose experience was essentially one of dealing with the organization and knew the real hard problems that it would take when [___] of course, may be one of the major problems of getting into the thing at all. So people like Kenny were very important in terms of his judgment and the judgment of people like that and the reassurance that it was doable, Kenny’s experience and his contacts and all. I talked to Kenny and got that and reported back, and then I think Kenny talked to him. But everybody was a little reluctant. They had their own personal feelings about these things, and yet I think most everybody felt that he had the right to keeping his own council in a sense and in making up his own mind on this matter, not that they weren’t ready to speak up if he asked them about it. But it was very interesting and when you say did you discuss this or did anybody discuss it, as time went on we discussed it quite a bit, those months of January, February, and into March. But the problem on the part of many people now, there were people like Adam, for instance, Adam Walinsky felt very strongly that this was something he had to do and that it was not really a question of choice, and that any sort of fudging of it or not doing it was in many ways part of a misunderstanding on his part of the situation or misreading of the situation or some form of a misjudgment of his own role in it. There were others that felt that it was simply something that he had to resolve. And I think that probably the majority of people felt to some degree or another that that was the problem with any advice that they could give, because if he had been a weak person and I think even Adam—I don’t mean to make it sound like Adam didn’t understand this. He did—but he was much more than most, I think, feeling that he should get through to him his point of view of this.

And as it got on, people made very strong arguments pro and con. But I think that it was an ambiguous situation, because he wanted advice and as it turned out, he ended up wanting reassurance that he was headed towards making the right decision. Which was very unlike his style of operating in other circumstances. And I think it threw off a lot of people

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that were working with him and giving him advice, because they are just talking about things with him. I think they started out feeling that they’d just lay this out and discuss it with them, which is the way he did it. As he got into it though more, I think these forces that were just the pressures, and his own feeling about this as an issue and the Vietnam War, and then the apparent weakness of the administration on the thing, kept building up and he began to look for, to some extent, advice that would give him some answers to these question about divisiveness, about losing, whether he could win it or not. And as he did that, he began to, almost within different meetings and in different groups to draw that out. He, however, as far as I could see, never really sat down and kind of confronted everybody with it. First of all, he didn’t like to run things that way. He didn’t run anything that way. Whether it was Bedford-Stuyvesant….

HACKMAN: You mean with the whole group?

JOHNSTON: With a whole large, yes, he just, at least in my experiences, he might have as Attorney General, but he never did with the things I was in. He worked with individuals and he got them to working in groups and he got
groups together. I mean he wasn’t, of course, shy to have group meetings, but I think he felt that you got more done the other way. It was just the way he worked. So this thing didn’t ever, it came up constantly as time went on in a series of conversations. And also, it’s important, to just give an idea, it kept coming up as we….He had thought a lot about taking a trip to Czechoslovakia and to Eastern Europe. It was a thing which I ended up with a number of other people arguing very much against.

HACKMAN: This was when?

JOHNSTON: This would have been in January and February. John Nolan [John E. Nolan] and I were talking about going over. I mean he had gotten to that point of talking to John and talking to me and we were roughing out a schedule of how John would go ahead just as we’d done on these other trips. But John and I, I guess I perhaps more strongly in the beginning, I forget really, but strongly I felt that it would be a big mistake for a number of reasons, but primarily because he’d be in an airplane with eighty American journalists who would do nothing but talk to him about his subject which he thought he was getting away from. He had originally….going to Eastern Europe in an open car, driving through with Ethel and having a really nice trip in the autumn, or at least, I forget the autumn was sort of the nice time of the year. He was sort of joking, but that was his thought of wouldn’t it be nice. And he kind of, I don’t think he really faced up to the fact or he did eventually but it took a while for him to really accept that going to Eastern Europe would get him away from these problems here. I think it was sort of like the daydream thing, just getting away. And once he thought about it, it wasn’t that I pointed it out to him, I think it became clear and obvious. Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman] and Burke Marshall and a lot of other people got into it eventually and just said, now, let’s think about this. So that was scrapped.

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So then he had January. Then I said, “It would be much better....”

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

JOHNSTON: ...influence this or got him to do it. But I said, “If he wasn’t going to Europe or instead of going to Eastern Europe that he could spend the time in New York State, from the first part of January, right after skiing, through January, give us three weeks of time in New York, that we could have a very, very effective schedule for him that would get him around the state, that would get him with a lot of groups that everybody had wanted to do or he had felt that he ought to do, in a way that would be leisurely and well-done. It wouldn’t be just a question of rushing in and out between a boat or spending a half day and not having….So he agreed to do that and I spent about two or three weeks in the New York office and with people, Joe Dolan and others. But principally I was in New York setting up a very, I think, a very busy and probably very fruitful, for lots of reasons other than just politics, schedule of meetings and visits. He went and spoke in a lot of schools. He visited a lot of places in the state he hadn’t been. He met with all sorts of groups. I’m sure that sort of itinerary, we had a day-to-day schedule event, it’s probably available someplace. And that was right at the height of all of this. When was the Tet Offensive, February?
HACKMAN: It starts late January, right at the end of January and then moves to….

JOHNSTON: Well, now see, this was right sort of over that period. I mean, it was just before that, and that time. So it was a very, very tough time for this thing which I described at a “Meet the Press.” It was kind of a conflict because it got more and more sharp every day. I must say my feeling about it was, and I told him this, I said, “I’m setting up a lot of these university visits and they’re going to be very tough in this regard, but I feel that it’s better that you get a feel for that.” And we discussed it. And I said, “I can’t guarantee that they won’t be very unpleasant. And if you don’t want to do it, clearly it’s easy to scrap, it hasn’t been set up. We’re proposing.” And he said yes, and it was just as ambiguous as the whole thing. He clearly didn’t want to do it, but he didn’t want to not do it, and so he went to just about one school a day or sometimes two, and he got asked at everyone. There were signs, are you chicken or…

HACKMAN: Chicken, hawk or dove.

JOHNSTON: …chicken, hawk, or dove or something, and it was very unpleasant for him because it sharpened the whole bloody thing. And yet I think this is the kind of the way….I mean he didn’t have any regrets at having done the things. He didn’t say he wished he hadn’t gone, but it really sharpened it. And it made these meetings where people said, well, don’t worry you can wait four years; we will be with you, it made them seem a little abstract and fuzzy and intellectual to him because he’d just been out and dealt with it. He was clearly able to know that some of these passions would subside. I don’t mean that it was in any way decisive. And I don’t think it was actually. But he spent that time in New York in addition to all the other trips around the country that he made in the four weeks before he announced or whatever. I can’t remember what his schedule was then, but he spent a lot of time with a lot of people. And even then, even the political people, people who traditionally had been very tough on the subject, very much in favor of supporting the President were getting so much pressure from their children at home, people like Bill Luddy [William F. Luddy], the Westchester County chairman. It would be interesting to get somebody to talk to him and just find out how he recalls his conversations both with me and also with the Senator and with other people, because at some point he just radically changed. I don’t know that he ended up urging him to do it, but he had consistently been saying he shouldn’t do anything like that. But I think something happened with his boy, he got in jail or something. It was an awful lot over Vietnam…

HACKMAN: Yes.

JOHNSTON: …and it just made a big difference. So these things were accumulating all along clearly. This is obvious to anybody that studies this period. And the pressures were building, and there were an awful lot of good clear
arguments being made about how important it was by people he respected like Arthur, Dick and others, who were in effect telling him, not simply that he had to do it, not that it was some sort of an imperative, but that it would make sense politically for him. I don’t know. I wasn’t there much with Dick on his, but I’d been sitting with him on the other end of the phone and heard him talk to Dick quite a bit about it. I went down to Kentucky, and I remember he had a long conversation with him when we were staying at Mary Bingham’s house that night. And it was clear that Dick was urging him to think it over and reconsider and Arthur made some very, I thought, eloquent and extremely perceptive sort of comments about this and long analyses which made an awful lot of sense, not simply in terms of the needs of the country, but also from his own perspective, and reflected exceedingly good judgment politically and in every other way. I think, though, as that period went along and as he joked about it Ethel, of course, thought that he should do something, and other sisters and other people, and Adam and, of course, thousands of people everywhere he went, whom he didn’t know, were telling him that he should. People like Kenny began to as time went on, although they were, I don’t know whether Kenny really…. You’ve talked to him. Did he really come out and tell him to do it? Do you remember? No. But he did through me.

HACKMAN: I wondered, in the meeting with you, what impression did you get?

JOHNSTON: Well, Kenny for instance said, which I relayed to the Senator—again I think this was one of those reluctances to impose his own feelings about the thing on a man that he knew was perfectly capable of making up his own mind on it, and who would have to live with the consequences—but he told me, he said, “I may be just lusting for a fight.” He said, “But I’d like to see him get in and do it, and I think he can win it.” He said, “I think Johnson will leave. I think Johnson will run.” And as I say, everybody was, an awful lot of people were very respectful of his right to make this decision himself. I don’t think Kenny would have hesitated to call him about a problem in Massachusetts or something he knew about in Latin America or whatever position that he thought that he should look into on the ABM [Anti-ballistic missile] or anything like that. But on this, I think he felt, and I did, very strongly that if he asked for your views on it, if he called you up and asked what you thought, that it was fine to say.

But it seemed to me that ultimately it was sort of irrelevant in terms of whether or not to do it. One could help in terms of an analysis of the thing, one could help in terms of what some of the consequences might be and just sort of thinking it out with him. But pretty much, finally this is a judgment of such a personal nature that it seemed to me that advice, except of the purest tactical sort, was kind of not to the point. He still got a lot of it and a lot of it I think just helped him in his own thinking about it. But I’m convinced that still he did not feel that anybody really adequately dealt with these two issues in the end, the major thing being the divisiveness. And I think if he’d felt, I guess this is the major thing in the end that held him back. I think he almost felt, was convinced and I heard him say it even before he decided to run, that it really wasn’t a question of losing, because he could have. He never quite said that he could come out ahead by losing, because he absolutely didn’t believe that, and there’s nothing in his experience or his
family’s experience that indicates that that makes much sense politically. He didn’t believe it. But I think he was beginning to believe that, or maybe even become—he certainly was beginning to say—that it really wasn’t simply a question of losing or not losing, that he could probably. It might even cost him more not to get into it than to stay and see his position eroded in this thing and not be involved one way or another. Of course, his favorite expression, one of them, was about the hottest places in hell being reserved for those who reserved their neutrality in times like this. All of his own convictions, all of his own statements, all of his own feelings came back to really haunt him on this. As I said, every day it was more and more painful. It was an agony, a moral agony.

And I think the thing that held him back, I think he dealt with all the other matters really in the way in which you get to be President: the respect for the office of the President, the question of family, and the question of just giving up, even the possibility, accepting the possibility of losing. But I don’t think that he felt that he dealt with very successfully the question of the divisiveness and the personal issue that his getting in would do, what that would do to the reasons that he was getting in for, and what it would do to him even if he could win and become the Democratic nominee. I think that sense, that it was all going to become a bitter personal struggle he felt was going to make Johnson look much better than he deserved and probably end up with him on the short end of the stick, because it still, tied in with all of this was still a very clear recognition all along of the power of the presidency.

And as I say, I think he would have accepted the possibility of losing in a sort of clear thing over the issues and going down with that, because I think at that point it was clear to him, more and more clear, that he was on the only side that could make any sense to him and to the people that he felt were his constituency in this country. So he wasn’t going to have

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the other people anyway, and if he went down over that issue, if he wouldn’t fight that then I think he got more and more convinced that he wouldn’t have that constituency. He wouldn’t merit it. He wouldn’t even, in his own eyes, believe that he could. But he was at the same time equally convinced, and it was even more persuasive in terms of inaction that he couldn’t have it that way, it would not come out that way; it would not be seen as that kind of a struggle. It would be seen as a personal fight between the president of the country and an ambitious young man, and the issue of Vietnam would be lost.

And I think if you go back and look at the New York Times coverage of the February 18 speech in ’66, it’s very clear Time magazine and cartoons and just the whole….If you read the speech, read the administration’s answers to it, read the material the way in which it was characterized in the press, I think he was right about that. I hate the idea; it’s very depressing to say that because it means—it was very depressing at the time; it’s not now very depressing—but it’s sort of discouraging to think that became a major factor.

I think it would be possible to say that this is sort of a rationalization, and I’m not sure. I was a great admirer and friend of his, and I would obviously….It might be that he was just uncertain and used this as a reason afterwards for why after McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] he got in. I don’t believe that. I’m willing to admit, though, that’s it’s not impossible; I’ve fooled myself on a lot of things, I’m sure. I’ve seen later that I have. And it was so fraught with complexity and different considerations and all, and I tried to sort of separate out a few. I feel honestly and just from my conversations with him about this that this was genuinely the thing
that held him back, that this was removed by McCarthy’s success in New Hampshire because at that point, the question of dividing the party and the personal thing between himself and Johnson was not a problem anymore, in the sense that it had been before. It made good copy and it would still be a big element in anybody’s view of this struggle over the next six months, but it was not the factor that it was before. It did not color the whole thing. Lyndon Johnson, in a sense, had been already struck a very tough blow, and it wasn’t so much Gene McCarthy that did it, it was the people of the Democratic Party, it was the people of the country. Gene McCarthy, one would have to say, did a hell of a thing by doing it and I think Senator Kennedy recognized that.

But it was something, and we talked about this right after, I guess, the morning, very soon after he announced. Everybody was saying how awful it was. How tasteless and graceless it was to have gotten in in this fashion and spoil McCarthy’s victory. And I must say I don’t think he was particularly happy with the way he did it. I don’t think that his friends or the people that were working with him on it were very happy with it all, but I think he was probably….He said, “Just imagine”—I remember he was in the kitchen cooking some eggs—and he said, “Just imagine what they would have said if I’d been the one that had gone to New Hampshire, how that would have looked.” He said, “First of all, I wouldn’t have won.” And I think he was right, that he wouldn’t have won, that it would have become really a question of the usurper against the President. It may be that, as I say, it’s possible to look at that and say, oh, no, he was all wrong, he could have won. And I think it’s very hard, and that’s the thing that makes just in the interest of kind of getting a feel for the things that went into his thinking and also for the objective facts, for the facts about it.

It’s very hard as you look back to remember without either having all the papers and just having the whole way in which television covered it, to have a sense of what a distortion this particular characterization of him as a power-grabbing, resentful heir to his brother’s throne, which not only made interesting copy, but which fitted into so many people’s conception or view of him, his ruthlessness, his drive, his one-sided kind of excessive drive forward. All of those prejudices about him fed each other, and such a conflict against the President of the United States, I think, is really important if one is trying to understand—looking back on it—how he made these decisions and why he made them in the sequence he did and the timing of them. This was perhaps the major consideration.

When McCarthy made, when that success came in New Hampshire, suddenly it was devolving into the unfriendly interpretation. I think it’s clear that he recognized that. I do. I think that anybody that was a friend of his would, that he saw that it was possible, and he decided to do it, and that was that. It was just as cold as that. I suppose if one weren’t sympathetic to what he was trying to do, and didn’t think that a lot of these other considerations made much difference anyway, that it would be possible to look at it and say that. In fact, McCarthy did show it was possible. McCarthy also showed that the Democratic—I think the important thing and the thing that somebody who was looking at it through his eyes would see—is that McCarthy established that the Democratic Party was already divided, and in fact that what it needed at this point was somebody to unite it who could pull it together and make it an effective force for reforming the country and for a new approach in foreign policy. And my feeling, which I didn’t discuss with him—I don’t think many, well, I don’t know—I think that whole question of the timing, of how he got into it, all of that seemed to be done very haphazardly and chaotically. I remember I was
at a meeting at Steve’s and everybody was…. The meeting was ostensibly called to discuss the question of whether he should run. It was after, what, McCarthy won on a Tuesday?

HACKMAN:  This is when the Cronkite [Walter Cronkite]....

JOHNSTON:  Yes, and everybody was standing around at Steve’s, fifteen or twenty or thirty people, I guess this was sort of the largest meeting of that sort and the like, quite a variety of people were there. And they were all drawn together, I guess, to sort of ponder this big issue. And here it was Walter Cronkite in living color, saying that—or Roger Mudd [Roger H. Mudd] or somebody was saying—that within twenty-four hours or I forget what, that he was going to go ahead and do it. And I remember I left just as that was going on and went out to the airport. What was that? Tuesday was the election, I guess. So, this was Thursday…

HACKMAN:  Thursday evening.

JOHNSTON:  …and he announced on Saturday. So he came in—that was Thursday evening—he came in with Ethel. She was wearing a really pretty dress, and we rode in, he was very relaxed as he always was and sort of jolly about it. And I

said, “Well, I’d planned to go skiing,” which I had. I was going to leave on Saturday for two weeks. So I said I really couldn’t sit around and go through these meetings anymore because they all seemed to be just talk about it. It seemed to me that he had to make up his own mind. I was just sort of saying it for fun with him too. And I said, “You have to make up your own mind about this. This isn’t anything any of these people can tell you.” I said, “Before we heard the Walter Cronkite, ninety percent of the people in the meeting…. Ted Sorensen had just finished making a brilliant case for your not doing it.” I said, “If you’re going to depend on those kind of meetings and people like us sitting around speculating about it…. So I’m planning, unless you tell me not to which I’ll gather means that you are going to go ahead and do it, I’m planning to be in Mont Tremblant [Mont Tremblant, Quebec] on Sunday.” Then he said, “Well, you better not go skiing.” So then as we got in, well, we had dinner and he talked about it. And then, I forget, he seemed to go…. We had something planned and, oh, then I guess the next day we had quite a…

HACKMAN:  It was Wednesday.

JOHNSTON:  … what was the sequence?

HACKMAN:  It was Wednesday not Thursday.

JOHNSTON:  It was Wednesday night, the meeting. Then he went back to Washington, I think, right, Thursday morning?
HACKMAN: Thursday was the day—I don’t know if this, the timing of that—I think was the day of the refusal of the Vietnam Commission idea. And, what, he comes back to New York on Friday for a day of Long Island thing.

JOHNSTON: Long Island.

HACKMAN: Long Island.

JOHNSTON: He came back. And, well, he had some meetings that morning, I think, with Steingut [Stanley Steingut] at Steve’s apartment. I forgot, I think he, now wait a minute here. I’m getting the days mixed up. Let’s see, I guess he came up to New York and he went out to Long Island. I guess he met with Steingut…. No, that was after he’d announced. That Friday, I remember I met him at the airport. He had with him somebody from *Life* magazine, Sylvia Wright maybe, and Jack Newfield and some other writer, another journalist. And as we were getting into the car, we had a day set up a long time ago to go out to Long Island to appear at a conference, something that Jack English [John F. English] had organized with Gene Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson]. There was a coffee klatch, and then there was one of those awful lunches where people all put on clown suits, some sort of a thing at a country club.

HACKMAN: Yes, I remember….

JOHNSTON: It was kind of a totally bizarre day for him to go through. Maybe though, actually I think maybe he came into the city first, and he didn’t go out there until later in the morning. What was rather striking was that I said something to him about, I said, “Have you decided? Have you made up your mind?” He said, “I’m going to go ahead with it unless you don’t think it’s a good idea.” And he was sort of serious, it was semi-serious. I suppose that what he meant was he was going to lock you into whatever he did. And he said, “What do you think?” And I said, “I think you ought to go ahead and do it at this point, and I don’t think that the way you do it in the end will matter as whether you do it or not. We rode in, I guess, to New York and he went in the city and I think he went to Steve’s apartment, and it seems to me that he saw some people that morning. But I’m not sure whether he did or not. Steve would probably remember better if it’s important.

HACKMAN: I believe he did too, but I can’t remember.

JOHNSTON: And I don’t know whether it was the advertising sort of people or whether he just talked to Steve. But I remember we stood around and talked. I remember he said, “Well, Steve, I want you to run the campaign.” So he had at that point pretty much made his mind up to do it. I guess what he was really talking about was if somebody came up with a good reason why he shouldn’t do it, this was the time to say it. It was still at that point. Obviously people were drafting his statement. And so there wasn’t too much mystery that he was, I guess, sometime that day…. And I remember a lot of sort of detail.
He went out and it just sort of seemed like we just spent all day driving around Long Island from one rather miserable affair to another.

HACKMAN: I think that dinner was in Garden City [Garden City, New York].

JOHNSTON: Or the lunch? Yes. Garden City. And then we went to some sort of an affair at some sort of a country club. Then I think he came back and went back down to McLean [McLean, Virginia] earlier rather than later in the afternoon, about four.

HACKMAN: Then the statement got written that night.

JOHNSTON: Then he wrote the statement and people helped….Then he went the next morning and gave it and then came back to New York, and went to this thing with Charlie and marched in the parade which he would have done anyway. It was set up anyway as a party for the press. And then he went on to Boston and then .... And I was at Charlie’s. I just was there. I went down to Washington with a group of people, I guess, Joe and Edward Kennedy, and Dave Burke [David W. Burke] and about ten or fifteen people in his office, in Edward Kennedy’s office. And so, I guess that gets him into it, as far as that’s sort of what I saw as he got into it.

HACKMAN: Okay. Let me go back on a couple of things then before we get into the campaign. One, you were talking about Walinsky by late ‘67 pushing him, or clearly feeling he should do this. I was reading a new book the other day on this whole thing, saying that Dolan, Edelman [Peter B. Edelman], Walinsky all the way back to ‘67 were clearly for him going. Can you remember that being so? Do you remember other than Walinsky where Edelman or Dolan were on this?

JOHNSTON: Yes. I think that’s true to some…. It’s a difficult thing to say. I think you have to start with the assumption that just about everybody that knew him and worked for him or didn’t work for him but knew him well, felt he should be President. I mean that, not only compared to Johnson, but that he was extremely qualified and would make a hell of a president. When you start with that it’s pretty clear that had any person asked at any moment on almost anything whether you think Robert Kennedy should be President or make an effort would say yes. And it wasn’t as if all these people were working for him just because he was going to become President or were friendly with him because of that. But it’s something that struck you over and over. Here was a guy that’s really confident, that is bright, that knows what he’s doing, and is not an egomaniac, is able to get people to work for him. And it seemed sort of grotesque that this guy—to anybody that I think has any feelings about the country—that this guy would be diddling around in New York and in the Senate sitting in committees and so on when the country was being run by somebody who, in my judgment, and in a lot of other people’s, was just not up to the job.

You start with this, I think, basic feeling that a lot of people had. It wasn’t as if somebody thought that only a Kennedy could run the country. It wasn’t an abstract thing like that. I think it
was just a feeling that he, by dint of loyalty that he had of so many people in the country as a whole and the expectations that his brother had left him the heir to bear fulfillment of those expectations, that combined with his own personal abilities and qualities made it seem just amazing all the time that he wasn’t having more of an impact on some of these things than he was in this job of Senator. And most everybody understood that you didn’t just become President by snapping your fingers, but there was that kind of feeling which was pretty general.

I think then when you say, “Well, now who felt that he really should do it,” I think it gets much trickier because I’m not sure they can, each of them, speak for themselves about it. I think, generally, there was a prejudice in his staff, including myself, for bringing up those matters and for exposing him to those things which would, if there was a choice, press him forward. But I would think, in other words—I don’t quite know how to put it more clearly but in terms of Adam’s and Peter’s jobs was to bring to his attention ideas and put together speeches and legislation—I think there was a prejudice in their work in favor of analyses of ideas, which would show the inadequacy of the present job, the job being done by the current administration. And I think there was also a tendency to bring solutions in and ideas in and people in that were implicitly only workable if you had a different kind of president. And I don’t think this meant that this didn’t come out of a sort of lust for the office or lust of theirs

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to be in the White House as much as just if you begin to look at these problems, that the most challenging and the most sort of ambitious way intellectually to tackle them is to put them in that framework and bring them in that way. I think Joe Dolan’s job was to keep in touch with political leaders around the country and work and to deal with the Democratic Party and to run that side of the operation. And without attempting to build himself up or glorify the job beyond what it was, it was clear that those people who were really active partisan supporters of Senator Kennedy now as opposed to President Johnson were the people who were the most alive, that he would bring in, in a sense, I don’t mean literally into the office but that would become so…. And in my job, which was in a sense dealing with the people in New York and with the groups in places like Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem [Manhattan, New York] and it was again, there was a tendency, as you saw what the current administration was doing, to bring to his attention and put him in touch with people who were urging some kind of change. So all of us, even in just doing our job, became agents in a sense, for this kind of an argument. Now, I don’t think, I think it can be over emphasized, possibly, how much freedom and time Adam, I, Peter, or Joe Dolan, or anybody else had to work on actually putting together a case for running. I mean it was almost slightly an extracurricular thing most of the time. We had a hell of a lot of work and they as much as I just plain worked to get it done. And I think that very often a lot of the conversations that we would have would come out of these things that I just described and the fact that all of our ideas and the people we were meeting were, in a sense, saying, look how inadequate what’s being done is right now. Now I would think in some ways this would still be the role even if we had been working for him as president. I mean that the temperament, maybe not of Joe but of Peter, Adam and myself, and others, particularly of those people, would have been to push along with these types of people. But it might not, it might change in many ways. In any case, I think it still would be—whenever it got explicit about—well, wouldn’t it be nice if he were President. Between us, I always felt that it was this kind of, in a sense just giving words to something that really didn’t at times seem to make a lot of sense but as a practical matter.
Now, Joe very persistently and actively cultivated those areas politically where these opportunities might later be useful. I don’t think he ever did so in any, and I think he just conceived that if he had any usefulness it was not to tread water, but it was to do something in this area and to put something together so that he created an option. I think intellectually Walinsky and Edelman did much the same thing with the different, altogether different style and approach, and I think to some extent what I was doing was that. I know they offered a lot of advice, which was based on the premise that he was putting himself in the position.

Let me say one thing which is clear, there was no shyness with him about what we or he thought of what Johnson was doing, and this was not just Vietnam, but I mean just across the board. We happened to that as he knew more than we, but enough things about what was going on in different departments in the government and what was happening to different programs which was very undramatic and weren’t being written about, which were so devastating and so discouraging that you just, it was an assumption that you were dealing with, well, it was just something that was almost unspoken, that part of it. A lot of the new ideas that people would put forward or lots of proposals or discussions about this were based on the assumption that something could be done better than the current administration. I don’t think that one should confuse that, though, with urging him to run. I think that’s an important distinction. There was a real dissatisfaction on his part and on our part with the way things were being done and so a lot of the things that came to him from his staff, particularly because we conceived of that as being important were things that highlighted those inadequacies and suggested ways to deal with them, many of which could only be done if you were President. But also many of which, such as the different forms of amendments that he made, the bills, the different hearings that he held, the trips he took to Bedford-Stuyvesant, and speeches he made were things that he could do well as a senator. And that’s where ninety-five percent of this effort went. There was really very little, and I think very little of people sitting around planning anything or even developing papers that were designed to deal with this to make a good argument that he should run. In fact, I think when it came up he generally put it down as something that he didn’t want his staff spending time on. He, I think, felt, just as he did with certain areas under the foreign affairs thing, that he either could figure this out for himself or he had better advisors than the people that he had working for him on his staff.

When I mentioned Adam, I think Adam consciously discounted more than the others of us, I think, some of these factors that he had in mind with some of the things I mentioned and I think felt very strongly that these were not really relevant, historically, so weren’t relevant personally. And he made his point and very often would get…. And Adam and I discussed all of these at the times he’d make the point; usually it was not made again. It was made in terms of doing something which would be helpful, but the helpful part was sort of implicit, but not very much developed, and very often these memos of that sort would come back with kind of a snarly comment with implicitness that you should work on something, like, where is the Latin American speech, or something; what are we doing in this office? So there was an effort…. Now as the thing got sharper, as I say, as those pressures mounted, then Adam’s memos, his material on Vietnam, got to be more explicit. And he did. He wrote quite a lot of very clear, very explicit pieces on this, I remember. He may have written some that he and I didn’t even talk about. And he would be his own best source on this. I mean, anything that he would say about this, I would
think, which contradicts what I’ve said, would hold. The only thing that I would suggest is that even he might view in retrospect some of this as relating more clearly to the question of running or not, than it might seem to have had at the time.

HACKMAN: Yeah. One other thing. At the time of the Regency Hotel meeting, Salinger’s meeting, you said Robert Kennedy asked you to go. Dolan and Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] were also there, and they were on his staff. The other people were primarily old JFK people.

JOHNSTON: Right.

HACKMAN: Could you sense at that meeting that there was an effort, an attitude of keeping [-24-]

you and Walinsky and people like this out? Do you knew if Robert Kennedy also got Dolan and Bruno in or if Salinger brought those people in? Does this mean anything at all or is that reading too much into it?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think it probably is. I think that’s the thing I tried to convey. It was a pretty pick-up game kind of a thing: you’ve got the ball, I’ve got the bat, I’ll see that you get some people out. There was more of an effort in the second meeting probably to include and exclude, probably, for whatever sort of subtle reasons. But, again, I don’t think it was a really sort of thought thing. It might have been thought that some people were better security risks than others or that the meeting would flow along better if some people were at one and others at another and whatever. And I think actually, I think there was some of that. I think one meeting was set up just so that the people who were at it wouldn’t feel so that they weren’t at the other, as I recall. But it might have been the way that it was explained to me because I went to the one. People are very, very sensitive about all these things, a lot of them, and I guess all of us are really, in some ways think it is important that people take our advice, or at least listen to it, if not take it. So it was delicate because each of these people had a personal relationship with Robert Kennedy. And this is really, I think, more than any….I think it would be tricky….Well, the old versus the new thing became a real problem in the campaign, clearly, although I haven’t read and don’t plan to read the books about it. But I think the old and the new is probably more complicated than I gather the books make it seem like.

But initially, I think, and throughout, the biggest problem was that most political people did not have—I don’t know Nixon or anything, but I was just taking him as sort of the other extreme and much closer to the classic political candidate for an office—they did not have the incredible number and depth of personal relationships with people who then became workers in a campaign. So it usually, it seems to me there’s usually somebody, whether it’s Bob Price [Robert Price] working for Lindsay, or Dick Aurelio [Richard Aurelio] as Senator Javits’ aide, or somebody working for Senator Cooper [John S. Cooper], who is sort of the man who speaks in the campaign organization for the candidate. Maybe there are two or three or maybe there are more. But the thing about Robert Kennedy was that he had a personal, it was like we were saying about the meeting. I mean, he didn’t deal with people in groups and he didn’t deal with them
through other people. He dealt with them as much as possible directly. And that was why it was fun to work with him. That’s why, in many ways, I was always amazed at how, and I think it is really important to say that, that it be understood because I was always amazed at how little jealousy there was and how little bitching and sort of backbiting and undercutting and all that there was in the time that I worked for him in the Senate and when all these people were swirling around. It was very busy; there were lots of misunderstandings and confusion and chance to blame other people. And I was amazed at how little there was compared to what I’d heard about under President Kennedy, what was quite clear when he went on trips and places where you saw people who wouldn’t speak to each other and all of that. And I think I didn’t know President Kennedy so it’s not in comparison with him. It may be the difference with being Senator and being the President of

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the country. It may be, I don’t know what. It may be the difference in the personality of the two people or it may be those two things and lots of other things also. But it was a very, very…. It seemed to me an amazing part of the way he ran things. And I think that it was primarily due to the fact that if you were somebody who he had confidence in and you had confidence in him, there was a direct thing where you knew pretty well where you stood with him, and he expected you to let him know. And he shared things with Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] that he wouldn’t have shared with Jim Whittaker [James W. Whittaker] and did things with any number of political figures and people that he enjoyed in one way that he wouldn’t have done with others. But it was a very…. So that’s something that made the organizing, that made these meetings even initially difficult but which became a real problem in the campaign, is that everybody…. It made a kind of commitment in the quality of people that you wouldn’t have ordinarily, but it made it hard for any one person to take the authority to speak for the candidate when the candidate wasn’t there.

I didn’t want to get into that long of a thing about it, but it was not…. I don’t think it’s setting up the meetings. I didn’t feel, anyway, that there was any deliberateness. I don’t think there might have been deliberateness to keep Adam out, particularly, because I think people felt, well, they knew where he stood. I think the Senator did. He’d got an idea of what…. And I don’t think that the Senator thought that he had—and I’m not saying that I agree with him because I don’t. A lot of this kind of thing depends on what kind of context, but I don’t think he—he often said that he didn’t think highly of Adam’s political judgment about these matters. But as I say, he was particularly eager at that time to get people who had had some political experience, not at that time but as time went on, particularly to get…. I think he could see all of the reasons that Adam advanced and he’d agreed with Adam, and I think he could see many of these things, and I think he felt all those pressures and was sensitive. But I think he felt there was a whole range of problems which perhaps people who had been older, people who had been though some of these campaigns before, would be much more sensitive to.

HACKMAN: Yes. Okay. You said when you talked to O’Donnell that he said he thought Johnson would run. Did he….
JOHNSTON: Not run, I mean go the other way. I’m sorry. I mean run away, that he wouldn’t fight, but that he would back down. He said that in a meeting as a matter of fact. He said that in a meeting at, I remember that’s one of the few sort of clear impressions I had out of those meetings, I can’t remember which one it is now. I think it was the very first meeting at the [_____] He said, “Johnson will not stand up to a fight.” You don’t remember that now?

HACKMAN: No. We just hadn’t discussed it. Somehow, it had never come up.

JOHNSTON: Well, I remember very distinctly because I thought on March 31 when that happened, I said, “Kenny O’Donnell was right.” It was just a gut judgment

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based on real experience that Kenny had. He said, “I stood up to the guy in the White House.” And he said, “I saw him back down.” He said, “If you let him yell at you, he’ll treat you like a dog.” But he said, “If you”—I mean, these weren’t exactly his words, but in effect he said he’ll back down if he thinks you can whip him. And that was one of those observations that as it turned out, of course, was, I think, very, very accurate. I think Senator Kennedy, I don’t know what his own, I think he believed that about Johnson. I mean, I did discuss it with him, and he said that’s true. But I don’t think he really ever, I think he felt that would have been too much kind of wishful thinking that Johnson would have really gotten out and given it up.

HACKMAN: What can you remember about any of the leading New York political figures you were talking to? Did Burns [John J. Burns] and English have any clear position or any of the reformed Democrats, the few that Robert Kennedy was close to?

JOHNSTON: Well, I’ll take Burns first. No, I don’t think he…. I think they all, again I think each one…. You’ve got the two things. You’ve got the fact that they all felt very strongly about him and very disgruntled, especially the politicians, very unhappy about Johnson, aside from their own admiration for Senator Kennedy. But they didn’t have any, they were very unhappy with Johnson, but they didn’t have any very good news to report about his doing it. So I think that, as pretty solid workers in a vineyard in which there’s really no craft that seems to be applicable from one season to another, they were convinced that this would have been a mistake, conditionally. They made every effort, though, to find out, to try to uncover other information, other people that would be encouraging. In other words, going back to the way I described the staff, I think that they too had this prejudice in favoring, in a sense built into it all, of their way of looking, just as we did, of looking for things that would push one in this direction. But in their particular area as opposed to looking for the moral reasons or the long range political…. They didn’t in short terms, see any very encouraging signs at all until much later on; after McCarthy or right around that time from the Tet on, it began to look a little better. I think Unruh was probably clearly the major offensive figure in the sense of being a political figure.
Now the fact that Burns and English themselves were involved is not an insignificant thing in New York politics. But Burns was clearly Kennedy’s man in the sense that he was supported by him and backed up by him. And Jack English was such a good friend that it wasn’t really a question of hard political judgment. I mean, I think, if Robert Kennedy had asked him, if you’re asking me would they had done anything that was asked of them to do this, I think they might have given advice that it was a mistake and still gone ahead and done it, just out of loyalty and the feeling that this guy was worth doing it for or whatever; even if he was wrong they would do it. The other people like Joe Crangle [Joseph F. Crangle], for instance, Joe Crangle was always very friendly. There were a number of leaders who were, but they were, everybody was looking at what seemed to be an irrefutable set of facts. No

Democratic President is going to get thrown out when the country is in the middle of a war by somebody from within his own party. It just didn’t seem possible, politically add up, to anybody. It seems to me that George Palmer [George V. Palmer], from Schenectady County, chairman, may have been, and I can be wrong about this, but it seems to me that he’s one of the brightest of the county chairmen and a very good fellow. He, it seems to me, was kind of enthusiastic about the idea earlier on, himself, but he himself couldn’t report any. I could be all wet about that. So if it’s important, somebody should be checked with, somebody else or with Palmer himself. But there are others.

There were, of course, individual Democrats, it seems to me, like…. Well, you got everybody from…. In the reform movement, in New York, I think you clearly had support for him doing something, but I think there wasn’t ever a big effort to discuss it because it was just…. They knew that he knew where they would stand on it. They also knew that he didn’t feel their type of experienced constituency was really that much relevant to this. I think the black political leaders in a sense, the people in Bedford Stuyvesant and others that he talked to, let him know in a number of ways that they were very unhappy. He got a lot of, from people like Ted Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel] and others, he got a feeling that people weren’t too happy. But as it turns out, of course, some of these people like Kheel and others weren’t really prepared to commit themselves so much even after he decided to run. I mean they were very sympathetic. The tricky thing was that he was such…. It was so clear to people that sooner or later he might become President they all or many of the fellows wanted to be very friendly. So you never knew until you did it. So that was the big thing; you never did know until you did it where they’d actually be. And we talked about that quite a lot. The problem is you had to just do it and that would transform that decision. Your will to do it would put everybody on the spot. Now all these same people would rather not have been on the spot. I mean most all of them would prefer…. But that didn’t mean even though they’d rather you didn’t put them on the spot, but if you did they wouldn’t end up with you. But it would have been a very painful choice. And they’d just rather you didn’t force them into that dilemma. I think this was true throughout the country. It was perhaps….

[TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE]
JOHNSTON: Well, I was just saying that the people, not so much Ted Kheel, as an example, but everybody was very friendly. And if you said to them, “Robert Kennedy said, ‘Well, now are we friends, Jim or Joe or Pete?’” they’d say, “Yes, surely are. But let me just tell you I did not advise you to do this on your own.” Now they would never say, “I won’t be with you if you do,” or very few of them said, “If you’re going to do it.” And it was obviously a kind of question like saying, Are you going to love me if I marry you, to somebody. It’s not the kind of thing that Robert Kennedy or anybody working for him would come out and say. I mean you did, actually we did try to get some people pinned down and some people we succeeded. But most people said, “Well, I just really don’t think you should do it. Now if he does it…” and so on, and hoping that, by gosh, he wouldn’t do it. And so that was a very big problem in any kind of hard political assessment of it because until he made that decision, everybody had the option of just that posture. And they just about all took it.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Okay. What do about the whole Lowenstein [Allard K. Lowenstein]-Robert Kennedy relationship?

JOHNSTON: What do you mean?

HACKMAN: Well, in what kinds of things he’d look to him for advice on and how seriously, how effective Lowenstein was putting any pressure on him in late ‘67 conversations. Supposedly there was this whole string of conversations that they had before he turned to McCarthy and everything. Some people say actually he would talk to a guy like Lowenstein; Lowenstein has ties with the New York Democrats, thus he’s saying, “Sure I love you, Al; everything you’re saying is good.” Is he doing it primarily for that reason, do you think, or is he really attracted to this guy and what he’s saying?

JOHNSTON: I think he is really attracted to him. He and I talked about Lowenstein. And I think he felt he was very bright. I think he felt all along that the Lowensteins and the Walinskys were where it was at, in one sense, and perhaps in the most critical sense, that that’s where their judgment, even though you discount it a lot of ways in political terms, was very, very important. And it was what most politicians and most public figures and most people in different positions of responsibility were so busy discounting all the time and saying, “Well, this guy’s far out or such and such.” I think and I happen to believe that he also was right. I mean I think the presidents of these colleges have been taking that same attitude, and as a result, when the Lowensteins in their setting come up with an idea or have a whole pitch to make, they don’t even bother to listen. I think he listened in seriousness. I don’t think, though, that he looked to Lowenstein any more than he looked to any other individual for a sort of total view of what his political responsibilities were. I think he enjoyed, though, and not just gratuitously, I mean I think he did get a lot out of discussing the pros and cons and the problems with it. And he really admired what Lowenstein put together for McCarthy. No, I think it was a genuine interest. I don’t think he wasted much time. I don’t think
he’d have anybody to his house that he was just going to do that with. There were easier ways. I mean you just didn’t do that; he just didn’t feel he had enough time to do that. And I think he really took it seriously with Lowenstein. I think he felt that Al and other people like Al, but Al particularly, was very able and just articulating what even journalists have a hard time getting a hand on. It was just sort of inchoate, at that point, dissatisfaction in the country which he sensed even just talking to the average guy on the street, he the senator. He also had meetings with Tom Hayden [Thomas Hayden], with Stoughton Lynd, and listened to them very seriously. I think there was less in it for him in terms of doing good with the constituency of West Side reformers by seeing them. There was another element in it. I mean he realized that it was worth spending a little time with them because they did represent an important element in the New York City political picture. But I think in the case of Lowenstein, I don’t know. I doubt

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if he would have followed up with lots of meetings with Stoughton Lynd just because he felt probably, I think, that their working assumptions were rather different. I think he respected Lynd and listened very closely to what he had to say about Vietnam and took it very seriously. But I don’t think he would have followed up with a lot of other meetings as he did with him, because Lowenstein’s frame of reference was in many ways pretty easily understandable to him and something they could share.

HACKMAN:  Okay. You were talking about that period in, I guess it was late January, when you had Robert Kennedy in New York for a couple of weeks. I don’t know whether you were discussing with him in this period, and I suppose both before and after, the whole New York senate race for ‘68, the Percy Sutton [Percy E. Sutton] and I guess some consideration of Sorensen, maybe even of Lowenstein, and then Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson] finally comes up. Can you remember the early discussions with him of what should happen here, and how it then worked out?

JOHNSTON:  Yeah. We discussed that one much less in many ways than we did the Mayor and the Governor’s races and candidates for it much less because it seemed to us there was much less of an opportunity to win against Javits. But it was sort of a re-run in some ways of the others in the sense that we went through a list of people who were Democrats who might be good candidates, and the fact that we sort of failed twice to come up…. Remember we had Beame [Abraham D. Beame] once and O’Connor [Frank D. O’Connor] the other time, and both times we should have won and we ended up very short and not only short, but I mean we ended up with a campaign and a candidate that no one really was happy with in either case. He got to be very skeptical about just any sort of short term changes. He worked on and he took seriously New York state politics, and I don’t mean to imply like it’s written about President Kennedy that he really didn’t want to get involved in any of the things going on up here in Massachusetts, whereas Edward Kennedy is supposedly much more involved and he spends much more time. I would gather just if you deal with those two sort of clichés about those two brothers, that Robert Kennedy falls somewhere in between. He walked into a state which clearly if it had had any kind of a party at all he probably wouldn’t have been able to get his own Senate nomination. He got that. He then also got the responsibility for shaping up the Democratic Party. He made some speeches in which he said he was going to do it.
But he never could come up with any very exciting candidates. There just didn’t seem to be anybody around that was of any interest. I’ll tell you how low it got. At one point he mentioned to somebody—I forget whether it was Joe Dolan or somebody—that maybe I’d be a candidate for the Senate. He was really, I think, at the dead end. I mean he just didn’t have any idea. A lot of it was ludicrous because we’d look through these lists of people that would make good candidates for Governor. And then we’d say, we’d get the three guys, everybody would say, “Well, he’s good, and he’s good.” Well, of course, two of them would turn out to be Republicans, and the third lived in New Jersey or Connecticut. So it was hopeless really. I shouldn’t say it was hopeless, but it became a joke. And at our discussions about it, well, Bill vanden Heuvel worked a lot on it, and of course,

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John Burns did, Ronnie Eldridge [Ronnie M. Eldridge], a number of other people spent a lot of time with different factions and different, Jack English and Nickerson and back and forth. And then, of course, it got—I forget when the actual convention was, but it was after he announced, wasn’t it?

HACKMAN: Yeah, I think so.

JOHNSTON: And so that swamped it all. I mean he didn’t really move on it as he had ultimately with the Senate. With the Mayor and the Governor he was pretty much there and involved in the decision. That got swept pretty much to the side. He was involved in it still and spent time on it. But he just didn’t really have much of a heart for it. This isn’t answering your question very well, but I was making a big effort to get somebody who would run for the Mayor’s race in 1969. And we had a committee of people and it included Bayard Rustin [Bayard Taylor Rustin] and Ellie Guggenheimer [Elinor C. Guggenheimer] and Ted Kheel and Dennis Meyers, people, about eight Democrats, who were supposed to come up with a candidate. And he thought that was all fine, but I don’t think he took it all too seriously. So in the whole thing I think he just felt....And I must say it was an ambiguous thing because it wasn’t bad for him to be the figure in New York. On the other hand, I think he really meant.... I’m not sure, I never really was sure, quite frankly, about that, whether he really wanted to have another strong figure because I couldn’t believe that he couldn’t have made more of an.... Yet I must say he did work on it. But it was one of those areas where every once in a while I’d say, “Well, maybe the key to the thing is that he’s quite happy to be the important, the only Democrat really, that we have in the state.” We’ve got a Republican governor, a Republican mayor, a Republican senator and there’s him. The way in which he operated in so many other things was so wide open and he was willing to share things and confident about it that I never really felt that that was a factor. But I would think, especially maybe with the Senate, that it wasn’t a bad arrangement. I wouldn’t say that if a Democrat had come along who looked like he could have beaten Javits that he wouldn’t have worked to help him get elected. But I wouldn’t say it was an altogether bad situation because the Senator has so little influence in terms of actual patronage or what he can do in a state that it is vitiated significantly when there’s another senator from your party. So I guess in some way the dynamics of the thing are such that.... Now the Governor and Mayor, especially Mayor, with Lindsay, but even with Rockefeller, it would have been much more pleasant to have a Democrat it seems to
me, and I think he really felt that. He made a stab at it, but it was just not... So I think the answer on the thing is that, first of all, he did not spend lots of time on it, as I recall, in that period when he was in New York, and he didn’t spend lots of... But he had people working on it and he had people other than me working on it. And just to be clear about this, I dealt a lot with politicians in setting up meetings and in just kind of personal problems that they had and working with them. But wherever he was really trying to put something together, whether it was the Silverman [Samuel J. Silverman] campaign—well, I was in South Africa then or on my way to Africa, and then I came back more or less at the end of it—I never really was involved much politically as such. I mean I just didn’t get much involved. I think he felt that probably Steve was much more effective in one way and that he could get a lot of sort of people that weren’t working on his staff to be helpful who would probably be more effective than I would anyway. And I could keep doing the things that I was doing. So there were a lot of people who would speak better to that than I, I think really, who would be much more thorough. But I got that impression, let’s put it that way, that the Senate race, even if he’d been around, for those reasons, first, that he’d tried and struck out twice on the thing, and second, that he really didn’t think Javits was a bad senator. Javits was a frustrating man to work with in lots of ways, but there were lots of other frustrating senators to work with. And he admired Javits, and I think thought that he really did make a contribution on a lot of things. And it was genuine although he thought also that if Javits was for something, that it got a lot of other senators against it. So I don’t mean that he would have supported Javits against a Democrat or worked to discourage a good Democrat. But I think he was not very much concerned about that relatively.

HACKMAN: Okay, why don’t we talk about the campaign then for a while and maybe you’d just....

JOHNSTON: Is it all right if I get another beer?

HACKMAN: Sure.

JOHNSTON: Would you like another one? [Interruption]

HACKMAN: Let’s see. Okay. I think you were saying, let’s see. You recalled that Robert Kennedy told Steve Smith that he was going to head the campaign. Okay. Then you didn’t follow that up by saying anything about how your role got spelled out, or if it ever did, or what you did over the next few days.

JOHNSTON: Oh. Well, then we said, sort of, that I would work with Steve and do whatever he wanted to do, and that I would just help him. And I guess I moved to.... And then Steve said, “Well, we’re going to go to Washington,” so why didn’t I go. And then really I guess it would be hard to describe very clearly any role except just, because it never got to be clear; it was never too clear who really was running the campaign. I suppose that’s become clear since clearly Steve was an important,
maybe the most important person, but so was Edward Kennedy and so was Ted Sorensen at some times or in different ways. My role, I guess, was just to sort of do things, whatever could be done at different points. And that’s really what I did, until, I guess, oh, about a week before Oregon, or maybe—Oregon was May 14—no, I guess about till about the end of April, or maybe even the 25th of April. So for about five weeks, six weeks, five weeks, I was just in Washington and I’d worked for Steve and then with Ted Sorensen when Steve was in California and then went at the end of April to the South, really, and worked in and around and through all of that, then was back in Washington—oh, I came back sometimes at different times—but was back in Washington and was planning that night—I spent the night in the hotel there—and was planning to fly that morning, the next morning, the morning after the California primary, to California for a meeting in Los Angeles. And so that’s where we were going to talk about, where I was going to talk a little about the South, and where other people were going to talk about whatever they’d been doing, and then we were going to see what we’d do next. So I guess it was really two different parts. And the first was very.... I could never quite figure out what I was doing. I mean, it was just different every day. And that’s a little bit like what I was doing in the Senate office. I mean, it was normal in that sense in that it was.... But in that you were clearly, ultimately responsible for some things, and if you screwed it up it was your problem. And you had somebody that you worked with, and in that case it was Robert Kennedy. And in this case it wasn’t clear who really was in charge, which I think made it a very difficult set of circumstances for everybody, including the people that thought they were in charge.

HACKMAN: You didn’t mention O’Donnell. Would you include him in the four, or was he....

JOHNSTON: I don’t think he really was ever in any conversations that I heard Robert Kennedy engage in on the subject. As I understood it, Ted Sorensen would not—as he told me—Ted Sorensen wanted a role in the campaign which gave him a title, and he didn’t want to write any speeches, and he wanted really the title. Now that’s what I heard him tell Steve.

HACKMAN: Sorensen told Steve.

JOHNSTON: No. Robert Kennedy told Steve. I don’t make that point. He told Steve that, so I don’t know whether that was a way of telling Steve without.... Maybe he wanted Sorensen to have that role, but he’d also told Steve that he wanted him to run it. And it was quite clear to anybody there that Edward Kennedy would have a significant hand in any decision, and so you had those three. I don’t think Kenny O’Donnell, the fact that I say that I don’t know that Kenny O’Donnell wasn’t one of four doesn’t mean he wasn’t. But I would gather from the attitude that the other three had about his role, or the conception that the other three shared with me about his role, and with others—it wasn’t anything that they shared with me—that they didn’t see him in any way as a co-equal. But I do think they were aware of each other in that relationship. And so a lot of my job, very frankly, was a very humble and not really very agreeable job to the extent that I did anything. It was just
to try to get, if one person of those three–or more, but say one of those three–people made a
decision to try to coordinate it with whatever the people that were working for the other two, or
to see.... I think that’s what a lot of people like me spent a lot of their time doing. You had a lot
of instances where somebody would decide, well, we ought to send so-and-so into Michigan.
Well, somebody else had already sent somebody into Michigan. So two guys end up in
Michigan, and they’re both the guy for Michigan. We tried to avoid some of those kinds of
collisions. I don’t know who else was doing that sort of thing, but I.... Like Paul Kirk [Paul
Grattan Kirk], who’s now working for Kenny, or who was working for Kenny and now working

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in the office. I think he did a lot of this kind of thing. Dave Burke certainly did for Edward
Kennedy, although he was much more completely tied in and used to working with him. And
there were other times. As I say, I’m not in a good position to judge as to whether Kenny, Larry
O’Brien [Lawrence F. O’Brien] and others were very major factors or were at any point. I think
the problem was that it was never very, there just was not any real clear chain of command, and
it would change very often, or there would be one for a while and then.... So it makes a kind of
judgment about whether somebody was really a major factor rather hard to assess because you
have to also say, well, where were the major arenas. We covered a whole country; we’re talking
about very important primary states, but you’re also talking about a lot of non-primary states that
might have been in the end more crucial. Kenny’s role, as I recall, was described generally as
dealing with certain key states and especially with certain key leaders. That may have been the
most decisive, important thing in the whole ball game. I mean the Senator himself said, “Mayor
Daley’s [Richard J. Daley] the ball game.” Well, if anybody was working on Mayor Daley, I
think it was probably Kenny O’Donnell one way or another. I went out to dinner once with
Congressman, big, tall, a tough congressman, younger fellow from Illinois, Polish name,
Razinsky . . .

HACKMAN: Pozinsky? [Roman Conrad Pucinski]

JOHNSTON: ...Pozinsky, yeah, and with Kenny and with quite a group of people in one
of those Washington restaurants. It’s a little wrong to say, well, was he or
wasn’t he, or wasn’t anybody a major factor, ‘cause it depends on where
you thought the ball game was. And everybody was always saying, well, the ball game is
Oregon, or, it’s Indiana, or it’s California. Well, there were other people who were arguing that it
isn’t, that you could do well in those and still have lost it unless you’re....


JOHNSTON: Right. And in the rest of the public opinion polls there were a lot of other
elements in it which.... So I think everybody, in a sense one could be his
own, I mean, it depends on how you conceive of the task, and it’s very....

Eight people could come up with eight very different conceptions of where the critical moment
or the real key part of the job to be done was. And all eight could be thinking and talking in good
faith. And by eight different interpretations you could have had eight different “most important
roles” in a sense. It was that big a problem, and it was that ill-defined also in terms of the strategy involved, or not ill-defined, but undefined.

HACKMAN: How does a guy like you, finding yourself in this situation, do you make any attempts to get some other role, or was there anything you could do, something you felt was more constructive?

JOHNSTON: Well, in the end I went to the South. I mean I thought that was more constructive because I really didn’t think I was accomplishing anything sitting around in the headquarters. I mean, first of all, I didn’t enjoy it, which was selfish but I mean I didn’t. So I thought if I was producing any work that was really effective that couldn’t have been done by anybody else, I would have stayed on and done it. But as it was clear that the South could have been the bomb—it wasn’t really—but I mean it was clear that some work could very usefully be done and that you could do it in a way which was rather, I mean there weren’t a lot of other people doing it. There wasn’t anybody doing it. Seigenthaler [John Seigenthaler] had been working on it—whom I had been working with closely on it—had gone out to California. Kentucky, which I knew well, had a convention system which on July 15 would, I think we would have probably gotten all of their delegates. The McCarthy people, even starting late and with nothing, ended up with a handful and ended up with at least something, I forget what. And I don’t even know how they got the votes, but they got a handful of people at the convention. We would have, I think, gotten most of the votes of Kentucky. We would have done something. We had something really interesting put together in Mississippi. And it seemed like the more you looked into it that Humphrey’s strength was very thin, and that you might, by a combination of getting favorite sons to go instead of getting the delegations pledged to Humphrey for whatever reason, perhaps just the joy of being nominated for President of the United States or the feeling that Robert Kennedy was after all not such a bad fellow maybe, and that it was worth being kind of neutral, you might have begun to chip away at some of that base and you might even have begun to.... I was rather optimistic by June 4 that you really might, if other things went well in the rest of the country, you might really neutralize Humphrey even there. I mean I thought it was rather far down the list in the immediate set of concerns, but it was something that I could do because I was a Southerner, one of the few that he had working for him in the campaign who wasn’t.... There was an awfully good fellow named Ted McLaughlin in the work force there or whatever you call it. But he and I worked together in the South, and he took Mississippi and Alabama. Well, he’s from Alabama, and he worked mostly in Alabama and Mississippi and a little bit, we split up Louisiana but worked on Florida together.

HACKMAN: Yeah. You took a trip to Miami [Miami, Florida], I think, along that time.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, yeah. We met there and went through that. And then I did Georgia, South, neither one of us had done much with South Carolina; we left that. I spent a long time in North Carolina and then Tennessee and Kentucky, and Georgia I worked with Troutman [Robert Troutman, Jr.] on and spent some time there. But as I say, that could have been possibly helpful work, and it was satisfying in the sense that you
really.... The part before that of being around the campaign headquarters.... So I think it’s generally pretty chaotic and pretty unorganized in most campaign headquarters. My only experience in a campaign before had been in 1964 when I was in the field in the state of New York driving around and talking to people and setting up registration and telephone campaigns and tabloid distribution and the get-out-the-vote thing and then just kind of

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working with county leaders to get out whatever they needed. And that was an awful lot of fun and that’s why people enjoy campaigning so, it’s like a sport really. But sitting around a headquarters, unless you’ve got a pretty well organized thing, all you’re doing all day is dealing with immediate shortages somewhere of something: people, material, or something else. And with our particular set of problems, I tried in a sense to figure out what made the most sense. But you had a series of this whole thing of the old and the new. You had a style of operation that had worked in 1960, had been very successful. And I feel, looking back on it, that one of the reasons it was very successful was because it was fresh and because nobody really knew what they were doing. But you had the people that had done that now back in 1968 and they were, I suppose, inevitably, going to try to do that same thing again. Well, it was my judgment that the–and this is just a personal judgment based on very little experience and no claim to any greater sort of wisdom than they–but I felt that what was appropriate in 1960 probably wouldn’t work as well in 1968. I’m sure people would say, well, it’s a different loyalty, different style, people didn’t know each other as well and all of that, but it’s interesting, different people, It wasn’t all according to age. Different older people felt that way, and some younger, but it generally broke down, the people on his staff felt one way, and the people sort of my age felt that the methods, the whole approach was sort of out of phase with what was ultimately more important to the country and which would be ultimately important at the convention. So that that tended to make it difficult because you weren’t talking within quite the same frame of reference. And each of these people, the older ones, had developed likes and dislikes personally, some of them, certainly not every one of them. It wasn’t impossible for them to work together, but it was rather more difficult than I had imagined. So that, as I say, somebody young like me or younger, let’s say, would spend a hell of a lot of time just kind of trying to balance between one and the other and keep them working together. I mean literally, trying to avoid one thinking that one’s office was bigger than the other. It sounds silly and they weren’t that petty. I don’t think it was all that, I mean I think everybody was very graceful about it and very gentlemanly and there wasn’t any....

But as a matter of fact, I think the problem was that everybody was so polite and so nice that in the end they didn’t probably really get the sorts of things done that one has to get done in a campaign.

HACKMAN: This is primarily the three top people....

JOHNSTON: No, I think it sort of goes to everybody. I mean I think Pierre and Mankiewicz [Frank F. Mankiewicz] were two people with different, and they had to be polite to each other, and they wanted to remain friends. And all of these people almost without exception—with some exceptions which were pretty well-known but which almost without exception—were people that liked each other and personally respected each other and knew that the reason they were there was because they liked Robert
Kennedy and wanted to see him elected President, and he respected them enough to want them there. And as I say, part of it goes back to the fact that each had a personal relationship with him, which was not just the fact that he knew who they were when he walked into campaign headquarters, and these people watch, almost everyone had been through a rather important experience in their life with him and felt, and justifiably so, felt that they knew him and he knew them, and that they were in a sense reporting to him, even though he wasn’t there to report to. But this was, I think, a given which started out, which now it’s easy to see that now looking back, and maybe people realized it at the time. It didn’t occur to me at the time but thinking about it, it occurs to me a very major problem which only could have been dealt with, it seems to me, by some clear—I think; I’m not sure about this—but it seems to me only really by some very clear designation of one person or one group of people who acted more or less together as people who were representing Robert Kennedy for this time, and then people would report to them. But that never came into being. It’s possible it would have after California. He was aware of a lot of those things, the problems, and people even wrote about them. But I think also he felt that all campaigns are chaotic. He told me a couple of times how badly messed up the 1960 campaign was, how confused it was. But I’m not sure whether it really, I mean he said that. I think it was partly kind of modesty or just a feeling of, sort of irony about the whole thing. But he said John Seigenthaler really organized it, that he really didn’t do it, wasn’t any good at it.

HACKMAN: About ’60, you mean.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. And he played down.... Oh, I remember, we were talking about John once, and he liked John a lot and I do. And I said, “Well, he’s a funny fellow, isn’t he,” because he’d never show up at any appointments. You said you’d meet him at dinner.... Have you tried to interview him? [Laughter]

HACKMAN: Not on this, but he comes in a lot.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, and he wouldn’t be there. I mean, you could say, “Well, I’ll have dinner with you at the Caravel,” and you’d be eating by yourself. And there wouldn’t be any phone call the next day to explain where he was; he just hadn’t gotten out of Nashville [Nashville, Tennessee] or out of bed or whatever. So I said, “Gosh, your friends, between Seigenthaler and Dave Hackett,” [David L. Hackett] who’d been sort of phased in and out of things, and I said, “these guys” and then others, I said, “they’d be really wondering about you, the type of pals you got.” And he said, “Well, I’ll tell you,”—he’s of course always kidding Seigenthaler about it—but he said, “Well, it’s really amazing because John is, well, he’s organized, he’s just fantastic,” he said, “He really....” Then he described, he said the ’60 campaign really was confused, but he said Seigenthaler really, really did it. He said, “I didn’t do it.” So it’s a very.... I think he looked, and I would too if I were the candidate and I heard a lot of stories, or if I were involved in running a campaign, I think you discount ninety-nine percent of the stories of friction and confusion and bad tempers and things. People were working hard. Even if they’re not, when some of them are trying to make a favorable impression and seem to
be playing an important role either because they think it’s going to lead them on to a big job later, or because they think it’s important that the press know how

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important they are or whatever. But even without that, which is a factor in maybe in everybody, but certainly in some and to some extent, and in some people to a rather large extent, but even without that you get tired. Tempers get up and so many unexpected things happen, so many.... You are trying to organize General Motors [General Motors Company] in eight weeks or eighteen weeks or whatever, but you’re trying to put together a hell of a complex thing in no time and with all kinds of problems and all kinds of unexpected things. So it’s natural that everybody carries on. So he discounted a lot of this, although I’m not sure that in the long run it wouldn’t have been something that he would have had to turn his attention to.

HACKMAN: What are the big things, though, that stick out in your mind during that time you were at the “L” Street office that either didn’t get done or were done in a very confused manner because of these problems back and forth?

JOHNSTON: I guess you’d say if you broke it into strategical and tactical and took the tactical first, that it was just incredibly inefficient–fantastic–I mean much more than any campaign has to be, it seems to me. We were sending, as I say, the same.... Many a time Sorensen would send somebody in and O’Donnell would send somebody in, and often knowing that the other person was doing it.

HACKMAN: I know Michigan was a big problem like that.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. That was just the.... I remember the night that happened. It was very deliberate. It was Ted doing it and deciding that he wanted.... And he might have.... As I say, I don’t know. I mean, who knows which man would have been better. Joe Crangle’s a hell of a guy. It was also a hell of a thing to do to Joe Crangle, who was a rather important figure back in New York. And I never followed it that closely to figure out how.... You probably know more than I do.

HACKMAN: No, I don’t know this one particularly. Is Crangle Sorensen’s or O’Donnell’s?

JOHNSTON: He was Sorensen’s. He’s the area county chairman, an important personage and a hell of an effective, attractive guy. And I guess Ted probably thought that whoever Kenny had sent was not going to be that helpful, whoever that was and whatever.... But this happened, this sort of thing. It wasn’t usually as deliberate; it didn’t reflect quite as opposite styles of operating. It wasn’t as much of a head on thing once the two guys showed up in the same place. But you had that countless kind of duplication. Not that you’ll ever have, I don’t think anybody should suggest that you’d have a neat thing where every state’s kind of pigeonholed and everybody’s doing a nice, clean piece of work that doesn’t overlap. But we just had much too much, and they did a lot of things well. I
mean we got the materials.... The materials I think, I guess got out pretty well, which is good, in the campaign.

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HACKMAN: And that’s in contrast to ‘60, I think.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. In ‘60 nobody ever had anything. Bumper stickers were still just getting ready and the thing was over. And there was a lot learned from ‘60. But basically you had the impression that there just wasn’t any, tactically that it was a kind of behemoth that just couldn’t get itself in gear somehow. You got a terrific focus on the—this gets into the second problem, which is strategical—but you get a terrific focus on the primary states with a lot of effort and money going into those and all kinds of manpower. But a lot of other rather critical situations which I would have assumed that the headquarters would have been the logical place to resolve these things, they either got totally fudged or just botched up. They always boiled down to some specific thing, which sooner or later time went by and it passed, or it got sort of plowed under. I mean you send two people out to Michigan, well, one of them leaves eventually. So it’s not as if these problems just stayed on. It’s not like breaking a leg or something. When you consider the amount of know-how and ability there, congregated even in that office but in the campaign as a whole, the output of it, I was amazed at how unimpressive it was. And the whole thing of, I mean, here’s Sorensen, who’s undoubtedly one of the, maybe the best sort of speech writer anybody could ever have, he was not going to write a speech and didn’t. I think he helped do the jingles for a song, and he thought about a slogan. But he mostly spent his time deciding about the bumper stickers for West Virginia and other places, the quantities, and talking with political leaders from all over the country and coming in for different.... And this was the decision which didn’t seem to make any sense tactically in terms of the most efficient use, over a short term, of his abilities. Now you can’t ask people to do things they don’t want to do, and he didn’t want to do speeches so it’s not really a very good example. I mean, he has a right to say, “I don’t want to do any speeches.” But I’m not sure, again, whether if the thing had been set up in a more organized fashion whether it wouldn’t have occurred to everybody, including Sorensen, that he’d be better off working in that area than in the other.

HACKMAN: Your impression, though, is that this is clearly his preference? It’s not that Walinsky and Greenfield [Jeff Greenfield] and these other people were already established?

JOHNSTON: Oh, no. I think it’s definitely his preference. I mean, I don’t know, because that’s the one thing—speech writing—where you can kind of work separately and directly and where he could still have had a very direct relationship with the Senator and done your speech tonight and Walinsky could have done his tomorrow and Greenfield.... And that’s the nice part of speech writing, that you don’t really have to all work together. No, I don’t know, but I think he just felt that speech writing is, of course, probably one of the world’s most unpleasant and difficult jobs, and I imagine he just felt he’s been through it once and he didn’t want to do it again. He’d rather establish himself as somebody
other than a speech writer. As I say, that’s kind of my way of reading it. I didn’t know him that well before. I did work closely with him during this, and I’ve seen him since.

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And my impression from, he wants to run for the Senate now. I think he would have liked to have had a sort of administrative job in any Kennedy administration, and clearly he had to established his abilities as an administrator. A lot of jokes were made by people in my sort of group of people, my age, I guess, about how this was on-the-job training for a lot of these guys. Well, of course, it was for us, too, I mean not that we were expert at doing anything. But I think there was a lot more willingness, probably, on the part of younger people possibly because we didn’t have a real alternative. But there was generally more willingness to just do anything that came up. I think as you got the people that had done things in the past campaign and had sort of a constituency of their own and a way of doing things, then it got to be much tougher and they wanted to do things on their own. And they had public presences of their own. I mean they were interviewed and written about and so on, which would be under normal circumstances fine, but which, when your whole effort is to pull yourself together as a group and work for one guy, made it hard to achieve that, I think, because somebody would be, so and so would be out in St. Louis [St. Louis, Missouri] and there’d be a whole thing on the “Today” show, not about Robert Kennedy, but about what Kenny O’Donnell thought or what Ted Sorensen thought, and how they thought the campaign was going. And this gave it, in a funny way, a very old politics look. It seemed to me very, very inappropriate for this time, through no fault of their own. I mean, they were doing exactly what they did well. I mean, no, I mean, that’s not altogether true because they weren’t often doing the things that they did best. But they were contributing something, and they were acting, I’m sure, in good faith. But my feeling all along was that all of these people and myself included, I mean, all of the younger ones too, I think, were minimally used except those people that continued to work directly with Robert Kennedy and those people in the primary states I would imagine. I think they in some cases put together pretty good efforts.

But that gets to the second question, which is strategic. And that’s equally more important really, and maybe the source of the first, and that is that I don’t think there was any conception of the thing as a total.... I mean these are all slightly irrelevant now. After he died, of course, it doesn’t make any difference anyway. But as it turned out the things that mattered were the primaries. But in the longer run, it would have been very important to have a strategy beyond the primaries. Of course, I don’t think we really did, and there wasn’t anybody working on it. So if you said, “What struck you as the most important, glaring lack?” it was the fact that we did go through in meetings very often lists of the states. People would report in, here’s what they’re doing in Alaska, here’s what our people in South Dakota or in Oklahoma, Georgia, say. But it wasn’t ever fitted into anything; it was just implemented as far as I could see. Now I think there are better people to speak to. I was just an observer there in a sense. I mean, my background was not as sort of political-operative in that sense in it so I didn’t have any real.... It might well be that there was a whole scheme, although I was in on sort of the one meeting, I went to the meeting in McLean where there were twenty people at some point. It seemed to me rather about two weeks after he announced when we went through a whole day of meetings. Do you remember when that was?
HACKMAN: No. I’ve got the April 19th meeting on the South, but that’s not the one you’re talking about.

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JOHNSTON: Oh, yeah, we had that. No, I went to that, but he wasn’t at that.

HACKMAN: You’re thinking of after he came back from the first California trip, I think. He’d been to Kansas, he’d been to the South, then he went to the West Coast, then he came back, and there was a big meeting.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think that was it. And there was sort of a day of meetings, and he met some Indians and community people. Well, so I went to that. I know there were lots of times when he talked to Steve or talked to Ted or certainly to Ted Kennedy and then the primaries where he thought about these things. But there was never.... And so I say there may well have been a strategy. Anybody interested in this question would want to get that from a much better source than me about what there was.... If there was, it was not apparent. It may well have been decided that it would come into appearance after California. But up until that time all that was clear was that we were hustling to do as well as we could do in the primaries and in the rest of the states whatever we could, whatever anybody could come up with, if somebody had a good idea, and there didn’t seem to be much priority in terms of that. As I say, you could take eight people, and each one of them could say well, now, these are the five most important states. And they could almost be in each case five different states. And even more important than that, because that makes it sound like just kind of a shopping list thing, my feeling was that you had a problem of how you influence these delegates come Chicago, and if you work back from that, you recognize that not only was it important to win the primaries, and not only was it important to influence those delegates that could be shaken in non-primary states, but that you had to have a very strong hold and gaining strength with the public at large, so that when you came into Chicago you were in as strong a position as you could be just in terms of what politicians would respect and feel is important in winning the election, and that you would look better in that regard than Humphrey. So you had to be very careful that all that you did in the primaries was very much in phase with what came after and consistent with what you wanted to come out over Walter Cronkite and over NBC [National Broadcasting Company] every night when X millions of people sat there and made up their mind about you. And it was my feeling very strongly that the kinds of things that were coming out were so much involved with the kind of crowd excitement and so on that works well in a small Indiana town but which on the screen looks simply like another form of violence almost and just a kind of horrendous amount of shouting and noise, and even more important, I think by itself it’s bad if it had been joined with a clear sort of position on things of substance, that it would have been balanced out, and that people would have.... The attention on the hoopla would have diminished or it would have at least been balanced out by some real concern with what the candidate was saying on some of these things. I think it was clear there wasn’t much work that really went into that in terms of how you’re being heard in the country as a whole. It
was really focused on each of the primary states, state by state. And that was a problem. And since there wasn’t much offered to reporters day in and day out except the same speech slightly altered from Muncie [Muncie, Indiana], from Gary [Gary, Indiana]. I’m not saying there weren’t some good speeches in the campaign, but basically it was a sort of pre-television. It was a local campaign, primary state by primary state, which may have been the case in ’60, but it certainly doesn’t seem to be the case now. And as a result, the reporters had to focus on the crowd, because that’s all there was that was kind of dramatic and interesting. And then they also focused on the mechanisms of the campaign organization and there was great fascination with that, which seemed to me highly inappropriate. It seemed to me there was only one person that should have been talked about and described and giving interviews, and that was Robert Kennedy.

HACKMAN: Who agreed with you, because I heard, I think it’s been written that—maybe this came up in that big meeting or some other discussion—that some of the younger staff people felt that the whole way of using TV and the whole approach was outdated. Were there others, or do you think you’re primarily the....

JOHNSTON: No, no, I don’t know. You see, it was an awfully difficult subject to get into with anybody because people felt, well, there were a variety of things. Well, let’s see. I think probably that Adam and Peter and I agree. We talked about it quite a bit. And I think we all three agreed very strongly.

HACKMAN: What about Mankiewicz on it?

JOHNSTON: I never really discussed it with him. Adam and Peter might have. I think he was out in California so much of the time, and I think probably pretty much involved again in the primary scene out there. So I never got in, and I never heard anybody mention him as somebody who felt.... Funny enough, Arthur Schlesinger you might think would be somebody who would look at things the way they were done under Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] or for John Kennedy. He felt very strongly that this was the case and independent of me. It turned out we agreed and talked about it. It was difficult, though, because you didn’t want to, I mean my conception of it was that there were already enough people floating around with their own ideas, and that these things, if they weren’t apparent to other people in the campaign organization, would never.... It wasn’t any good to make a big point of discussing them over and over. And I thought that it was important to get it to Steve and to the Senator, so I did a rather long memo, which I sent to the Senator and which I gave to Steve. And I don’t think he was very happy with it. I mean I think he felt it was, he never talked to me about it, but I just gathered that he felt, which is I think, appropriate probably that somebody else should be handling and resolving these things. But there wasn’t anybody else at that point. Well, I did talk to Edward Kennedy about it, and I did talk to Sorensen about it or write them things about it and we discussed it. But there wasn’t very much.... In the end it was something which they just didn’t really feel very interested in, I think, and they felt that if I had
something useful to do I could get on and do it. It said in the memoir I wrote the Senator enough people are sort of trying that think they ought to be or are

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running this. I want to make clear I’m not one of them. I think it was probably a very small number of people who really felt that that was very important. I think most people felt if you don’t win the primaries, you’re dead. I didn’t disagree with that. I just thought that you had to do everything you could to win the primaries but that you might really still be in a big lot of trouble if you hadn’t dealt with some of these other problems, and that you were digging a very deep hole for yourself which was unnecessary. There were a lot of other things. But I think it’s sort of, how even at the time I thought the important thing in a campaign, it seems to me, is not to get all involved with how you think it ought to be run. I mean there are, in every campaign, enough people around like me or Adam who’ve got their own idea on how the hell it should be run. If I were running a campaign I wouldn’t tolerate me or Adam sitting around doing global speculations when I was supposed to be out doing something. So I was very.... Even though I had lots of other thoughts about it and sometimes when I had a chance I’d talk to the senator or to somebody about them, I’d realize that it was not very effective really and not even appropriate and not very helpful to him as a candidate. I mean he really . . .

[TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO]

JOHNSTON: ...that this was really not a problem that he should be worrying about, that he should be being protected from these sort of responsibilities. So then every once in a while you’d get a terrific.... I mean it got to be toward the end a very sensitive issue, because somebody like Fred Dutton would get very worked up about it and he’d say, “Well, now we’ve got to....” and he really, I think, got very irritated at Adam, Peter and me. We’re pals now and I respect him and I think he did a very good job in the campaign, I’m sure. But at the time we just didn’t see eye to eye at all on this. It got to be, at that point, clear that if you were going to do anything at all you had to pick out a place where you could work. At some point it might get sorted out and otherwise it certainly wasn’t by your sitting around, as I say, sort of speculating about it and making large suggestions that it would get changed. So then at that point there was a good opportunity to do something at least in the South, and I moved on to that.

HACKMAN: Well, can you remember before this? This is the list of people, I think, that were at that April 19 meeting. Can you remember getting in any discussions of the South before that at all?

JOHNSTON: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I’d been, before that let’s see. That was about April 19th. Well, I guess it was in the week or ten days after that. It was when Seigenthaler went to California. I don’t know when that was.

HACKMAN: I don’t have an exact date. I think it was about this time.
JOHNSTON: A little after that, I think, or about then, and he was at this meeting. And he and I had sort of organized it, and we were going to hold it first of all at the Jefferson Hotel, and then we held it out at Hickory Hill [McLean, Virginia] without the Senator being there. Ethel was there. But, yeah, we’d had a lot of sort of talks about individuals in the South, and we’d had meetings. And again it was just something that wasn’t in very clear focus for anybody. We’d have these people working. And the idea here was to bring them together and kind of see. There hadn’t been really much done, but there’d been sort of talks about what was going to be done, and so many people had volunteered to take on. These assignments had gotten made one way or another generally by somebody saying we want to do this or we want to do that. And so Judge Reggie [Edmund M. Reggie], who’d been there in 1960 and had set up some things for President Kennedy, and he was one; Bob Troutman, of course, in Georgia; This fellow Stergel in Kentucky was very optimistic. He’d been very eager to do something. But I guess that meeting was the first chance to kind of get into it at all. But we’d had these girls who were there working on each of the states.

HACKMAN: The Boiler Room girls?

JOHNSTON: Yes, the Boiler Room girls. The basic theory in the South, if there was any—that’s a pretty big word for it—up till this meeting and even afterwards, was first of all just to try to get along a little bit, I mean just to try to let them know that we were going to make a little bit of an effort in their, I mean that Robert Kennedy was not unfriendly to the South, which is a pretty minimal point to try to make but which was our first job. And then to find out where there were some friends and where there were some strengths and most of all to find out where there were weaknesses in Humphrey and then work on that.

HACKMAN: Were there any people who were resisting this whole thing at headquarters? Someone had said that Sorensen was ready to write the whole South off. Was this your impression, or were there others who’d feel like this?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. Sorensen was rather funny. I don’t quite know. As I say, I’d not worked with him much, but I was amazed at this meeting of Southern representatives. These were guys which were working for Robert Kennedy or ready to go to work for him in some cases in states where it was rather unpopular to be for him and where they sort of weren’t going to get much out of it locally and much out of it perhaps at all. And they’d come up here to this meeting and were there. It seemed to me that the purpose of this meeting was to encourage them to go back and to work a little bit. And Ted, I think, meant to do that. But as he talked he conveyed to them a feeling that, well, we don’t take the South very, we don’t care about the South. And you can go back, the way he put it, I think almost precisely, was that, you can go back and tell them that this thing is moving forward, and if they don’t want to be part of it, well, that’s tough. I mean he didn’t say it exactly that way, but
that was the message. I could see what he sort of wanted. I understood to some extent what he wanted to accomplish, but the effect as I got it from talking to people after the meeting was rather cold and discouraging, rather bleak and grim. It didn’t sound like there’d

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be much help from headquarters, that it really made much of a difference what they did. But Ted and I never discussed it as a problem because it seemed to me that once I got down there, I mean first of all, at least for the first part, I didn’t have to persuade anybody to put any resources really. No, we did have some discussions. And we had to persuade them, actually, that Kentucky was a real opportunity. But that was so clear on the face of it. I mean that was a real precise and obvious thing just like Iowa had been. And we had, actually, a congressman who’d helped to organize it in Iowa, send in his fellow, who was an awfully able, Clark [Richard N. Clark] is it?

HACKMAN: The Iowa plan, as everybody calls this whole thing?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, yeah. Well, the Iowa plan got turned into a Kentucky version. And that guy was awfully good. And we got a meeting on that. So this made sense, and this was pretty easy mathematics for people to grasp. But working in the South as a whole, I think the crunch on that argument would have come in June on that meeting out West when, in effect, I and Seigenthaler would have asked for some of the candidate’s time to go into the South, to spend I think what I was thinking was three days really split up, over the summer, and also to be willing to meet with some of the Southern leaders. And I think we probably would have been able to make our point So I don’t think one should characterize it as real resistance to any effort in the South. Ted was all for an effort in the South and others were, and Kenny particularly thought it was worthwhile. Ted was for it; it’s just that I think he thought it was about as low a priority as there was maybe this side of.... But he’d spent time working on Puerto Rico, too. Again I think it gets back to, it was my feeling that in the long run it would be important to just demonstrate that he wasn’t altogether unpopular in the South. I never had any, as I say, very great illusions we’d pick up a lot of votes out of the South. But if we could show that he was, which we could have by getting him to visit certain areas where he would have been extremely well-received in the South as he had already in Nashville at Vanderbilt [Vanderbilt University] or whatever and in other parts that he was a national candidate, that he wasn’t just a big city black fellow. So that was important, and also I think if you’d been able to switch some of those people over to favorite sons, which you might have been able to do, stranger things have happened, and as it turned out, Humphrey’s strength, thin as it was in the South, was not even that strong around the country. And we were working, just the idea, I think, was really to meet as many of these people. I spent time with Sanford [J. Terry Sanford], with Buford Ellington, with Smathers [George A. Smathers], with even that Maddox [Lester Maddox] at a funeral in Georgia. I spent a lot of time with different Georgians, and, of course, in Kentucky and lots of other people in North Carolina. And as the thing went along, I think those people would have maybe possibly in some cases, other cases it was a waste of time really, but in some cases might have been willing to help us in some way.
HACKMAN: Do you remember at that April 19th meeting and then maybe all the way through, a difference of opinion between yourself and Seigenthaler on how this

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should be handled, and Troutman, who’d sort of had the thing in 1960?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, yeah. There was a definite difference. John and I tended to agree on just about everything without having to go into detail to explain it to each other. John gets along with Troutman, but Troutman sees John as a flaming liberal, and he didn’t know me that well. So sort of the idea was that I was kind of the go-between and the guy that.... We got along well so that it was a little bit, I think it would have been clear to him by the end of the campaign that I wasn’t any more helpful to what he was working on than Johnny Seigenthaler. But in the beginning it was a fresh face and a guy that was friendly to him, so he made a big effort. So it was no question, though, that all of the people that Troutman on almost every recommendation would have been different, almost the opposite and Troutman always for not upsetting things and not doing.... He would never tolerate.... That’s where we had to keep the McLaughlin’s thing kind of off as if nobody knew what it really was just as far as Troutman was concerned. It wasn’t a big problem, but the problem was just that Troutman would, in the end, would feel hurt really. It wasn’t as if we would have lost a lot politically with these things. It was almost a matter more of just politeness. It wasn’t a big, big problem. If he had found that I felt just as strong, and I didn’t hide from him my feelings or anything about a lot of these things, but we just tried to avoid having long conflicts where he felt that we were going at it backwards and had to explain it.

HACKMAN: Was this primarily in terms of people you’d be dealing with in the states?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. Well, just the whole conception of, yeah, people, types of movements that you were trying to foment, and trying types of activities. But you see the thing was Bob Troutman had, and–it makes it sound like he was not making any or couldn’t have made a contribution–he knew a lot of these people that had the power in the South. So in a sense it was like the Kennedy operation throughout the country. We were trying to keep together whatever contacts we had with the establishment, with the people that had the running of the Democratic Party in that place and at the same time keep and develop our strength in the areas where they in the end might have to respect us and deal with us. And they certainly weren’t going to do it just voluntarily. So it was a twofold, I think that was what we were doing almost everywhere else in the country, even with the Unruhs and the people we were trying to keep them happy and at the same time get something done with the people.

HACKMAN: What about the Sanford thing, though? He came out for Humphrey. Was this in violation of an understanding you people thought you had with him?
JOHNSTON: I think it was somewhat of a real surprise. There were a lot of surprises, though, connected with all of that. I mean, I think Fred Harris [Fred R. Harris] was even more, much more of a surprise. Sanford, Breathitt. As I say, Breathitt and Sanford were the two names mentioned at the meeting at Horace Merton’s office. Again, I think

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Edward Kennedy and a number of other people said, “Well, these are two that might travel around and look into these things.” Sanford said to me, he said, “We wish there wasn’t a presidential election this year.” He said, “It just doesn’t make any sense to have to choose even for Humphrey; Humphrey’s a problem for us, but Robert Kennedy would be impossible.”

HACKMAN: He didn’t lead you in any way to believe that he might back off Humphrey later or something like that?

JOHNSTON: To be fair, or to be accurate, I talked to him after he’d already made the decision. All I remember, everything we talked about sort of in the headquarters about him was that, no, he’d never given any commitment to us certainly, and he didn’t. No, he was very straight about that, very clear. He just said, “This is where I am, and I like Bob Kennedy, and I liked President Kennedy. I admired them. And I wish I was out of this thing altogether. But we do all we can do.” He was helpful. I mean, I said, “Well, who can we count on here?” He said, “Chick Riddle.” Was that Riddle?

HACKMAN: See, I thought Jackson, I don’t know. This is a...

JOHNSTON: Oh, yeah, Stanton, yeah. Well, that’s not the really good picture. But they’ll have the [_____] stuff for that. But he gave me, I thought, good advice, what turned out to make sense in the context of North Carolina about what we should do as friendly adversaries really.

HACKMAN: How was Riddle to work with?

JOHNSTON: Well, of course we never got to the point where we got, I mean we were just getting North Carolina into it. And it was sort of fertile territory. And I thought he was good. He’s an awfully attractive guy, I think, and certainly not new to politics, and he’s not, like Troutman, the fact that he’s so loyal and that he cared so, that he didn’t have other things, other axes to grind. And I think this is Bob Troutman’s great strength aside from, they’re both charming and intelligent men. But the fact that they have such extreme commitment to Robert Kennedy, it makes it much easier to deal with them and to work with their judgments about things than it does with somebody who’s an active force and is balancing things. On the other hand, the very fact that they’re so committed in those states means that they’re not probably going to be very effective political forces for accomplishing anything. So they’re much better sources of information and sources, in many cases, of judgments about people and methods of going into consequences of doing different things, analysis really, of
different courses of action. But they’re relatively very ineffective in terms of moving something forward. But I don’t think they pretend to be.

HACKMAN: What about Smathers? What can you do with him, if anything?

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JOHNSTON: Well, I just happened to see him almost by accident, or really by accident. I went out of my way to talk to him but just briefly at this Palm Bay Club or whatever in Florida, where McLaughlin and I had been meeting with other people from Florida, with . . .

HACKMAN: D’Alemberte [Talbot D’Alemberte], or whatever his name is?

JOHNSTON: ...yeah. Sandy D’Alemberte. And guys from the different, fellows who had been mayor down there in Miami and different ones, and Smathers was in this restaurant or bar. I had just read the chapter on Smathers in the book, Gothic Politics in the Old South . . .


JOHNSTON: ...which is an awfully, I think an awfully good book. And it’s an awfully chilling description of Smathers. I would have assumed that he would have—which is I guess true—that he’d just never be interested in anything with Robert Kennedy. I think Florida, funny enough, is really almost hopeless except as a, because he had it tied up so nicely and he was not, just like Ellington it was not easy to.... It would have been much easier to move people like McKeithen [John Julian McKeithen] and maybe Dan Moore [Daniel Killian Moore] in North Carolina than it would most of the others. And even in a funny way the Georgia delegation because you at least had either personal involvement, the personal considerations of role in history and all which might have sort of whimsically influenced the thing. Or you might have had in the case of the Georgia delegation just a kind of an outrage at everything liberal and Democratic. Whereas in the case of Ellington and in the case of Smathers, you’re working with people who were pretty well geared in with the Johnson administration’s way of doing things and weren’t likely to be very erratic or very difficult for them to hold. So our real hopes, in a funny way, were—I mean, it’s quite obvious I think—were with people who were less a part of that administration and whose commitment to Humphrey was just simply because they feared Robert Kennedy, no enthusiasm at all for Humphrey.

HACKMAN: Can you remember trying to put together anything at all with any McCarthy people in Florida?

JOHNSTON: No. You see, we missed out on Florida. We decided—I’m not criticizing, I wasn’t involved with it—but we decided that, the primary was over by the time we really got involved with it. And we had decided pretty much,
there was a lot of discussion about a joint slate earlier on. Ted Sorensen dealt altogether with that and talked to the people from Florida. I was in, I remember, on a couple of meetings, but I can’t remember any of the details. And the decision, I think, I can’t remember how it worked. But there was a lot, and there is a lot. I’m sure Sandy, for instance, would know, and Ted might even remember just all those details about it. But there was a big effort to put the two together against Smathers.

HACKMAN:  Going back to this Troutman-Seigenthaler thing, can you remember a discussion of a law and order statement that I think Troutman wanted at one point?

JOHNSTON:  Yeah. Gosh, I can’t remember, though, whatever happened. I mean I just remember there was a lot of joking about it. What happened is Jack Miller [Herbert J. Miller, Jr.] came to this meeting and made a kind of a speech about law and order and Robert Kennedy and law and order, which he then made in his own role as a speaker in Indiana, which was very important in some of those areas. And he’s Jack Miller. Do you know him?

HACKMAN:  No.

JOHNSTON:  He’s a good man. And he’s a very impressive and attractive fellow. And what he said was not demagogic or anything. He just said that Robert Kennedy as Attorney General was this country’s law enforcement office and has a long history of experience with these problems and dealing with law and order and criminals and so on. And I think Troutman was so carried away, he said it was the best speech he had ever heard. All we had to do was get that out to everybody and if we did that, the South would be with us tomorrow. And if he made it a national policy.....So there was a lot of discussion, but as I recall, it just kind of, it wasn’t anything which John and I or anybody else took on head on. We just agreed that Jack had made a great talk there and that it would be helpful if other considerations weren’t put into it. And, unfortunately, once you began to put the others in, it didn’t look so helpful. I think that’s the way, do you recall, have you heard....

HACKMAN:  No, I don’t know much about it.

JOHNSTON:  That was the serve that came up. And then I’m sure Bob wrote or talked, or every time he had a chance he probably mentioned that this is what it would take, because I know he felt this very strongly. And he was right. In the context of Georgia it would take that and a lot more. That was at least what they wanted for openers. I remember driving down with him through the middle of Georgia somewhere in a car with a guy who was very able and who was one of the real sort of--I can’t remember his name--but a very important figure in the delegation when it ended up in Chicago. And this guy--and I don’t mean in ‘68 but had been and was going to be again--and this fellow was important, and this is what he just said. He said Robert Kennedy has to start in such a state, and then he has to...
HACKMAN: This is Oscar Carr or someone Oscar Carr knows?

JOHNSTON: ...no, no. In a car. I’m sorry. In an automobile. No. Oscar Carr is the fellow from Mississippi. No, this was just driving with Troutman and with this fellow who was very important—I can’t remember—but he was sort of one of the back room lawyer figures, like out of *All the King’s Men*, sort of like the narrator of that, and very astute. And I’m sure he was right. In the Georgia context this was the only thing that would even get you into the ball game. So Bob kept saying that. But it really never, first of all, we never got around to dealing with the South. I think that’s an important thing because it was all rather preliminary. And my guess as to whether something would have come is no better really than anybody else’s. But I think, maybe just being optimistic, I feel that if we’re going to pick up in the rest of the country that we would have made hay in the South as well.

HACKMAN: Did you get involved personally in any of the contacts with McKeithen?

JOHNSTON: I never met him. But when we dealt with Reggie....

HACKMAN: I guess it was really Reggie then rather than McKeithen to deal with in Mississippi.

JOHNSTON: Reggie to deal with. Yeah, yeah. In Louisiana.

HACKMAN: I mean Louisiana.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. He did that through him. And the only thing close to that is I was interviewed on television by Ed Planer, who’s a good friend of Walter Sheridan’s [Walter J. Sheridan] and who was a sort of real friend down there and works for the local affiliate and is a good newsman. Reggie thought it would be helpful if, as a visiting guy of Senator Kennedy’s, I said some terrific things about McKeithen. So I just said about how we knew that McKeithen was going to make the judgment in the best interests of people in Louisiana and how this would be consistent with everything else he’d done on behalf of Louisianans. And he said, “Oh, McKeithen will love that, and we’ll tape record it” or something. But I think the idea there would have been eventually to have.... First of all McKeithen was not the type that should deal with even anybody but the candidate himself. And apparently the correspondence that Humphrey had with him is something else really, full of intimations that he, Humphrey, was going to be looking for a very good Secretary of Ttate. He, Humphrey, knew that he and McKeithen would always be together in whatever they did together as they had in the past. And Reggie seemed to have access to all this. But it showed that, he said, “You’re dealing with a guy that’s really got a terrific sense of who he is and a terrifically big conception of his own importance. And the only way to deal with that is to somehow....” It’s kind of a grim game, but what it meant was somehow trying to make him feel, I don’t think so much make him feel that he’s going to become Secretary of State under the Kennedy
administration, but at least let him know—and I think this is true throughout the South—that let these guys know that Robert Kennedy would have people working for him, I

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guess, one, and two, would himself be friendly were he elected, whatever that means. And I think the only way to have demonstrated that would have been to, first of all, to have some people who were Southern working and traveling and just talking. And then third that he was able, that he, Robert Kennedy, had real popular support in the South, even though it didn’t show up in the polls when he came into New Orleans [New Orleans, Louisiana] or when he came to Atlanta [Atlanta, Georgia] or Nashville or Miami, that people really came out for whatever reason. We could have done that. And then also I think that McKeithen would spend a couple of hours with him and feel that Robert Kennedy knew who he was and that he took him seriously as a person and spent some time, and that he, Robert Kennedy, was an attractive guy. And they never had that opportunity. Every chance that they’d ever had to get together had been aborted one way or another. The Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] assassination stopped the trip to Louisiana as it did to Kentucky. Every other time they tried to phone, and it always had not worked. Oh, no, he was coming down once before and he didn’t come because of something to do with the Teamsters [International Brotherhood of Teamsters], to Louisiana. So that aborted. And this sort of history of bad luck and bad circumstances seemed to be consistent with his relations with most southern politicians, most southern governors especially. Plus, of course, all of them remember him as the attorney general. So you started out with those negatives. But my feeling is that their enthusiasm was all based on the fact that their enthusiasm for Humphrey was almost zero. They just didn’t like him at all; they didn’t like him as a person. I think they preferred Bob. In a funny way, the Southerners—the ones I talked to—seemed to prefer Robert Kennedy as a man to Humphrey as a man. They thought at least he’s honest and he’s tough and he’s straight, and Humphrey’s a big wordy liberal, a big ADA [Americans for Democratic Action] guy. So they were very unenthusiastic about Humphrey. Support was so thin that if Humphrey hadn’t done something significant to keep it, I think we might have at least neutralized them.

HACKMAN: Did anybody ever put the bean in McKeithen’s ear on the vice-presidency?

JOHNSTON: No, that was... How did that happen? Did that come up with Ted, something on the “Today” show?

HACKMAN: I don’t know.

JOHNSTON: It seems to me he was asked–Ted Sorensen was asked–is it true. No, Ted Sorensen said, that’s right, yeah, that’s right. Ted Sorensen said, I believe on the “Today” show or some program, he said—I could be wrong—but I believe he or somebody else said that they thought Humphrey had offered the vice-presidency to McKeithen or somebody else, or that he’d offered it to five southern guys.
HACKMAN: That’s right. That’s what Sorensen said on the TV show. He said he offered it to every southern governor.

JOHNSTON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then there was a great.... And, of course, it was not a

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good thing to say in the South, for us, because it made them look like fools. But we joked about it. I mean, this was what Reggie said would be slightly helpful. But no, I don’t think there was ever anything seriously thought about. But I suppose he would have, the idea that he might have been an ambassador or something. I suppose Reggie’s thought was that you had to let him think that he was going to become something important. I don’t know. I never was involved in anything at all with Robert Kennedy where we actually led somebody on to believe he was going to be something. But I was also never involved before in a presidential election. And I remember hearing all the stories about all the people who were going to be federal judges. There were hundreds of them apparently in 1960. So I’m sure that at some point he might have thought.

HACKMAN: Who was helpful in Kentucky, other than the fellow who came in from Iowa? Wasn’t Jim Wyanas down there?

JOHNSTON: Jim Wyanas was in Washington, and he went down both with me and then separately and kept in touch an awful lot. He was very helpful. We had quite a good group of people because, well, we had the state committee against us, but the people that were the, and Breathitt was not for us. But former Governor Bert Combs [Bertram Thomas Combs] was sort of the most important figure in terms of just sort of the under, the political under kind of, there must be a simpler way to say it than that. Probably he’s the most influential Democrat in the state. He’s got the most judgment, the most strength and the most personality of anybody else down there who’s recently been in office. And even though he’s a federal judge he can’t do a lot, but his people, if they move on your behalf, it signifies that he thinks you’re important and is for you. So when we had Fontaine Banks [Fontaine Banks, Jr.]–I think his name is; is that his name? I can’t remember, but anyway–his former aide in Frankfort and Breathitt’s, when he began to get involved for us that was a clear signal of something that we’d known already which was that he thought, Combs thought, that Robert Kennedy should be president and that he had a very good chance of getting, as I said earlier, the votes of all the Kentucky delegation. And so then we set about with Dick Clark, I think it was, from Iowa to do this. He came in, and we had a meeting. We set up a citizens committee, put Mike Mills, who’s a lawyer from Madison, whom Combs thought highly of, who Breathitt liked, and who others thought was good, who was acceptable even to the people that were in a sense against us– who would have been–was a non-controversial and a nice fellow, he was chairman. And his brother is Don Mills, who’s editor of the Herald-Leader in Lexington [Lexington, Kentucky]. Then we had a lot of volunteers. And we had to organize the state in different sections. We brought in a guy from Tennessee named Bo Edwards, who was recommended to us by a friend of John’s in Nashville, Jim Neale, who was working with us on North Carolina. He and I got over to North Carolina one weekend and then got him up to
Louisville—he and his wife—and they began to work. And we had the beginnings of, I think, a rather effective.... We were going to go into each of the hundred and twenty counties, pack the meetings and then pack the county or the district conventions and end up with all the delegates. And it never had been done before, but this was an entirely legal, normal, democratic and everything. It just meant a

lot of hard work to do it. And by packing I just mean getting the people there on the bus or whatever to vote. And Ed Pritchard [Edward F. Pritchard, Jr.], who’s been a long-time figure in the Democratic party nationally was very, very helpful, just in terms of information and judgment about who would be helpful. He was a speech writer for Combs and Breathitt.

HACKMAN: Could that Iowa system be used anywhere else, or was it too late? Was it primarily a time factor?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think that was just about the only place that was open. Most places aren’t that susceptible to that sort of thing. Virginia still had a convention, I think, but it was a pretty... We looked into the other opportunities in the South, but there weren’t any. North Carolina, had we gotten going earlier on it, might have provided us with something similar. They have a convention system, as I recall, but they have an awful lot of at-large votes which are selected by the state people. And it seems to me then what they do is they impose the unit rule on the thing. If you’ve made a big fight over it, then you end up with just a minority. So the tradition of the unit rule in Kentucky was a much harder one. Number one, it was much less acceptable than it seemed to be in North Carolina. So even if you ended up with a minority in Kentucky, I think the general feeling would have been that you would have kept those votes. If you had fought it out in North Carolina, you wouldn’t have gotten more than a minority, and then they would have just shut you up anyway. In Kentucky, also, you had the chance of winning more than a minority, which he did. And also plus we just never got going; North Carolina came too soon for us. Kentucky, by being late July, I think it was July 28th or something of that sort, just perfect. And it also would have had a very important, of course, psychological effect. We wouldn’t have talked about it and didn’t intend to go around boasting that we had them, but it would have been something that everybody in Newsweek and everybody put in Humphrey’s column and then we would have it out of the blue; well, I suppose somebody would have figured out we were doing something there. But it wouldn’t have had to have become a big thing if we didn’t make it that until we did it, and then it would have been a rather shock to people.

HACKMAN: At the time of the assassination how much was in the works that you were involved in on thinking about challenging delegations?

JOHNSTON: Well, there was quite a lot of sort of lawyer’s work on that going forward. All I remember is that at this meeting we talked about it, on the 19th. And then I think Jack Miller was actually, wasn’t he in charge of it?

HACKMAN: Yeah, yeah. I believe so.
JOHNSTON: And we talked a lot, and I, gee, I can’t remember. It seemed to me that people were pretty pessimistic about it, except in the case of, of course, of Mississippi. But outside of that... Have you heard of any, there may well be, because

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I didn’t follow it that closely. It seemed to me that the Mississippi delegation was, or that situation was that....

HACKMAN: Yeah. As I understand it–I haven’t done any interviewing on the South, outside of yourself–Mississippi basically takes care of itself. I mean because they’re used to doing this.

JOHNSTON: Right. Yeah. Right, right. So that wouldn’t have been, except that we would have had to do everything. It would have become a.... We’d put up a group which would have challenged the one, and then we would have had to go ahead and back it. In the others it would have been a case of bringing a suit on the backs of the local people, generally, or by trying through the rules committee to do it.

HACKMAN: There was thought given to possibly challenging the unit rule in South Carolina?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. Yeah, I think that’s right. That’s right.

HACKMAN: South Carolina and somewhere.

JOHNSTON: Yeah. Yeah, I think there was. And I think Ted Sorensen, have you interviewed Sorensen?

HACKMAN: Just started and we’re going to wait until he’s finished writing the book. Rather than duplicate a lot of that we’re going to wait until the book comes out, and then I’m going to go back and....

JOHNSTON: Well, he would be clearer about the, I mean he paid more attention to that maybe than most of the people . . .

HACKMAN: The legal aspect.

JOHNSTON: ...and kind of followed it very closely and worked on it. That would have been sort of part of a real strategy of how you handled the whole convention. To sum up what I would know about it, I think was done was some real sort of investigation was started on, preparatory to it, and the thing was waiting then for some decisions as to how you thought you’d do the convention.
HACKMAN: Well, I really don’t have that much more on the South, and I’ve got about ten or fifteen minutes of tape. I think it’d probably be a good place to break. This is the last thing I’ve got.

[END OF INTERVIEW]
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