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Third Oral History Interview

with

JOHN RICHARD REILLY

December 16, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By James A. Oesterle

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

REILLY: There have been a number of things which have actually come up since the last time we talked, as far as printed material and other things of that nature. [William J.] Bill vanden Heuvel's wife's book [Jean Stein, American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy] is out, the [Nikita S.] Khrushchev memoirs [Khrushchev Remembers] are out, the number of things in that nature which have recalled a few of the.

OESTERLE: The [Victor] Navasky article.

REILLY: The Navasky article on "The Government and Martin Luther King," which goes into the question of FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] wiretapping or eavesdropping, or whatever you want to call it, and the involvement of Bob Kennedy as attorney general at that time with the. . . . Navasky--I think I've said this before; I'm not sure--at least, having read his article, I feel that he's probably treated the whole subject about as well as I've seen it treated anywhere. I don't know of any one person at the Justice Department that knows exactly what was happening during those days or exactly what the attorney general's involvement was, his knowledge of eavesdropping, wiretapping, et cetera. I guess the only two who would really be able to talk about it are Bob Kennedy and John Edgar Hoover.

OESTERLE: Courtney Evans might help.

REILLY: Courtney will have an awful lot of information as the go-between, I'm sure, and [Herbert J., Jr.] Jack Miller. But
when you get really down to the type of thing that they're now arguing about, or have argued about in the past, whether or not the attorney general actually authorized eavesdropping or whether or not it was being done by the FBI under some understanding or misunderstanding as to their authority, it becomes almost a subjective thing and can't be measured very objectively, and I think it's... 

OESTERLE: You mentioned that a lot of things have come about since we last talked. The controversy between the director of the bureau and Ramsey Clark is another thing that has been in the newspapers.

REILLY: Yeah, that's an interesting thing. It was interesting in that Hoover's reaction, his overreaction, it would seem to me, to Ramsey's rather objective statement—I haven't read the book, but I mean what appeared to be his objective statements in the book—and Hoover's just funny reaction to Ramsey Clark, particularly in view of his friendship with Tom Clark, et cetera, the fact he is so critical of Ramsey as a wishy-washy person. None of us ever felt that Ramsey was wishy-washy. We felt that he was quiet, and we felt that he perhaps remained in the background when we were there. We always respected his judgment, and I think one of the indications of how Bob Kennedy respected his judgment was that even though Ramsey was in charge of the Land [and National Resources] Division, which is rather an unsexy operation, he was called in on almost all of the major problems, particularly regarding civil rights. I'm not talking about major problems involving crime or anything of that nature, but Ramsey was a man that was kind of on the team when we're talking about Montgomery [Ala.] or we're talking about Oxford [Miss.] or we're talking about any of those—the freedom march. Ramsey was, I think, highly thought of by the attorney general. The reaction of Hoover that Ramsey was the... I'm not quite clear whether he thought Ramsey was the worst attorney general after Bob Kennedy, or whether Bob Kennedy was worse than Ramsey, or what.

OESTERLE: I think the quotation in the newspaper article said something about that Ramsey Clark was even worse than Robert Kennedy.

REILLY: Yes, I think he said that Robert Kennedy, although he was wrong, stuck to his guns, or something, and that Ramsey when he was wrong sometimes changed. Well, that doesn't seem to be too great a criticism to me, if a man is wrong that he can make up his mind differently or see the error of his ways.

I got a kick out of Hoover's statement, and it really made me laugh out loud when I read it, that Bob Kennedy had discussed with him the fact that he didn't have many black agents, that he was trying to encourage him to hire more, and that Hoover felt that he would be somehow or other lowering the standards of the FBI. I think this is a quote. Presumably he said, "Well, Bobby, if you don't like what I'm doing you'll have to get another director." And then he said, "Well, then I went over to see the president." Well, at this point I was trying to figure out, just quickly in my mind, "Boy, that's strange that he went over to see Jack Kennedy." Then I found out that he wasn't talking about Jack Kennedy; he was talking about Lyndon Johnson.
Well, naturally he felt very strong in his position vis-a-vis Bob Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. But the fact is that Bob Kennedy long before this time had been attempting to convince John Edgar Hoover to hire more black agents. In fact Bob made the statement to me one time, "How can the FBI do any undercover work in a place like Harlem? They can't send a white agent into Harlem as an undercover man." It must be very difficult, according to his thinking and mine also. The fact is that he had been encouraging Hoover, and all of us, to pretty much go out of our way to discover blacks who could handle the jobs.

Assistant U.S. attorneys is a good example. Hoover mentioned it in his statement, that this was the first time it had ever happened. Well, according to the fact that he said he went over to see Johnson, it sounded like Bob Kennedy only brought it up after November of 1963. He brought it up long before that.

I don't know whether I told the story about riding in the deputy's car with the deputy attorney general's driver. Did I tell that one?

OESTERLE: Yes, you did mention that.

REILLY: And what the guy said, he'd rather work for the FBI because they're all agents? You can see what we always used to kid about, because we said that the black agent that turned up in the New York meetings looked like the same guy that turned up in Chicago meetings, and we thought Hoover was shipping him around the country along with the picture of Jack Kennedy.

That Ramsey book and Hoover's reaction, his subsequent reaction, of which we've not heard the last, I'm sure; appearing before the committee on the [Capitol] Hill and coming up with this great conspiracy by the Berrigans [Daniel J. and Philip F.] and their group to overthrow the government in some method or manner. . . . This really doesn't have too much to do with what we're talking about, but I thought that Representative [William R.] Anderson showed an awful lot of guts by defending the Berrigans, getting on the floor of the House of Representatives and criticizing John Edgar Hoover. To my knowledge I'd never heard of that before. I mean, I don't recall anybody on the Hill ever really being critical of Hoover. I think there are a number who would be critical, but they seem to have some great fear that he has a raw file on them as to their habits and so on.

I don't have any personal knowledge as to whether that is actually so, and I've been asked that a number of times by people on the Hill as to whether or not there are files on people. There are files on people, and people in government life. I think I told you about when [David C.] Dave Acheson was being investigated to become United States attorney in the District of Columbia. When I received the FBI report on his character
investigation, I also received all of the previous investigations and reports on Dean Acheson because this was kind of a SOP [standing operating procedure] evidently, that when in a character investigation of an individual they turned up other names about whom they had information, they would many times send that along with it. So when they came in with the Dave Acheson investigation they came in with a three foot high stack of Dean Acheson's. I didn't read them all because it was just so raw—I mean the files were so raw, I don't mean immoral or anything—you know, as to, "Somebody said that Dean Acheson was a Communist, and we checked into it, and T-1 of known reliability in the past says he's not." Statements similar to that. So that's what we're talking about when we. . . There seems to be some fear on the Hill that Hoover has a great file on everybody as to all their peccadillos in the past.

Another thing which has come out—and I haven't read it other than the newspaper reports—is the Khrushchev statement in his memoirs that at the time of the Cuban missile crisis [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin, in a visit with Bob Kennedy, was informed by Bob Kennedy that one of the reasons that President Kennedy had to settle the Cuban missile matter was because he was fearful of an overthrow by the military in the United States.

I think the general reaction in the. . . As a matter of fact, Life, I think, editorializes and says nobody believed that he could have said this. I just want to tell the story, but I want to preface it by saying that this is my own personal view and could be entirely wrong. I happen to feel that he could have said that.

I think I mentioned about the fluke at the time of getting on the attorney general's private elevator in the Justice Department and running into [Edwin O.] Ed Guthman and Ambassador Dobrynin, who got on in the basement of the Justice Department and rode up to the attorney general's floor. I never really asked Ed Guthman what was going on, but subsequent events showed me that they were having a private meeting, and it was at the time of the Cuban missile crisis.

It seems to me, perhaps, that a statement such as Khrushchev claims could have been made at that time, obviously. It could have been made other times. It always seems to me to be something that Bob Kennedy might have said to Dobrynin. He obviously would have been trying to explain exactly what President Kennedy was trying to do in having the missiles removed from Cuba, and it seems perfectly logical to me that he may have overplayed his hand, in a way, in a manner which might have been understandable to the Russians. And it seems to me that they would certainly understand the pressure a man would be under if he was fearful of a military overthrow in his own country. I think we all recognize that this is, well, almost impossible in the United States, and it certainly was impossible at that time. The president was certainly strong enough, and Maxwell Taylor, for instance, was not going to be part of a cabal to overthrow the president. I think we all have to say that it's impossible in
the United States. But I guess we also thought assassinations were, and so it's not.

OESTERLE: One of the other things, too, that Khrushchev mentions in this series--I've read three parts of it; the fourth is out this week, which I haven't read yet--that the placement of missiles in Cuba and the final outcome, the missile crisis, was a success from his point of view, that Cuba would not be the independent state, socialist, communist state, that it is today had this not happened. This is interesting in light of the fact that this was also considered a success from the American point of view, and certainly from the Kennedy point of view.

REILLY: Yes. But I think it was successful from a Kennedy point of view because it did point out that the president was rather a strong individual and that many of his advisors were also strong and supported him. But I think, and I think Bob Kennedy either makes a flat statement or alludes to it in the book Thirteen Days, that one of the problems which was faced at the time was that they had to arrive at some kind of a solution to this matter which would not ruin Khrushchev's face. This was the difficult skirting of issues that they were trying to do at the time. So if it appears to be successful from the American point of view and also successful from the Russian point of view, it would indicate to me that they were successful in doing this. The ploy of answering the first communication from Khrushchev rather than the second, stronger communication was pointed towards this; and this, of course, was Bob Kennedy's solution to the matter. So actually if the Russians felt that they had been successful, and if we felt that we had been successful, and nobody was actually hurt except the one poor guy that got killed, it would appear to me that Bob and Jack Kennedy were very successful in what they were trying to do and had done what they were attempting to do.

The secrecy of that time for these people other than those who were involved was always amazing to me, the fact that even in the Justice Department, although we knew something was happening on that Monday, we didn't know what it was. I think I've mentioned having lunch with Ed Guthman and his frightening statement that he couldn't tell me what was happening but the world would never be the same again. It was one of the most shocking experiences that I think I ever had at the Justice Department.

OESTERLE: I don't think you did mention that.

REILLY: Didn't I mention that?

OESTERLE: I don't think so.
REILLY: Well, you recall the history of the thing, the fact that the president came back from Chicago, and that there was indication that there were meetings being held in the White House over the weekend and nobody knew what they were all about. It became apparent to almost all Washington-watchers that something was going on, although nobody really knew what it was, on the outside. That Monday I had lunch with Ed Guthman, and we went up to a little restaurant whose name escapes me right now. I asked Ed what was going on, and he said he couldn't possibly tell me, but, he said, "I'll tell you one thing, that the world is never going to be the same again." I've never forgotten that statement, and obviously the world was really never the same again, although I'm not sure that that... I think Ed was probably a little bit more worried, at that point, whether there would have to be military action on either side.

I also recall, about the time that the blockade was announced and was hitting the wires, there was a little wire service room on the fifth floor of the Justice Department in which we had all of the tickers. I was standing in there alone--no, I was with someone, I remember, but I don't know who it was--and was reading the announcement coming over the ticker that it appeared that we were blockading Cuba. I recall saying, "A blockade? That seems to be kind of going pretty far." And I said, "I wonder if 'blockade' actually means blockade?" And a voice behind me said, "It means exactly that," and I turned around and it was Bob Kennedy. He'd just been wandering in there himself to see what was coming over the wire. He turned around and left immediately, so I didn't have much chance to... In fact I think at that point I would have been frightened to really inquire as to what was going on. Everybody was pretty uptight at that point.

I want to just go back a minute--I was just thinking of something--back into Hoover. I think Hoover also made the statement that after this little conversation he'd had with Bob Kennedy, when he'd gone over to Johnson and Johnson said, "Stick to your guns," or something of that nature, I think Hoover said, "I didn't speak to him in the last six months that he was in office." Well, if you assume that Hoover means Bob Kennedy left office at the time he announced for Senate in August, we're going to have to figure those six months almost just on the minute, because in January of '64 I was present at a small party in Bob Kennedy's office one evening where he had a group of us from the Justice Department. He gave us all gold cuff links with the seal of the Justice Department on it, and then on the back of one of them it said, "RFK to"--whoever it was--"in my case, "JRR, 1961 to 1963." I'm not sure whether it said '63 or '64. I think it said '63, but at any rate it covered the span which was important to all of us. Hoover was at that party. Hoover was given cuff links, and I don't think it was apparent to anybody there that there was any bad blood between them. It was one of the few times I saw Hoover in Bob Kennedy's office, but he certainly didn't refuse the cuff links.
OESTERLE: Do you recall any other visits that the director made to the attorney general's office?

REILLY: No, that was the only one of which I was aware, but I would not have been privy to others. But that's the only time I ever saw him there. Oh, I shouldn't say that. There were certain times when there were swearing-ins--swearing-ins, swearings-in, or whatever--of individuals . . .

OESTERLE: Took place in the attorney. . . .

REILLY: . . . in Bob's office, where there were large groups of people. He may have been present at one of those. You know, I would assume that he would normally have been invited to anything involving the Justice Department.

OESTERLE: Did the attorney general have two offices, a formal office for the purpose of a swearing-in and a work office?

REILLY: No, he used the. . . . There are two offices up there. In fact, there's almost an apartment in the rear of the attorney general's office. But Bob Kennedy used the large office all the time. In fact, the rear office, which other attorneys general. . . . I know Nick Katzenbach used it, and I think Ramsey used it, and I don't know what they're doing now. Many of them used the back office and made the front office the big, big thing for formal occasions. But Bob used the big one, and the back office was really very, very empty. There were some bookcases with just a few books in it, and a big long conference table. But then there was a little apartment type thing back there with a sitting room, bath, shower, and then steps leading up to a small bedroom. The dining room was back there in which he used to hold weekly luncheon meetings.

OESTERLE: Was it your impression that he used this office as his primary office, apart from an office, say, at Hickory Hill, or some facility that he might have had in the executive wing of the White House?

REILLY: My impression was that he operated almost entirely out of the large office at the Justice Department, and that was the office with all the. . . . In fact, there was a fireplace in there, and he had the fire going almost constantly during the winter-time. There was a little settee and arrangement around the fireplace with coffee table and so on. From time to time he would break out a bottle with one or two of his friends or people who happened to be visiting him and sit around just there and operate off his desk. The business of the Justice Department would continue to take place right in that office.
I don't recall ever meeting with him at any time other than in that big office, oh, other than evenings when he'd be showering or dressing to go to something else. If that was the only time you could see him, you might be back in the little apartment type thing, visiting. But he would hold meetings, everything in there.

OESTERLE: Did Mrs. [Ethel S.] Kennedy often meet him at the office?

REILLY: Oh yes, she'd be in and out a lot. I mean, Ethel would be coming in the back door quite often. Particularly in the evening when they'd be having to go to some function she'd come down and meet him. The problem always was getting him out of there in time to go to the thing.

OESTERLE: Did you ever see the children at Justice [Department]?

REILLY: Yes, they were in and out. [Interruption] You were asking about the kids. They were up there quite often. As a matter of fact Ethel used to bring them--some of the younger ones, not the older ones--over for lunch. They'd appear from time to time. We'd walk into the attorney general's office and three or four children would be climbing all over everything. He'd be admiring a recent drawing or something of that nature, or settling some internal strife. It was always very difficult to get him to focus on what you were talking about, either during or after one of those occasions. But it was very relaxed, and the kids were typical, climbing over the furniture, grabbing Angie [Angela M. Novello] or something.

By the way, I meant to mention this. Angie is in town. We are, just on the spur of the moment, planning a little Christmas luncheon tomorrow for the former Justice Department group who have kind of stuck together over the years. Ethel is attending. I called her on Monday to see when she'd be available. She said that she was going to Sun Valley [Idaho] with all the children over the holidays and would be leaving Monday, but that she could go to lunch this week, so we planned the thing for Thursday, tomorrow. She was kind of kidding about the fact that she was so readily available, that she really doesn't have many social engagements at this time, which is, as you know, incorrect; Ethel is very busy. But she called me back a day later and mentioned the fact that Angie was in town and it would be nice if we invited her, which was thoughtful of Ethel because we didn't know she was in town.

OESTERLE: She's been working in Denmark at the embassy there, and I guess she's going to be transferred now.

REILLY: [William A.] Bill Geoghegan mentioned--I didn't talk to Angie; he talked to her to invite her--evidently she's got... She may have to be out of town tomorrow, and we don't know
whether she'll be able to attend. But Bill mentioned that she had indicated that she may be going to London. I don't know what for, and neither does Bill. We'll probably find out tomorrow.

The group that's attending the luncheon is, I guess, just exactly those that you would expect: Ramsey and John Douglas, Jack Miller, [Louis F.] Lou Oberdorfer, John Cassidy, [William A.] Bill Bittman, [Andrew F.] Andy Oehmann, John Nolan, myself, Bill Geoghegan. [Jacob] Jack Rosenthal is trying to break away from a previous engagement, and hopefully he'll be able to attend. Byron [R. White] is in argument, so he can't make it, but I think Marion [Stearns White], his wife, is coming. What it is is just the guys who are in town. I think Bill called Burke Marshal, Nick [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach], and John Doar and those guys who are out of town, but they for one reason or another can't make it. It's really pretty short notice. It's funny, every time two of us or three of us get together we always say to one another, "Let's get together," and nobody ever really puts it together.

We did this once before on an organized basis, and that was, oh, about two years after Bob was senator. I think it was about '67, after he was senator. We organized a dinner at the Federal City Club, to which we invited all the former—not all, but I mean many of the former--Justice Department people. They came from all over then. [Archibald] Archie Cox came down from Boston, and [William H., Jr.] Bill Barry came down from New York. [Robert M.] Bob Morgenthau came down. It was a larger group then.

Actually the way it came about was the fact that I was up one day talking to Bob Kennedy about a number of things and happened to mention to him, "You know, we really should not let this camaraderie which we had slip away. Everybody's off on frolic and banter of their own now, and we ought to get together from time to time." He fully agreed—in fact, insisted that I organize the thing at that point because he wanted to see everybody. So I did organize it, but now, upon recollection, it was more at his insistence than anything else. I mean, we'd all talked about it from time to time, but when he started to insist upon doing it, then we did it.

Of course, he was a terribly busy man, as you know, and there was some doubt as to whether... I mean he had a great history of arriving at something and having to leave fifteen minutes later. We were wondering how much time he'd be able to spend with us that night. Well, I think we'd planned the thing for seven o'clock, cocktails, and we'd taken over the Federal City Club. It was ours for the evening and dinner. I was over there early just to see that everything was in order, and about ten to seven Bob walked in. He stayed until two in the morning, and we just had one of the greatest evenings we've ever had. Everybody did do a little drinking and reminiscing—a lot of laughter, a lot of fun.
When we finally sat down to dinner after an extended cocktail hour—we had four or five round tables of perhaps ten to twelve people at each—I sat next to him, and he turned to me and he said, "Where's the wine?" Well, I hadn't planned on any wine at all, so we got hold of the maitre d' and we all had wine and cigars and afterdinner drinks. It was a very, very nice evening. And he asked me to call upon certain people. He said "Ask [James J. P.] Jim McShane to stand up and tell a story." So I called on Jim McShane; and then he said, "Ask Archie,"—now this was all sotto voce—so Archie stood up. And then he'd say, "Ask so-and-so." It ended that everybody in the room was on their feet sometime during the evening and had to say something. And, of course, there was a lot of good laughter and fellowship. It was an awful lot of fun. I said two o'clock in the morning. It wasn't two o'clock in the morning, it must have been closer to midnight. I don't know why I said two. But the point of the whole thing was that Bob enjoyed himself, stayed to the bitter end with everybody. There was an awful lot of kidding, he was in great humor. We've often thought that we'd like to do that again. I've been kind of hesitant to organize it on that basis because I think it would be rather a disturbing occasion for all of us, simply because it would be just another incident of missing him. As usual, you forget somebody at one of those things, and I think I forgot [Raymond F.] Ray Farrell, and Ray was really kind of a part of our group.

OESTERLE: I just saw him the other day, as a matter of fact, and. . .

REILLY: Actually I didn't forget Ray Farrell. It turned out that the invitation had never arrived, and I had not checked back to see if he'd accepted. I think Andy Oehmann brought to my attention the fact that he was not there because he said he wasn't invited. Well, it was a terrible mess—I mean, it wasn't a terrible mess, it's just that I felt terribly bad about it because he should have been there. So, actually, tomorrow is the first time that we've gotten together. I mean, we've been together at Hickory Hill on some occasions. In fact, I was just out to Hickory Hill on a rather trying evening. It was November 20th, and Ethel had a small, private mass that evening for Bob Kennedy; it was his birthday. A number of us attended, and then we went back to Hickory Hill for drinks and hors d'oeuvres. It was rather a tough evening. Everybody was attempting to be gay, and, you know, you can be under some circumstances, but when the occasion is something which relates to him, why, it makes it difficult. Ethel was great. I think she kind of buoys everybody up.

OESTERLE: Was this just this year, you mean?

REILLY: Yeah, last month. You know, it is a bad time because it's two days before the president's assassination too, and it's just that whole period of. . . Strangeley enough, people have kind of. . . [Interruption]
OESTERLE: Okay, we're back on.

REILLY: What I was saying before the phone rang was that I made a point of asking my children after the 22nd if anybody in their school had mentioned... [Interuption] And my children reported that nobody had even... They remembered it because I've done it every year to them and they kind of anticipate it, but they said nobody mentioned the fact that it was the date of the president's death or burial or whatever you want to talk about, that took place at that time. It seems kind of strange to me; it's only seven years. But anyhow, that time is bad for everybody because it's Bob's birthday, which was always... I always think it must be terribly hard on Walter Sheridan. It's also his birthday. He and Bob used to kind of either celebrate together or send telegrams to one another or kid. Actually they were the same age and born on the same day. I don't know how I got into this.

OESTERLE: Oh, you'd mentioned that this party had been at the Federal City Club after Robert Kennedy had left the Justice Department.

REILLY: Oh, yeah.

OESTERLE: Didn't Robert Kennedy play an important role in setting up the Federal City Club?

REILLY: Yes, at least to my knowledge. I think Bob and Burke Marshal and a few others originally got the idea because... It occurred about the time that Bob resigned from the Metropolitan Club when it became apparent to him that they had a restrictive policy and that there were no blacks in the club. It became apparent that there was no downtown luncheon club or place to steam or work out or anything of that nature that was not restricted in some manner, either to Jews or to Negroes. So I think he decided that there should be, and with others organized the Federal City Club. [Charles H.] Charlie Bartlett was also instrumental in organizing it, and I think [Stephen E.] Steve Smith helped out. I don't have too much information on that. I think Burke would have a lot. But that was the real reason.

Just to show you how far we've come, I went out to Burning Tree [Club] one night to a stag evening about that time, about the time of the organization of the Federal City Club. I was in a gin game, and I was playing with people I didn't even know. I was out there with Fred Vinson. It turned out that one of the fellows at the table was the president of the Southern [Railway System] railroad, and he started talking about the fact that he had always stayed at the [Sheraton-] Carlton Hotel but that he wasn't going to stay there any more. Then I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, Bobby Kennedy is organizing this club down there, and they're going to let blacks into it." I said, "Well, what's wrong with that?" He said, Well, I can't go down there. My wife will be sitting in that lobby and waiting for me from time to time, and I just can't have her sitting in
that lobby when who knows what will happen to her." I looked at him and said, "What the hell are you taking about?" "Well, Bob Kennedy's going to open the hotel to all these black people who are going to be in there, get drunk." I said, "Well, you've got to be a fool."

This is probably one of the reasons I don't represent the Southern railroad today. It's just unbelievable. I mean, you know, we don't even think of things like that happening now, and it wasn't that long ago. This man was very critical of Kennedy. Oh, you know, "Look what they're doing to the country. Blacks are going to take over." Jeez, it was unbelievable. I haven't thought of that one in a long time. But as far as the Federal City Club, it was organized specifically because there was no... And I think the thing has been successful. At least it's been successful in the fact that it is not segregated or restricted.

OESTERLE: Did you have occasion to observe Robert Kennedy's relationship with Hoover while Robert Kennedy was at the Justice Department, specifically on the organized crime effort?

REILLY: No, I really didn't have any actual involvement other than the normal day-to-day involvement with the U.S. attorneys and their activities in the organized crime field. Most of my information on that would be so vague and hearsay on organized crime, that I just can't recall anything right now. The relationship with Hoover, I don't have too much information on that other than a general realization that it was strained, not the same relationship that everyone else had in the Justice Department. He was kind of sitting off by himself. Did I mention the story about the time Bob Kennedy had the diplomatic corps children down to the Justice Department for a party, and there was a question of whether or not the FBI range would be open that day for an exhibition of shooting prowess by the FBI? It was just an incident of the lack of cooperation between them [Hoover and Kennedy], just kind of a small little thing which kind of points out, you know. There's no reason why it had to be done in the way that it was done. There was no reason why it couldn't have been opened without any problem.

Another incident involving Hoover that I'm not sure I mentioned was the first time that I held a meeting of the U.S. attorneys after they were appointed. The first meeting we had was of the U.S. attorneys in the ten or twelve major cities. We had them come into Washington for a three-day meeting in which they were lectured and taught, exposed to a number of things by the members of the Justice Department, the heads of the divisions and so on. It was an indoctrination program.

One of the things which I had arranged was an interview or meeting with J. Edgar Hoover, since he was the head of the FBI and they would be working with the FBI out in the field. Obviously these men, when they came to Washington, were interested in meeting Hoover. Most of them--to my
knowledge, none of them—had ever met him. So that was scheduled through Courtney. Now, keep in mind that we had U.S. attorneys from the twelve major cities in the country. We had two from New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, all of them. So according to the schedule we went up to the FBI office, the director's office, with these twelve men, and we're waiting in the anteroom, and somebody came out, an agent, obviously, and said, "Now, the director is ready to see you and would like to have you line up. When you go in to see him, introduce yourself. Say, 'I'm Robert Morgenthau, New York Southern.' He likes to know who you are in case he has anything he wants to discuss with you. Be sure your hands are dry because he dislikes a clammy hand on the handshake." So we lined up, and I happened to be at the end of the line.

The door opened, we walked in, walked up to the director who was standing beside his desk. I, could hear, from the back of the line, "Morgenthau, New York Southern," "Joseph P.] Joe Hoey, New York Eastern," "James P.] Jim O'Brien, Chicago," and so on. And we just kept right on walking. We walked into another room, which was behind the director's office, in which there was a table. I could see ahead that we were going in there, and I thought "Well, this is fine. We're going to sit down around the table now, and we're going to have a discussion with the director." Well, we walked into the room and through a door and out the door, and we were all in the hall. That was our visit with the Director of the FBI. These were rather important men, and they were rather important men to the director as well as to the attorney general because they were the law enforcement officials in those... That was their meeting with the director of the FBI. They shook hands with him and were out in the hall and almost falling on the floor, laughing so hard. It was one of the craziest experiences. And of those twelve people, I've never met any one of them at any time, any place, that they don't bring that up. I can remember Arthur Garrity, who was the U.S. attorney in Boston, turning to me. He says, "Who was that fellow in there?" We brought U.S. attorneys in small groups of fifteen or so all through the year, and that was the last time the director was scheduled. I just completely scratched it off, told Courtney that I thought that they had been insulted. Poor Courtney then had to go tell the director he wasn't going to meet any more U.S. attorneys. I don't think it particularly bothered him.

OESTERLE: How widely known was the surveillance on Martin Luther King while Robert Kennedy was attorney general?

REILLY: I don't think it was known by many more than two or three people.

OESTERLE: Were you privileged?

REILLY: No, I did not know, only after the fact. It became fairly well known after the fact, when the bureau started leaking the stories of King's sexual prowess.
OESTERLE: What were your impressions of this?

REILLY: I was upset. I thought it was rather a frightening thing to have happen. My original reaction was that I couldn't believe that he had been surveilled, or I just couldn't understand how it could have happened, with approval. And frankly, until recent years I kind of refused to allow myself to admit that it had been done with approval. I guess that's why I kind of agree with Navasky's position, more or less, that the approval, if it was approval, was done for reasons other than an interest on the part of the attorney general as to whether or not Martin Luther King was a Communist.

OESTERLE: Perhaps to prove just the opposite.

REILLY: Well, whether it was to prove just the opposite, or whether it was considered by him to be a harmless thing and it would get the FBI off his back, I'm not sure. But I'm inclined to believe, knowing how Robert Kennedy thought, that it would be more to be able to say, "See, you know, there's nothing to it."

OESTERLE: You don't have any particular knowledge about the origin of the request and the approval?

REILLY: No, none.

OESTERLE: Did you ever discuss this with the attorney general, or with Katzenbach or White?

REILLY: No, never on a basis where I could say I had any hard information. Many of these things were kind of discussed in a flippant fashion many times when we were together, and I must say that there were always people in the Justice Department who had a piece of information who would be able to, say, make a remark regarding something that might sound like they knew all about it, but they might not know anything about it; they just had the piece of information. This was kind of the thing with Martin Luther King. There was a little banter from time to time as to what was happening, but the fellows that really knew weren't saying much.

Regarding the wiretapping, I've always been very confused and kind of a victim of mixed emotions as to what went on when I was at the Justice Department because those of us who used to read FBI reports certainly had some impression that the usage of unidentified symbols to indicate information being received from someone or something. We certainly began to have a feeling that this was not always an informant, that perhaps it was a mechanical type informant, that it was either bugging or . . . . I personally always thought it was bugging. I never really felt it was wiretapping because I always felt that wiretapping was much too dangerous, simply because if discovered it would certainly lead to rather, oh,
derogatory or... No, I don't mean to say derogatory. It would lead to a situation which would overpower the value of the wiretap is what I guess I'm trying to say.

I did have a vague impression that wiretapping was being used where national security was involved, and that some of the embassies, etc., probably were tapped. But I began to realize that much of the information which I read in a number of FBI reports was from bugging. Now, I never was quite sure whether it was FBI bugs or whether it was information which they would obtain from bugs or surveillances or something of that nature by local police forces or local district attorneys' offices or investigative bodies. I think much of it was, and I think if I now went back and read some of that information I would be convinced that that's where it came from. And that's where much of it did come from, frankly. I'm not sure how much the FBI was doing, but I think they were certainly cooperating with, let's say, a man like [Frank S.] Hogan in New York City who used that type of method often, and that information was made available to the FBI.

The business a few years ago, the argument—not argument but the business—which hit the press about whether or not the attorney general authorized bugging, whether bugging by the FBI was done with the attorney general's knowledge, never really rang a true note with me. First of all, I've always felt that the attorney general did not authorize specifically any bugging of criminals, political figures. I think he may have been aware, much as I was, that there must be something going on, and probably felt, much like I do, that it was coming from local police organizations. There was one incident which has been used to show that the attorney general heard a wiretap or a bug and therefore must have been aware that the FBI was doing it, and since he did not say anything about it, condoned it. That was an incident which occurred—and I happened to be present—in Chicago in the FBI office, in '63, as I recall, or maybe it was late '62. It might have been late '62.

As I have explained earlier, we used to make trips to the U.S. attorneys' offices and, incidental to doing so, we would also visit the FBI office. When we'd go to Chicago we'd always visit the FBI office. This was on the occasion of one of those trips. We were sitting in the SAC's [Special agent in charge] office, and the members of the organized crime squad of the FBI were present, and were reviewing with the attorney general what was going on in Chicago as far as their activity in organized crime. It became apparent that what they were going to do to show some of the things that were going on—and this was in particular reference to a political figure, a minor political figure, a local political figure, and his possible connection with the outfit, the Mafia, whatever you want to call it—was that they were going to play a tape. So I was rather interested in just what it was all going to be about. I specifically recall, although I cannot say who said it, that this tape was
obtained from the Chicago police force. And I emphasize that because it's a very important fact as far as I'm concerned, because this is later identified as an FBI tape. At least to my information it was identified as an FBI tape, and it was indicated that Bob Kennedy had been told that this was an FBI tape. I specifically remember the group being told that this was a Chicago police force tape.

Now, a very funny thing happened at that point. I came from Chicago. I was identified with Mayor [Richard J.] Daley, although not correctly so. He is a very close friend of mine, by the way, but I was identified as his being my political rabbi, which was not so. At the time that the tape was about to begin, I was called out of the office and told that a friend of mine wanted to see me. Well, I knew that there was a friend of mine in that office. His name was Bob Dolan, and he was an agent who had gone to college with me. So I was called to the door and said, "Come on out, Bob Dolan wants to see you." Well, I just didn't want to say "Well, I can't. I'm in a meeting right now." I mean, there was no one standing there. So I went out of the office and visited with Bob Dolan, and it was kind of a goofy visit. It was one of those. "Well, how are you? How's everything with you, and how's your wife?" and "You know it's great, Bob, and it's good to see you progressing," and, "Well, you're really doing well, John. You're with the attorney general now?" and so on. "Wonderful." "Well, I've got to go back in the meeting." "Well, why don't you visit just a little bit? I don't know what they're doing in there. Why don't you visit?" Stood around and visited a little longer, went back into the meeting; the tape was over.

I really didn't think too much of it at that point, except I began to think a little more as I sat in the meeting, "Well now, what the devil did I go out there and see Dolan for? It wasn't that important. I've got friends in other offices and this has never happened before." They're usually so protocol minded that it amazed me that they would break up this big wheel's meeting--and at that point they had to consider me a big wheel because I was travelling with them--just to go and say hello to an old college chum that was an agent.

On the way back on the plane that night I sat next to Ed Guthman. I said, "Guthman, you'd better tell me something. Was there anything on that tape that I should not have heard?" And he said, "No, what are you talking about?" I said, "Well, was there any information on that tape regarding pols or anything of that nature in Chicago which may have embarrassed me, or information with which I should not be trusted?" And he said, "No, that's silliness. What are you talking about?" So I told him what made me feel this way, and of course he accused me of being oversensitive and so on. But I always felt rather strange about that whole thing.
OESTERLE: Okay.

REILLY: As I say, I always felt rather strange about the thing because I became aware in a later time that, obviously, the bureau knew all about every man that traveled with the attorney general or surrounded him. I was told that they did not trust me regarding Chicago, which may or may not have been based on something about which I was accused or not accused. But I was aware of the fact that they did not trust me in Chicago. Now, one of the major reasons for this was the fact that Jim O'Brien, who was the U.S. attorney there, came from Washington off Tom O'Brien [Thomas J. O'Brien], and was the congressman's nephew. They did not trust Tom O'Brien. They felt that he had some connection with hoodlums, so they never trusted Jim O'Brien, the United States attorney, and always felt that we had made a rather bum appointment out there.

In addition to this, the first assistant United States attorney was my personal friend and had been put in the spot by me. The reason I put him in the spot is because Jim O'Brien didn't know Chicago. He was a good lawyer and had been in the Criminal Division in the Justice Department and knew exactly what he was doing as far as law is concerned, but didn't know Chicago. So I felt that he had to have a first assistant who knew Chicago inside out, even the seamy side. So an old friend of mine named Frank MacDonald became the first assistant United States attorney. Frank was not a great lawyer, but his primary responsibility in that office was to make sure that Jim O'Brien didn't foul up as far as travelling or fooling with the wrong people or even discussing things with the wrong people, and that he understood the ins and outs of the political situation. I've always been very pleased that there was a marriage between O'Brien and MacDonald which worked out very, very well to my judgment.

It was because of this, I guess, that they felt that I was so involved with the U.S. attorney's office there, and because it's traditional in Chicago that everybody feels that everybody else is on the take or one thing or another, that they really didn't trust me. And I think, seriously, that that was one of the reasons I was taken out of the play in that particular time. I only mention this thing as kind of an aside. I only mention it to emphasize the fact that I was there and I do know that the attorney general was told that this was a Chicago tape. I subsequently had occasion to check out my memory with Jim McShane, [James J. F. McShane] who's now dead--it always happens that way, I guess-- and Jim McShane fully agreed with me. He was present at the meeting also, and his firm understanding of that meeting was that this was a tape of the Chicago police force.
OESTERLE: It was obvious that it was a bug on a telephone hookup?

REILLY: Yes. It was one side of a conversations; I mean, it was not both sides. When the problem came up regarding the wire-tapping and whether or not Bob Kennedy knew whether or not he'd authorized such-and-such, and the memos were being released, provided to the press and so on, I was in New York. I received the information that one of the things that was damning Bob Kennedy here was this Chicago meeting, and I think there was another meeting involved. There was also a New York meeting, and I frankly have never been too sure whether I was at that one or not, so I hesitate to talk about it. So I called Bob Kennedy's apartment, and I knew he was in New York at the time.

OESTERLE: This is at the Carlisle Hotel or . . .

REILLY: No, it was his father's [Joseph P. Kennedy] apartment on Central Park South. I knew he was in New York, and I wanted to tell him that I had information and if necessary I would make a statement or do anything he wanted me to. For some fluke, I got him at the apartment, and he said, "Well, John, we're holding a meeting on this right now. Will you talk to Steve Smith?" He said, "I'm in the meeting. Can you talk to Steve Smith about it?" So I told Steve Smith the entire story, and never heard another word about it, frankly, but I emphasized that I knew what he had been told. Subsequently, I think, claims were made that this was what he had been told, but I don't think the attorney general ever made that statement. I think it was a release by [Frank] Mankiewicz or somebody after that. I'm not sure of the . . .

OESTERLE: Sequence?

REILLY: . . . sequence on the thing. I think there was also a New York meeting mentioned, and I'm not too sure whether I was in on that. The one New York meeting with the FBI regarding organized crime which sticks in my mind is one at approximately the same time where we sat at a similar type meeting to Chicago where the organized crime division of the New York FBI was brought in and were discussing their activity with the attorney general.

The head of the squad, the organized crime squad, who was leading the discussion, got up and went to a prepared visual aid type placard or group of placards on an easel sitting behind the table. He lifted the top page and there was this kind of a diagram and he started to explain to us what the diagram meant. What it was, actually, was what was considered to be the various Mafia families in New York City, Brooklyn, New Jersey, et cetera, and how those families broke down,
from the head all the way down through the soldiers. He started to explain at this point what this meant and that they had this information that so-and-so was the head, so-and-so were the lieutenants, so-and-so were the soldiers, and so-and-so were the button men.

I was sitting with my head kind of bowed at the table, and I'm kind of thinking to myself, "This is a kind of a revelation to me, but I hate to appear overly interested because I'm probably the only guy at the table that hasn't heard this before." I mean, because I wasn't in the Criminal Division, I wasn't in Organized Crime and Racketeering Section. But this went on and on and on, and I began to realize that we were being told that there was organized crime, that there was a Cosa Nostra—and this was the first time I had ever heard the expression—that there was connection between the various families in the New York area, that there were connections between the families in New York and Chicago and other major cities. I was incredulous, frankly, but I was ashamed to show it because I really felt that I was probably the only guy at the table who didn't know it.

I began to raise my head to cautiously look around the table, and the first man I looked at was Bob Kennedy. I'll never forget the expression that I saw on his face at that time, because my reaction at that point was, "This is the first time Bob Kennedy has heard of this!" Now, I can't believe that is so, but that was my impression. Perhaps it was the first time he'd ever heard of Cosa Nostra, button men, soldiers, in those terms. But here was, at least to me, the first use by the FBI that I ever heard of, of these terms themselves, of these breakdowns of families, of the identification of individuals and their various areas of authority, whether it be prostitution, dope, juice. I never discussed this with Bob Kennedy, as to whether or not, this was the first time he had ever heard it; we just never had the occasion. But I'll never be able to get over the fact that I felt very strongly at that time that it was the first time that he had ever been aware of it.

One of the things which supported my judgment on that thing, in my estimation, was the fact that up until that time I can never recall him answering the question at a press conference, and we would have press conferences with all cities that we went to. There'd always be a question, "Mr. Attorney General, is there a connection between organized crime in this country? Is it all-pervasive? Is there a committee which handles the whole thing?" et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Bob Kennedy's answer always was, "There is organized crime in this country, but it's on a local basis; and there's no connection, to my knowledge, between Miami and Chicago, or Las Vegas and New York." Now, he made that statement because this was the information which was constantly being given to him by the bureau.
I have always felt that if he had any knowledge that he never would have said that. Because obviously later on, when the [Joseph M.] Valachi thing hit and all this became public knowledge, it made him look rather ridiculous because he'd been saying all along there was no connection. And I really don't think until informants began to tell the bureau—whether it was Valachi or others, I'm not sure—the bureau did not think there was any connection. I mean, their knowledge of organized crime was that slight.

OESTERLE: Was this prior to the Appalachian meeting? It must have been.

REILLY: No, no, much after the Appalachian meeting. The Appalachian meeting took place in the late fifties.

OESTERLE: So then the Appalachian meeting did not serve to...

REILLY: No, the FBI did not ever explain the Appalachian meeting as a meeting of the top hoodlums, I mean that was certain, but never because there was any connection between them.

OESTERLE: It wasn't described as a Cosa Nostra meeting?

REILLY: No.

OESTERLE: Not until after Valachi?

REILLY: That's right. Now, it's the old story. I got involved in something else and never really had time to go back to that and check that out with anybody, except I did check it out with Jim McShane at one time. Maybe it was that week or something, and I said, "Did you ever hear of this stuff before?" And he said, "No. First time I ever heard of it." Now again, there was not really any necessary reason that Jim McShane should have known about it, nor was there that I should have. But I never really sat down, say, with Jack Miller and said, "When did you first hear about this?" or, "When did the bureau first discover this?"

The only thing that ever upset me about it was that I always felt that Bob Kennedy had been misled by the FBI. I remember a statement that he made one night when we were sitting, having a drink, late, up in New York. It was at the Sherry-Netherland Cafe. It was Courtney Evans, and McShane and Guthman and myself, and we were discussing Justice Department like we always did, and what we should be doing and what should be going on. We were discussing Communism, and I can remember Bob Kennedy turning to Courtney and he said, "You know, Courtney, if the FBI, after the [C. Estes] Kefauver hearings in 1952, had put the same effort into organized crime that they have put into
the Communist party, I would not be talking about organized crime today."
Now this was 1961 or 1962. Bob Kennedy was aware at that point that
the Bureau was very bad on organized crime and they really didn't
know too much about it. His point was if they had worked as hard after
they should have become aware, in 1952 at the Kefauver hearings, that
there was such a thing as organized crime, if they had put the same
effort into it that they did infiltrating the Communist party he would not
have a problem with organized crime today because there would be no
organized crime. Organized crime and the structure of organized crime would
not have been able to exist.

I always thought that was a very telling remark. That's why I
get such a kick out of some of the stuff, the efforts being made on
organized crime today. I mean, I'm not objecting to them or I'm not
saying that they shouldn't be made, but it's like a new discovery today.
I mean, you stop to think about what Bob Kennedy did about it, he didn't
... Bob Kennedy in response to questions about, "What are you doing
about organized crime?" always used to outline the legislation that
he was attempting to get passed or had passed regarding interstate trans­
portation of information, interstate transportation of money, the type
of federal statute which was necessary for federal jurisdiction, as
opposed to local jurisdiction which we had nothing to do with. And he
always used to say in response to a question at a question-and-answer period
or at a press interview, "I'm not going to talk about what we're going
to do. I'll tell you when we've done it." I mean, that was his entire
philosophy as far as that goes. "I'm not going to tell you what I'm
going to do. I'm going to tell you what I've done." And that's what
he used to impress on us. "Don't tell me what you're going to do.
Tell me what you've done, and until you've done it, it really doesn't
mean anything."

I detect just exactly the opposite philosophy going around today.
Nobody's telling us what's been done. It's like [John N.] Mitchell
saying, "Don't listen to what I tell you, look at what's happening."
Well, Bob Kennedy never had to make a statement like that because he
never would say anything which had not been done. He was not going
to talk about tooling up for organized crime or anything of that nature.
He was going to talk about the people we've convicted, or he had
convicted, or Justice had convicted.

OESTERLE: The task forces that had been set up now in Justice in many
ways are a product of Robert Kennedy's efforts to bring the
men in the field together.

REILLY: There's nothing new about the task forces that have been set
up now. We had them on a completely informal basis. The only
thing that is present now that we did not have is the cooper­
ation of the FBI. The FBI reluctantly has joined the task forces and
exchanges information, as I understand it. Now please, I'm not knowledgable any more, but as I understand it, they do work with IRS [Internal Revenue Service], with the National Labor [Relations] Board, Labor [Department] investigators, with [Bureau of Narcotics], everybody. We had that going on, but one of the biggest problems was the fact that the FBI would not cooperate. I mean, there was no... We had informal task forces going on. In fact many of the times when we'd go around and visit in cities outside of Washington, we would call on the people who were responsible in the other agencies of government for a meeting, and the FBI would always attend. But one of the complaints I would get from these other guys in the Narcotics, Treasury [Department] or whatever you want to say, would be the fact that, "Listen, why should we sit in here and give all our information that we have, because we're certainly not getting it back from the bureau?" So I think there was a constant effort, even after Bob Kennedy left the Justice Department, by Nick, by Ramsey, by Mitchell I guess, to perfect this type of thing; and I think it's much more perfect now than it was, although I'm not sure. I'm sure petty jealousies between bureaucratic agencies still remain. But it's not new, and the announcement of it really doesn't mean a damn thing, you know. The only thing that means anything is if you've made some inroads into the organized crime picture, if you've got some convictions.