

Franklin A. Thomas Oral History Interview – RFK#2, 05/02/72
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Biographical Note

Director, Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. In this interview, Thomas discusses working on the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Project and Robert F. Kennedy's involvement in the project, among other issues.

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Franklin A. Thomas – RFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

FRANKLIN A. THOMAS

May 2, 1972
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: Okay, let me begin by asking you, we did a lot of talking about the restoration [Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation] board last time and the shake-up in that. How satisfied were you with the new board once it got going and had a chance to work?

THOMAS: This is back in 1967?

GREENE: Right.

THOMAS: Well, I was satisfied in the sense that the people seemed interested in burying the controversy that had arisen and in seeing if in truth we could develop a program that would make sense out here and have some impact. Some of the new people were better known to me than some who had been on the other board, particularly the younger new members: Jimmy Cato, [James Cato], Rudy Clarence [Rudolph Clarence Jr], Al Vann [Albert Vann]. These were all people that I had known maybe off and on for twenty years from the neighborhood, so that their faces were all familiar and their general attitudes were familiar. So for me it was a more comfortable group, frankly, than the initial group simply because I knew these people or at least I had known them. Many of them, we hadn't seen each other for ten years but at least we had some common base from which to start. So I felt comfortable.

GREENE: Did you notice any reluctance on some of their parts to take responsibility, that they tended while the thing was still in the preliminary stages to want other people to. . . .

THOMAS: No, it was more a sense that, you know, we picked Frank and gave him the authority and, he ought to be able to do it. And if he can't do it, then maybe he's the wrong person; but if he needs help, he ought to get

back to us and tell us what he needs. I think essentially, it was a placing of both confidence and responsibility in me as a full-time person there, and saying, in effect, "Go make it happen."

At that point we had no money. We had a little bit of dough from the Ford Foundation, but it was just a minor amount. We had the Astor [Astor Foundation] grant, but that was tied to physical development, not to any operational expenses. We had a line on the seven million dollars in the federal Special Impact Program [Title I, Economic Opportunity Act, as amended in 1966] but we had to draft a proposal for that. At that point there was just an awful lot of staff work to be done, to decide what pieces went in from the whole array of memoranda that had been prepared by all the experts, and the discussions that the newly-formed board had had about what it wanted to do, and some of the decisions that the old board had made, for example, the Sheffield building [Sheffield Center]--which had been made prior to the split in the corporation. All these things had to be put in some kind of form that would allow the funding source--in this case the Department of Labor--to respond to them. If we were not successful at that, maybe the whole discussion would have been academic.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: So it was generally a sense of, we're here if you need us and we expect you to go ahead and operate and make it happen.

GREENE: Were there any people that you felt were particularly valuable or any that were problems to you?

THOMAS: You mean on the board itself?

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: Well, I'm trying to think of the areas in which we were operating. In a technical sense there was not a tremendous amount of resource in the board because most of them were not familiar--as I wasn't really familiar either--with the kinds of efforts we were then about to undertake. What they could give was a general direction about getting things going that people could see and experience and relate to and be a part of. But in the sense of helping to either define programs or write proposals or put budgets together, I would say probably no significant amount of help along those lines came from the board itself. They were there more as a sounding board for ideas and proposals and giving direction, but not really as an originaive thing. I think that's a fair statement of what happened.

GREENE: Did these people get along fairly well with Robert

Kennedy and his crowd?

THOMAS: Well, I don't think many of them knew the senator. I think everyone wanted to know him. Everyone wanted to work with him and wanted to be known by him. He engendered that reaction in people, even from a distance. But I don't think many of them actually knew him before this. They were to meet him as the corporations developed. But there was an identification with him as a person and what he stood for, what he believed and the sense that he would stay with you and fight, and would lead you in areas where his leadership was important.

GREENE: [But the hostility that he seemed to have engendered in the original group did not follow through?

THOMAS: No, no and I never really felt that there was any hostility towards Bob that was more than surface deep. I mean, I think it was more a case of hostility towards Tom Jones [Thomas K. Jones], and Bob because he supported Tom. I mean it was more a case of, How could you support that person rather than we, the people? I know Elsie Richardson, Lucille Rose, Louise Bolling and some of the other women, Olive Ramsey--I think they felt the senator was wrong, he'd made the wrong judgment as to where he ought to place his support. I don't think there was any fundamental resentment of him. I think each would have been perfectly delighted had he said okay, and they would have worked with him diligently and "grown-upedly." I think the resentment was more local, in the sense that he had picked wrong, and that this was a bad person.

GREENE: What happened to Jones at this point?

THOMAS: Our understanding--I don't know how articulated it was--was that in the point at which I agreed to take the job, I would do the speaking for the corporation. He went underground in a sense, in that he held the line but did not engage in any verbal attacks back and forth. Most of the focus of attention was then on directed at me, by local people questioning me--you know, who I was and where I came from, what my attitudes were. And that was all right. So I think it's fair to say the judge faded into the background for the next couple of months, while we put our program together and got it started.

GREENE: You said last time that the reason that the judge still dislikes Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston] so much is because Robert Kennedy used Johnston to kind of sit on the judge. I wonder if you could explain that. You sort of mentioned it.

THOMAS: I would think I was reacting in part to a question that raised that as a fact, that the judge expressed dislike for Tom, in explaining why I thought the dislike appeared. Well, once we decided to go with the program--I was going to take the job, corporations were being formed, and the grant requests were being prepared--and the truth is, it was work time then. I mean, it was time to stop. . . . We could not stand another blow-up. Everything would have turned off. The judge is a fascinating mixture of great dedication and great principle and great eloquence and great pettiness--almost self-destructive in my opinion--and very jealous. What we were working on, really, was trying to keep him focused on the big picture. The person who was best able to, who was assigned that task, anyway--whether or not he was best able to do it or not is another matter--was Tom Johnston. He stayed in touch with the judge, he fought with him on the telephone, he argued with him. I'm sure he intercepted hundreds of complaints about me from the judge, because some of them ultimately got reduced to writing and I saw copies of them. So I know that Tom Johnston must have caught hell acting in that role.

GREENE: Did Robert Kennedy kind of use Tom Johnston to kind of do his dirty work and keep himself apart from this whole thing, so that the judge's hostility wouldn't . . .

THOMAS: I don't think so.

GREENE: . . . carry over?

THOMAS: No, I don't think that's what Bob did. I think Bob has a kind of fundamental empathy with the judge. I mean, I had the feeling that he understood that the judge was impossible to work with, and how difficult, and he was an obstacle and a yoke and a burden to us all, but I sensed anyway that Bob felt the judge was still a victim of a lot of circumstances that he had been subjected to in growing up, and that in a way it wasn't his fault. So Bob tended to be fairly charitable. But his sense of the priority of things indicated that, while he could be personally charitable to the judge and understand and have a kind of empathy, on an ongoing, day-to-day basis, you still had to control him or else he'd destroy everything. I think since Tom Johnston was here in New York running the office, and was in touch with the judge and with me and all the people involved in the process, it just made sense that Tom, who was on the scene and had the contact, would do the front-line work.]

Bob remained available, and in fact, used to come up once a week or every other week. I think I may have mentioned we'd have an early morning meeting at the apartment and just kind of lay out where things were, and ask him for any specific

help that was needed, including any help with the judge. But Tom took over the staff role in this.

He and I have never really talked about all of the things that went on, or even many of the things that went on, between himself and Tom Jones. But I have drawn the inference from the few things that have come up and the little I've seen that Tom Johnston took one hell of a beating during this period from a person who is virtually insatiable in his demands. You've got to understand that one of the phenomena that happens with the judge is that he thinks so little of himself that anything he achieves loses its value, so that he pursues things and then when he gets them, someplace in his head he questions whether those things are really worth anything anymore, because he's got them. I mean, it's an incredible thing to see, but it establishes for me why attempts to appease him never work, because you think you've given something that would be significant and meaningful and okay, you've sacrificed in some way. But he resents it on two levels. One is, he questions how meaningful it is, since he has it. And second, he resents the fact that you're in a position to give it to him. So that you're caught in one hell of a dilemma when you try and work with him. And this is a fact today. I mean, we're dealing with a problem this morning on the telephone relating to Tom Jones, and some crazy scheme and notion that he has, that we all have to somehow deal with. It's just a fact. It also means that now, five years into the effort, the members of the Restoration board have now got to deal squarely and firmly with Tom as a problem to be solved. That's pretty much where I've put it to six or seven members of the board who understand the problem.

GREENE: Understand and agree with it, I mean your assessment of it?

THOMAS: Yeah, yeah. They see the. . . . Even though they only catch it once a month or every either month at the board meeting.

GREENE: Is he viewed as a problem by the D & S [Bedford-Stuyvesant Distribution and Services Company] people also, or do they sort of stay apart from that angle?

THOMAS: Well, I think Benno Schmidt [Benno C. Schmidt] sees it as a problem. Any one of the D & S people who's active in the corporation and alert to what's going on, who's been here for a while, can see him as a problem. If you're not active, and if you just attend a meeting every other month, and the judge makes a speech, you know, he's great to listen to. He comes on as a very dedicated, committed person who's high on principles and not petty. It's only when you have to hang around after the speech and work with him that you see the rest of it.

I know, for example--it's a little off the point--that his resentment of me is so deep and pervasive as to be almost beyond comprehension, considering that I don't socialize with him and we don't really know each other. We're thirty years or twenty years difference in age and I've always been respectful, to the point of its being a burden to me, towards him. But it's clear to me that every single thing in my life, he views somehow with envy. It's a crazy, crazy thing, but he does, and I know it. Sometimes when he erupts and it's directed at the staff or at somebody else, it's really directed at me, but for some reason he only goes head-to-head with me once or twice a year. In between, it's very circuitous, but clear.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: And it's very deep, there's no question about it in my mind. It's a difficult role to be in, because what it means is that running a corporation the size of this--an operation the size of this, with as many people, as much money as we're handling, as many programs as we're responsible for; and having done it for five years with relative success--you have zero credit cards. The first time something goes wrong, you'll be thrown to the wolves. That's the fact of life that I live with in dealing with this guy.

GREENE: Well, now you say be thrown to the wolves. Is he really in a position to do that kind of thing?

THOMAS: Well, he would try. Let's put it that way. Whether he would succeed or not. . . .

GREENE: Does he have enough credit with the community now to do that?

THOMAS: No, not really, but there's a willingness on the part of the press and the people in the community to believe in the worst anyway, so that if you come out slinging mud the chances are that's going to be the item that registers, not the clear wash that comes afterwards. An example which is really not directly relevant from our standpoint, we give a Christmas party every year for the staff. Two years ago we gave one. The board was going to have a reception around Christmas-time for a lot of the community people and we usually have a staff Christmas party. We combined the two and held it in this building, kind of a preview arrangement. The building wasn't finished then, but we brought people in. It was kind of nice. The judge had appointed a committee of the board to work on the arrangements for this event. And like most committees, unless the staff person gets in and really stays after it, the chances are that the committee will meet once or twice and then not much will

happen, In this case one of the committee members said she would arrange to get the food catered by somebody. Well, anyway, a couple days before the event, her caterer collapsed and couldn't produce, and so the staff got back into it and arranged through a local caterer that we used for a number of other things to prepare the food, which was a full meal. Hors d'oeuvres and pie and. . . . I've forgotten what the menu was, but it was a nice party, Before going to the local guy they had, as they do, checked with Junior's [Junior's Restaurant] which is an established white caterer here. I've forgotten the prices. Anyway, it came to about \$4.50 a person or something like that. The guy brought waiters and they served, and the whole thing.

So anyway, after that was over I'd gotten some rumble that the judge was complaining about something, but I hadn't really focused on it because I really didn't know what he had to complain about at that point. and I had looked into the expense of the party, just routinely because, well, you just do it. In those days I used to sign all the check requests and write them. When they'd come through, I'd look at them and question things if there was a need to question them. So anyway, I was reasonably familiar with it.

But we had an executive committee meeting scheduled for a given day, and about two hours before the meeting the judge had his secretary deliver a memorandum to me. It was an eight-or nine-page memorandum which, in effect, accused one of the staff people who had arranged for the caterer of stealing because he, Tom, in his memo said that it was represented by us, by this staff person, that he had checked with Junior's prior to committing to this local caterer, and that the Junior's price was equal to or greater than that of the local place; but that he, Tom, on an independent check with Junior's had established that instead of \$4.50 it was \$2.25, or something like that. And he goes through a whole series of these kinds of accusations--how much liquor was consumed, how much this, how much that--just endless. Fundamentally, it accuses the staff person and through the staff person, me, of having stolen this --whatever it amounted to--five hundred dollars or something.

So I got it. I got the people up here and called Junior's on the phone, and asked them what their quote would be--gave them a menu and they gave it to me over the phone--which was more than the figure that this local guy charged. So I sent one staff person down to get a written statement from Junior's. This is all in a two-hour period, and we went through and calculated a lot of other stuff. But the main part of it was the Junior's bill, the Junior's quote, rather.

The judge arrived about half an hour before the meeting. He came in very calm. He was smiling and he sat across from my desk and he said, "You know, I had that little thing done because some of the board people had been concerned about the expenses associated with the party and I wanted to set the

record straight on it. Of course, you noticed that I asked you to have your staff man who worked on this available in case the board wanted to talk to him." And he was very calm, sitting right over there. So I took out the letter from Junior's that I had gotten back and handed it to him, which was a statement by Junior's with the menu attached and with the figure, which was even greater than the amount that was actually spent. He lifted about a foot out of the chair, right? Started to shake and stutter and water came into his eyes, and he looked at me and he said, "Don't you do this to me! Don't you do this to me!" And he started to scream. I said, "Do what to you?" So I said, "Why don't you call Junior's if you've got a problem?" So of course I got Junior's on the phone and we asked them. And what happened is the quote he had gotten was for hors d'oeuvres . . .

GREENE: Not for a dinner?

THOMAS: . . .not for a dinner.

GREENE: Was he at that point accusing you of having Junior's misstate their price to you to prove to him?

THOMAS: Well, I mean it's not clear. But I just offered the phone to him so he could call them, because if you say chicken livers and I say chicken livers for three hundred people, and his quote had chicken livers at ten dollars, I know darn well that's not chicken livers for three hundred people. So we talked to Junior's and they explained it. In fact he wouldn't talk to them. I talked to them and he asked them the questions on the phone. But I only use that as an illustration of a relatively petty matter that was attempted to be blown into an incredible issue that challenged the integrity of the whole organization.

So we went into the meeting and he tried to squirm out of it for just a little bit. But I said to the group that I didn't see any way that we could let that memo go unanswered because it was typed in this building, it was xeroxed in this building, and it's known to at least my office and John Doar's office because John got a copy of it. So we put together an answer that I still keep in the file over here--I never did anything with it--just so that the facts are known and all the vouchers are attached.

But it's that sense, and from that example maybe you can get a feel for the incredible tension that this person creates. Because you realize we're building. . . . We've got thirty million dollars worth of construction going on, or soon to be going on, with hundreds of people involved, thousands of purchases of supplies, materials, payrolls, ranges of things that happen. It's impossible for me to be absolutely certain that every single person connected with each one of those operations is straight, just as the bank can't be certain that

each teller is straight. To have someone that you've worked with all this time, who is technically your boss, waiting in the wings with gendarmes, you know, to go cart you off someplace is an incredible way to have to operate.

GREENE: How does the rest of the board treat him? Do they sort of go around him or say nice things?

THOMAS: They ignore him. See, what they've done up to now is they've all said--like Benno and the D & S board--"Frank can deal with it" right?

GREENE: They just dumped it back in you lap.

THOMAS: And fundamentally they know what the situation is, and that if there's a crisis that they're there to support. But in the meantime, you know, you've burst your internal organs with high blood pressure and tension, but deal with it. That's part of, I guess, what they pay you for.

GREENE: Did Tom Johnston have any problems with anybody else, or was this strictly between him and the judge?

THOMAS: No, I don't. . . . I mean, other than the people who split off, of course. That was a natural tension there. They blamed Tom for lining up the senator's support behind Tom Jones rather than behind them, but as far as Restoration board people go, no, no problem at all. He gets along well with Daphne Sheppard and others who came to the board a little later, all fast buddies of Tom Johnston. He's really been tremendous. . . .

GREENE: And he's stayed very much involved, hasn't he, even though he's left?

THOMAS: Yeah, yeah. He's with Whitney Company [J.H. Whitney & Company]. Both through that connection with Benno, and through his connection with me, and his connection with Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy], he's stayed pretty active. The logical thing for him would be to be on the board, in my opinion. That would be my recommendation, to see him elected to the board. He really has done yeoman-like service in this, and has taken a pretty good beating in the process.

GREENE: What about other people on the senator's staff? I don't know how much they got involved, but people like Carter Burden [S. Carter Burden] and Earl Graves . . .

THOMAS: Earl Graves.

GREENE: . . . and Peter Edelman?

THOMAS: Carter, not much with me. He worked on a couple of specific things that I recall. One was the Montford Industries, which is a little company that was brought back to Bedford-Stuyvesant. And I think Carter spent. . . . To my knowledge, that was his major effort during those months. It's a little company that has maybe ten, fifteen employees, and it's kind of symbolic that early on that company announced it had left Bedford-Stuyvesant originally and was coming back. I think that Carter did most of the staff work on that.

Earl did a lot of the local political stuff, or tried to anyway. The judge absolutely hated him, because you see, with me at least the judge felt in his heart that I had at least equal credentials to his. He really felt I had better credentials since I'd gone to fancy schools, so that he had a grudging tolerance of me, didn't like me, and still doesn't--but I mean, he says, "Well, I'll give him my support." I'd been a good basketball player and had gotten a lot of recognition. So that for purely social reasons he was better able to accept me than he could ever accept Earl, because Earl was to him a street person, who went to a second-rate college and never achieved anything, and just got a position in the senator's office. I take it he probably would have resented Earl calling him on the telephone, and I think it got to that point. To this day he resents Earl's success with that magazine, because in the early days, when he was first starting, he used to laugh and describe Earl as a person who couldn't write, couldn't put two good sentences together. That's how he described Earl. I'm sure Earl, I don't know how much of it he's willing to talk about these days, but I'm sure he knew that. I really am. He had to know it. He has to still know it.

GREENE: You had no problem with him?

THOMAS: With Earl?

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: Nothing overt. I mean we were never close friends. I've known him for a long time--from Boy Scouts [Boy Scouts of America] actually--and I really didn't think he was terribly talented, frankly, fundamentally talented. I think he's a great salesman. I really think he's a tremendous salesman, and to the extent that that's a talent, he's gifted. But when it comes to doing the kinds of things that, you know, I was involved in then and needed help in, he just wasn't capable in my opinion. I can remember having

discussions with Tom Johnston, and Tom was offering Earl's services to me. I said, "The biggest help you can be is, you keep him." Truthfully, that has nothing to do with liking or disliking Earl. There's a lot of front, there's a lot of facade, there's a lot of puffing. The whole thrust of what we were trying to do then was just the opposite of that.

The whole notion was to go low profile, to really work like hell to make programs work that were good, solid, and substantial, so that when somebody lifted the lid, what they saw just kept getting better and better and better. The closer you look at us, even today, the better we look because our programs are solid. You can see the houses. You can see the people. You can see the businesses. And so, it was really the reverse of Earl's style that I was interested in. I don't know, we get along and we've never been close friends, but I've noticed that in his magazine, Black Enterprise, it's a known fact that in the two and one-half years that it's been out he's never done anything on Bedford-Stuyvesant or on Restoration. I conclude from that he doesn't look back very warmly on all of this.

Then, there was an article done by a little publication that came out once, then folded. It was really critical of the program, done by a radical guy whom I've since met--I hadn't met him at the time he did the article, but I've since met him. It's interesting now, three years later, he's still radical in his political sense, but he's come here and sat right on the couch and apologized in the only way he can. He said he was just wrong in what he wrote. But I had the feeling in talking with him that some of the guidance he got came through Earl. And in fact there's a little quote in there--it's not attributed to anyone by name--but it's about someone who had held out great hopes for the program that it would begin to make fundamental changes in the area, and was going to commit and buy a house and stay there. That person is now. . . . He sees the way the program's evolving, he's lost confidence and he's moving out of the area. And then there's a quote from that person. When I read it I thought it was Earl, and I still do. I think it's him. And it's a dishonest quote, really. But, all of that kind of suggests that. . . .

GREENE: Could you get much of a feeling for how he was regarded by the rest of the Kennedy staff and by Robert Kennedy himself?

THOMAS: I think that Earl was regarded by the staff in general--by the senator, too--as a good military-type logistics person who could pull a lot of pieces together to organize a motorcade or, you know, a rally or whatever. He was good at that, as long as he didn't have to stay in the community too long or stay among people because he would irritate them eventually. But for one-shot situations

he could put the pieces together and make them happen. And I think he was respected for that. As a strategist, as a resource person, as for insights in most things, I think they largely ignored him. I think he and Carter kind of formed an alliance in the office, really against Tom, in a way, but for different reasons. They each felt that Tom kept them away from the senator. I shouldn't say that so positively. I sense that they felt that, and that Tom would take their ideas and write them up and make them his. I mean, you could get all of that feeling going on, but none of them worked half the hours Tom did, or in my opinion, had half Tom's intellectual capacity.

As far as Peter Edelman was concerned, I really didn't see much of Peter. He was on the Washington scene, and it was largely in our dealings with the Labor Department and coordinating Javits' [Jacob K. Javits] office that he got into it.

I never saw much of Adam [Adam Walinsky] in those early days. I mean, I met him a couple of times. But once we got the grant and got started. . . . And then right after Bob's death, I used to see a lot of Adam. He would always come up with new ideas and new ventures, with elaborate complicated deals that he would come with. And I like him. I just had difficulty believing that Adam was ready to commit himself to any one thing and stay with it. If he wasn't going to commit himself to whatever his proposal was, there was no way in hell I could, because we had fifteen other things going on. So we would end up spending an interesting couple of days, and he would expand my mind a lot because he's as smart as hell and capable. And then he'd go off and a few months would pass, and then there would be something else. But I like Adam. I think there's a good human equation there and I haven't talked to him in a while. I think he feels a little neglected by me in that I haven't reached for him lately, but. . . .

GREENE: Well, I wanted to shift the emphasis a little bit to the D & S side and what was happening there. By the time you accepted your job, Ed Logue [Edward J. Logue] and the Pratt Institute thing was kind of in full swing.

THOMAS: Um hum.

GREENE: Logue was, I think, at the time still considered a possibility to head the D & S.

THOMAS: Yes.

GREENE: What was your understanding of his status when you came on, and to what extent were you consulted about what your future would be?

THOMAS: Well, I had known of Ed for a long time, from the days when I worked in the federal housing program. He was in New Haven [Connecticut] then, and he had a reputation of being tough and capable, and kind of single-minded in purpose and difficult to work with. I think he's a maverick in all ways. I was impressed when I first heard that he was involved here by the fact of his involvement, because it added another note of serious commitment to all of this. I met him a couple of times, once before the split of the boards. . . . Well, a few times before the split of the boards. But on one Saturday in particular we all went up to New Haven to look at the New Haven redevelopment, something comparable to what was then contemplated for Superblock. Ed was really the host on that trip, talked to us all. Then after the trip was over I stayed on in New Haven, and we had dinner together and talked for a long time. We were talking then about the structure of the corporations and my argument, which I had told you about, that I think the dual staff really didn't make sense, and all the reasons for it. Ed was saying, in effect, that it had advantages in that there was a whole range of activity to be carried on, involving going to the banks and getting the insurance companies and all those financial houses lined up and ready to go in support of programs that we were developing and working on. And that that job was one that the person who was heading the D & S staff, because he could stay after the D & S directors to get contacts opened up, [he could] use them when they needed to be used and begin to line up all these resources and be able to offer alternate ways of financing things, alternate structures so that we could all look at it and react to them. And it was a sizeable task involving a lot of legwork and involving a lot of things outside of the project area. In his mind that warranted a full-time person with help. We didn't agree on it. We didn't disagree on the function. We just really disagreed fundamentally on why you needed two staffs to accomplish that. If you do, you can have a senior vice-president who related to the banks and insurance companies and the rest of it within the one structure, which was the difference that I objected to. You know, back and forth. He was saying, in effect, that in order to get the kind of person you wanted you have to offer him something pretty big. I don't know. We just went round and round on that. He expressed himself. He did not indicate at the point whether or not he was personally interested in the job.

GREENE: Had it already been offered to him or was he considered simply a consultant?

THOMAS: He was then a consultant. Now whether or not there'd been an offer or a kind of tentative offer made, I really don't know. There was just so much happening at that time. I think Eli Jacobs may have been

sitting in the background some place about this time. It was always understood that Eli was just temporary and was to hold the fort until they found someone. I know Ed had a lot of discussions with Tom Johnston and with the senator. And at some point he gets awfully pissed off at everybody--the whole D & S structure. I don't quite know when that is, whether it's after he turns the job down and then we cut off his consulting team, which would be around the middle of June.

GREENE: What was the order of that? Did you cut him off and then he. . .

THOMAS: No, I think he. . .

GREENE: . . . turned the job down?

THOMAS: . . . had declined the job prior to that because they're not cut off until after I take the job. So I'm pretty sure he would have essentially declined before then. He may still have had a reconsideration going. I don't know. But I think the general thought was that he was not going to take the job.

GREENE: Do you know why?

THOMAS: I never did find out.

GREENE: I had heard one thing which I'm curious to see your reaction to, that one of the main reasons he got involved is because he was already interested in running for . . .

THOMAS: Mayor?

GREENE: . . . mayor, and thought it was way of gaining the Kennedy family's support, and that when it became apparent they were going to go with someone else he got angry and dropped out. Does that sound credible at all?

THOMAS: Yeah. I mean in light of the fact that he went back and ran in Boston, it does sound credible to me. And that he came back to UDC [Urban Development Corporation] which is kind of a way of saying that if you won't let me be mayor, I'll have more power than the mayor has, this is a kind of Ed Logue act I would think. But I didn't know that at that point. I guess there were rumbles always that. . . . Let me see. Ed had done some work for the mayor on. . . .

GREENE: You mean Mayor Lindsay [John V. Lindsay]?

THOMAS: Mayor Lindsay. He'd done a white paper on the

creation of a super agency--Housing and Development Administration--and a development plan for Staten Island and some place else. Yeah, that's right. He had worked on that, and then had been offered the job by the mayor as the head of HDA--this was the rumble--and turned it down for a number of reasons relating largely to how much power the position actually had. He had brought into New York Bob Hazen [Robert G. Hazen] who had been his deputy in Boston, or some place, and Bob Hazen was the number one development guy in HDA at that point. I really don't know whether Ed was thinking about '69 and possibly making a run. It would not surprise me that he would have those thoughts, but I really don't know.

GREENE: Did you ever talk to Robert Kennedy or Tom Johnston--I imagine you must have--about Ed Logue, whether or not you thought you could work. . . . Oh, he had already declined . . .

THOMAS: Yeah, he had declined.

GREENE: . . . by that time. Right.

THOMAS: He was then the consultant, by the time I came on so. . . . I mean, there may have been conversations but I don't really remember focusing on it.

GREENE: Okay, then how did you first get wind of the fact that Jacobs was coming on as temporary executive?

THOMAS: It seems to me he was there when I took the job.

GREENE: Oh, really?

THOMAS: Yeah. It seems to me that he came. . . . Sure, he was there before April. They had him hidden some place, but you know. I don't know where the office was. He was working out of Kennedy's office, I think. They just had a little room somewhere.

GREENE: Well, he had his office uptown.

THOMAS: That's later, on Madison [Avenue.]

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: That comes later.

GREENE: But that's later?

THOMAS: Yeah, I think that comes after I'm here, they actually rent space. I know where he was working.

He had space in the IBM [International Business Machines Corporation] building, I think, arranged through Burke Marshall or someone. I don't know. They had some little cubicle over there with a couple of Arthur Anderson [Arthur Anderson and Company] people and Ellie Renaullo [Eleanor Renaullo.] Have you talked to her at all?

GREENE: No.

THOMAS: Oh, that's a name you ought to. . . .

GREENE: Really? I don't think I've heard of her.

THOMAS: She was Eli Jacob's secretary, technically, but she was really more than that. [Interruption]

GREENE: Ellie Renaullo did you say? Or Renaullo?

THOMAS: I did say one of those two. [Interruption] Marge will remember outside . . . in our old files. Yeah, she was there.

GREENE: She was his secretary?

THOMAS: Yeah.

GREENE: Well, they finally brought him out into the open and put him up on Madison Avenue, how did you react to that whole set up?

THOMAS: Well, I mean I still had the basic problem of the dual structure which I had kind of put down on the second level of priority. We were deeply into writing a proposal at that point in time. He had a couple of hot-shot kids working for him--either they were working then or they were to be hired--who really became abrasive after a while. They misunderstood their role. They thought they were the auditors for the program, and were running around behind people who were working. It was really bad, I must say, making independent check [Interruption]

GREENE: . . . actually co-signing all the checks, but they were certainly passing judgement on all of them?

THOMAS: Yeah, for a while, until the Labor Department grant came. Maybe it takes a month or so--I can't remember--but there is a period of time when we don't have a fiscal department here, I hadn't found any body yet. Arthur Anderson, Ellie and Eli are signing checks. I don't think I was signing any at that point. Maybe I was, but if so maybe I was the only one. I couldn't have been because I don't think there were any board resolutions during that

first several weeks. It takes maybe a month before we get organized out here and start to move. But during that time there's money being parceled out. I guess the Arthur Anderson people had given us someone on loan, was what it was. He was countersigning all the checks. But essentially they were controlled out of Madison Avenue, because we had no fiscal department here. Back at the hotel there were about seven of us running around doing what had to be done, mainly writing the program. It's at the time that the draft to the Labor Department is being completed that the whole issue of fiscal arrangement really gets dealt with, because at one point the question was whether or not all the grant requests wouldn't be grants to D & S and sub-grants to Restoration. I may have mentioned that to you about the Ford Foundation.

GREENE: Yes, in a specific instance.

THOMAS: It was discussed with the Labor Department, but rejected right away. Then it was whether it should be Restoration alone. Then we decided on the joint arrangement. But that's in late May-early June because the grant date is June 23 or 24, and would have been four weeks prior to that, so it's in May. It's right after we get started, and we were all working down at Cravath [Cravath Swaine & Moore] around the clock, literally twenty-four hours a day. We had secretaries typing and going. It was a wild scene.

But all of this is kind of fuzzy to me, as to who was on board precisely in April and May. But by June, in any event, we are then setting up our own fiscal shop. I think by that summer we have a fiscal officer, Owen E. Hague comes on board. Then the transition begins where the separate accounts were set up, separate controls were set up, all in coordination with Arthur Anderson, so that the systems were similar. But we then are signing all the checks ourselves.

GREENE: Is that something that evolved naturally or did you have to put up a . . .

THOMAS: No, you had to push it. Nothing evolved naturally in the transfer of power. Absolutely nothing. It was the state of everybody's head, I guess, back in 1967. It was very grudging, very difficult.

GREENE: Was Jacobs a particular problem or he just was part of the big picture?

THOMAS: Yeah, he was more a part of things than a particular problem. I think the extent to which Jacobs was a problem was largely just his personality and whole lifestyle--nervous, very cautious. I guess that's fair: nervous and very cautious. Very cautious when it came to

expenditures by Restoration. I'm not so sure he was equally cautious with regard to expenditures for D & S. In fact, take a look at his expenditures during that time and the way they outfitted that office up there. They were not frugal in there.

But we were caught in an interesting kind of dilemma. One way you could have dealt with this dual system was to give as good as you got. Right? Since you have joint authority and responsibility you don't simply have to be audited. You can also audit, because the other side can't move any money either without our concurrence. But that seems to me to just compound the difficulty, and since we were faced with getting the dammed programs off the ground out here and doing all the local work that had to be done, we really didn't opt to go back and fight. "Well if you're going to look at this voucher, then I want to see all the vouchers from last week that you had." Right? I mean, what the hell is that. . . .

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: So we talked about it a number of times. We talked about it on into the next year on other matters, whether or not one way of demonstrating the frustrating impact of the dual arrangement, dual financial arrangement anyway, wouldn't be to simply turn around and do to the other side what was being done to us. But somehow you just took the high road and let it go.

GREENE: Do you remember talking to Robert Kennedy or Tom Johnston about Jacobs and what his position was going to be in. . . .

THOMAS: No, it was interesting. I'm sure I talked to Tom about it, but somehow it was clear to me that Eli was temporary and we developed a fairly easy working relationship, as easy as you could get with Eli. He was a difficult personality. I guess he trusted me, was what it amounted to, and that allowed him to ease up somehow with his dealings, so we were able to move things along. It was unsatisfactory, but it was a kind of understanding that certain things had to move and they had to move swiftly, and you know, the arrangement is uncomfortable the way it is, but you can't use the arrangement as a means of slowing things down, because the impact is felt out here. We used to have a jaw-down covering check arrangement which persisted for a long time, actually, where Restoration used to carry a zero balance--theoretically, it wasn't actually zero, theoretically we carried a zero balance and covering checks were acquired from the joint fund of the corporations--in order to allow Restoration to make any disbursements. So that if you had twenty checks totaling ten thousand dollars to go out, those twenty checks theoretically would be grouped together, and

then one covering check for twenty thousand dollars would be made payable to the disbursement fund of Restoration. That check would have to be signed by someone on the D & S side and then, only when that check was signed and deposited, could the twenty checks go out. Well, it took almost a year with the accountants and everybody else to reach the point where the fund balance in the disbursement account was kept on a revolving basis so that you had twenty thousand dollars in that account. You didn't have to wait each time. You could still send and get a covering check from the joint accounts, but you could issue your own check. Well, we've completely turned that around now.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: The system is that we have our own disbursement funds and accounts--we still have the joint accounts with D & S--but our disbursement account is unhealthy and inadequate for our needs--we've got a lot of CD's that come due. . . . It took probably two and a half years to put that right. Now any one of those issues, really when you look back on it, was enough to blow the whole thing up. I mean, it was stupid to have a system operating that purported to be a partnership based on trust and confidence, but operated as though you had a father-son relationship, or a mother-daughter--whatever your choice is--master-slave.
[Laughter]

GREENE: Yes. Some people have said it was a kind of a plantation type of arrangement.

THOMAS: Yeah, well, it was dismal.

GREENE: Well, what effect did John Doar's coming on have, and were you consulted on who was being considered?

THOMAS: I met John. . . . Tom brought him--Tom Johnston, I think actually. I don't know who spoke to John initially, I would assume it may have been Burke Marshall or someone, but Tom [Johnston] was right in the middle of it. And I met John Doar through Tom Johnston. He came up on a Saturday, I think, or came up during the week, and we spent a few hours talking. And John came up again on his own and looked around, and I think, either at the first meeting I had with John, or certainly the second when he was seriously considering the job, I outlined for him some of the problems that I had with Eli Jacobs and the way that system had been set up and was functioning, and the need to get it changed. Parts of it had changed by then, but it hadn't changed completely. And I know I spoke to him about that before he took the job.

GREENE: Do you remember his reaction?

THOMAS: No, not in words. I think the sense of it was a misunderstanding that was conveyed whether. . . . I don't remember what he said, but I do recall him thinking that it was wrong to have the offices in Manhattan to begin with, because that just increased the sense of alienation. If he took it, how did I feel about them moving to Brooklyn? I said I had no problem with it, given that they would exist. I mean, I had a problem with them existing, but as long as they existed, it didn't matter that they were in Brooklyn.

Why don't we talk about that--the possibility of beginning to try and get the staffs to work a little more closely together, at least be housed together. The need to accept Restoration as a full-fledged organization. All of this, just parenthetically, Tom Jones was aware of--the frustrations that I described that I felt and expressed and expressed in Tom's presence. At no point do I recall Tom Jones really taking up this issue and carrying it further. The only time he reacts is when Eli insults him one day in my office.

I had some people there from some place, and the judge was off making a. . . . We were having a conversation--it was late and everybody was tired--and in Eli's mind the judge started to make a speech, and he just cut him off in some way, or expressed it, and the judge got furious and stormed down. . . . You see, from that point on, "Oh, I understand. You know, it's terrible, these patricians," which is what he calls them to this day, and he goes on and on about it. But that's only because there is a personal impact at that point.

But in any event, John Doar seemed to be sensitive to the issues we were talking about. In that initial meeting, and I think one subsequent meeting, it was clear that he would take some of the steps that we thought were necessary.

GREENE: Did he have any sympathy for your whole position on the problems of the two boards and the two staffs?

THOMAS: I don't think he expressed it.

GREENE: Was it clear at that point how strongly you felt about it . . .

THOMAS: Oh, yeah.

GREENE: . . . so that he might anticipate some of the problems which have since developed?

THOMAS: I can't imagine that he could have been misled in any way, or that. . . . But I mean the only thing that was possibly misleading--well, not misleading,

but it may also have come across that I felt strongly about it--that I wasn't kicking over the apple cart, I mean, which, in a way, has been true for five years. We've changed it in a lot of ways, but we really haven't said that that principle was worth destroying the whole effort for it, and I've thought about that. I never concluded that principle was important enough, and could be divorced enough from me as an individual, to make it worthy of that kind of aspiration. I think if there had been a way to divorce it from me as an individual, I'm sure I still wouldn't have done anything public about it, but I would have done more, I think, with the boards than I've done. I felt inhibited because the direct beneficiary appears to be me with any change in the structure. Maybe the only way to really get that done, is about this time when we're thinking about who's going to run this thing for the next five years. . . . Can we saddle that person with this kind of structure that doesn't make sense? Rather than, "I want an easier task, and demand a complete break," now five years into it with my tenure.

GREENE: How did you find Doar to work with once he did come on?

THOMAS: John's stubborn and committed, dedicated, hard working, works like hell. It's been better in the last year or so than it was in the beginning. In the immediate beginning it was all right because it was improving on the Eli Jacobs situation so that those were all positive steps. I think the crunch really came when it was apparent that the Restoration staff people were equal to or better quality than the D & S staff. Because that's a terrible burden to have to take, since ostensibly your purpose in being there is to bring guidance to the natives. The natives didn't need it.

GREENE: At what point would you say that became apparent, and was it apparent to the D & S as well as to you?

THOMAS: No, I don't really think. . . . Let's see. John came in '68, so let's say in '69 it's apparent to me and to many of the staff people working on both sides that Al Puryear [Alvin N. Puryear] was smarter and better trained than his counterpart on D & S; that Owen Hague was smarter and better trained than his counterpart, that Lew Douglass [Lewis L. Douglass] was better trained and smarter than this guy. I think that became apparent about '69. And D & S was still looking for a role, and they had a lot of people and they really didn't. . . . Other than to be in competition with us, with our staff and economic development, really you couldn't figure out a role for them to engage in. When we got around to figuring budgets for the '69 period. . . .

No. Something happens before that; I can't remember the

sequence accurately. But when John is deciding to take the job, [or] has just decided--I can't remember what it was--but anyway we have a meeting at Benno's office, and I ask the group, "How do I explain John Doar to Bedford-Stuyvesant? What's his role?" And that I think is one of the deepest penetrations we make on the whole subject of why do the members of the D & S board assume that their talents are transmitted to John Doar and his staff and not to me and mine? And why do they feel that their interests are better protected by John and his staff than by me and mine? Well, what does it mean? What do you base it on? You don't base it on experience, you don't base it on education, you don't base it on commitment and hard work. But what is it based on? Pure and simply race? Is that what it is? We talked about it, you know, and everybody tried to formulate rational explanations and things that you could at least work around and toy with as to why this was. John at that point--he finally got into it pretty heavy--took a very legalistic point of view and said essentially that since we were joint grantees, we had joint and separate responsibility and therefore the D & S board people had a separate responsibility equal to ours. While that's a legal argument that has some appeal to the D & S board members, in point of fact they could have discharged that responsibility through us. They didn't have to discharge it through a separate staff.

So we went round and round, and I said what I felt and what I believed, that I thought it was wrong. Tom Jones was there then. It was essentially a discussion between John and me, kind of at one another a little bit--not so much, because he was in a way a victim of the situation, too. He didn't create it. Benno was trying to explain it, Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric], Andre [Andre Meyer], and I think Paley [William S. Paley] was there then that day. And if not then, certainly subsequently when we have another one of these discussions, they're all there.

GREENE: Could you pinpoint that again, the date approximately?

THOMAS: When I asked that question it seems to me it must be the spring of '68, because John comes in the winter of '68, January.

GREENE: Right. In other words Kennedy was still alive, and is still involved. . . .

THOMAS: He's still alive.

GREENE: Were any of his people there? I guess it was during the campaign.

THOMAS: Yeah, I don't. . . . Tom [Johnston] may have been

there, but I don't think anyone else.

GREENE: They didn't take any memorable role in it?

THOMAS: No, no, I think at the time Tom was still arguing with me. This is an argument that's gone on for five years. I think he's come full circle now, but at that point he was still deep into the need for the two staffs, the practical need.

GREENE: Right.

THOMAS: And I think he was also anticipating that John would make a difference because he understood the sensitivity of the issue, he understood that the purpose was to build a local organization. And so, in a way, we could have been arguing about the pace at which things happened. I mean, on one level you could say that the entire discussion was one of fundamental agreement on where things were going, but a difference of opinion on timing.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: Frank is saying, "It's now in '68," and we're saying, "Well, it's probably got to be '69 or '70." I mean, whatever. So I think with that escape route available and I think that most people tended to look at it that way, "Well, that staff isn't as ready as Frank thinks," you know, whatever. So that would be in '68. Then we have it again in '69. It's really bad then, I remember.

GREENE: That's the one meeting I know about, where there was a full-scale blow-up. In December of '69.

THOMAS: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's about right. It'd be interesting--I've never talked to Benno or Ros about the specific meeting--to see how others saw it who were there. It was me against the group, really is what it turned out to be. Though I think way down inside Benno agreed with me. I don't think he felt fully free to express it. In fact, I'm sure he didn't. Andre disagreed and Ros kind of made the legal argument. And Paley, I think, was there for at least part of it, and he really didn't understand it at that point. I don't think he focused on it. But some months later, he sees me and says, "How the hell did we ever get a dual structure? That doesn't make any sense at all." That's what he says. [Laughter]

GREENE: It's my understanding that technically you have the authority to disband the D & S, that they serve more or less at Restoration's pleasure. Is that accurate?

THOMAS: Legally it's not.

GREENE: Legally it's not? Oh, I thought legally it was.

THOMAS: No, legally, right now--at least vis-a-vis the government--we are joint grantees committed to carrying out the programs for which the grants were made. Now the method for carrying out them out is that Restoration will operate the programs, but in fact each of us, each organization, takes the responsibility that the programs will be carried out according to the grant. So that it's important that at the next application, which is, coming up pretty quickly, we're going to make a change that would indicate in the application either that Restoration alone was going to be the grantee or that, while we are joint grantees, it is anticipated that during the life of this grant Restoration will assume full and complete responsibility for its administration. You've got to say that to the government in order to take out the legal hooks that have been used all this time to justify the existence of the staff. As I say, I think this issue is big enough and important enough that I wouldn't leave here without settling it, or at least making a good fight to get it settled.

GREENE: I've heard that on two occasions Doar offered to resign, saying that he wouldn't and couldn't stay if the Restoration board and you didn't want him.

THOMAS: He never offered that to me.

GREENE: No?

THOMAS: Or in my presence. I have heard quite recently that he was contemplating leaving, but it's not reflected in any conversation I've had with him.

GREENE: Do you think that his whole attitude towards this thing evolved--I mean, this is a natural thing--from Robert Kennedy's presentation of the whole thing to him? That the misunderstanding begins there? That Kennedy actually viewed the whole thing quite differently from the way you came to view it, and that's where the misunderstanding began?

THOMAS: It's conceivable. I'd hate to think that, but it's conceivable. My problem with being able to answer it completely and accurately is that I have to always try and separate out people's treatment of me as an individual from what may be their perception of my group. Certainly in my dealings with the senator, and the discussions with him and all the rest of it, he always made it clear that he saw this as building a local institution that would control

and operate the programs and improve life in this area. And everything else was just an assist to get that to happen. I think I mentioned to you the discussions dealing with Bill Birenbaum [William M. Birenbaum] about the leadership of the Educational Affiliate.

GREENE: Right.

THOMAS: His instincts were right on all those things, and his commitment made sense. Now he, there again, was talking about me in relation to Birenbaum, so one of the things that I get a little cautious about in answering the question is whether or not Bob saw it as a total capacity-- whether he did or not, I don't know the answer. I'd like to think he did, that he saw it all as. . . . In short order this would be a functioning place where you could comfortably put you resources and see them turn into good and meaningful end products and without the need for any outside control. But that doesn't mean without the need for accountability to the outside. That's never been an issue, of our accounting to funding sources and others. It's really been the day-to day decisions that you have to make, on how you operate and what you do. But it's conceivable. I'd just say I don't know. Tom and others would know better than I. John would know. I don't know how much was said about that. I can remember Burke Marshall saying to me once. . . .

There was a period when John was not active here. He was president of the Board of Education [New York City Education Board]--I guess it was almost eight or nine [months], maybe almost a year; ten months anyway--and he would come in. . . . Well, there were stretches when he'd be in maybe a day a week, or two days or something. He was always around working on other problems of the Board of Ed., but essentially he was the president of the Board of Education, and that was his job. There were some people here who believed that the tremendous steps forward that we took in rearranging the structure and moving some of the power to Restoration took place largely because John didn't have five days a week to focus on it. Because if you had five days we would have had to fight for each one of those things. So I don't know if they're right or wrong, but that's. . . .

GREENE: Do you ever get the feeling that he's actually trying to expand the D & S functions, you know perhaps for personal reasons, beyond what Robert Kennedy would have conceived them to be?

THOMAS: I don't think that John would consciously set out to do anything that was inconsistent with what Bob wanted. I really think he's got a deep loyalty and respect, and admiration for Bob. I also recognize that he's human and that he ~~has~~ the same drives we all have, to spend

part of the time we have on earth doing something important and meaningful anyway. And so it's a difficult role for him to accept, merely limited to us here, and to an organization that essentially says, "We won't blow the whistle on the fact that you're not needed, but you ought to know that's how we feel. And you ought to know from the evidence that our feelings are anchored, not on emotion, but on fact. That's a hell of a role to be in. And I've said to him I wouldn't want his job--I just wouldn't. So it's conceivable to me that what would happen, putting myself in that spot for a moment, is that you would start to back off from the day-to-day operations as much as possible, and try and appear to have built within Bedford-Stuyvesant enough capacity so that you as a resource are now available on a national basis, or for other regions who may need the same kind of support; and to kind of extrapolate from the experience the elements that go into a national strategy or a national program, to write articles, to collect data, to do whatever. And to in effect say, without saying, "Our work is largely done in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and it's a measure of our success that that organization is strong, and that I've really been the power behind the throne all along; that Frank has taken all the credit and that's right because he's local and that's all we want, and that's important and consistent with everything we set out to do; and I don't want anything I say to suggest that Frank isn't fully able and competent because he is a tremendous person. But after we finish with all this, I want you to carry away the unspoken notion that but for me. . . ." So, it's fun to. . . .

GREENE: The game plan you have marked out for him?

THOMAS: Well, it wouldn't surprise me.

GREENE: Yes. How interested, or aware of the internal differences has the community been?

THOMAS: In the beginning, very aware. Well, that's not completely accurate, in the beginning the differences were largely intra-community, so we were battling each other for a while, right? We had Sam Jackson [Samuel C. Jackson] and the mediation panels and all that stuff we went through. And during that time we closed ranks. Eli was still here for a portion of that, and then John came. And again, the beginning of those sessions I was the spokesman for the organization. In fact D & S wrote a letter to Sam Jackson indicating that I would speak for them. And so we closed ranks on it. And there was an understanding by maybe a dozen, two dozen people that we had internal problems to work out, that we kind of mirrored the problems the country had. And we knew that these would be tough and difficult for us to conclude successfully, but there was that sense. Then

we went through a period of kind of resentment of the D & S people, but by then John is off the school board, so the embodiment of D & S is really John, it's not the staff guys so much, as far as the public knows.

GREENE: How is he regarded by the community?

THOMAS: I really don't know, truthfully.

GREENE: Do you think it is clear. . . . I'm speaking now of the. . . .

THOMAS: Outside Restoration.

GREENE: Yes. Outside Restoration. Are they conscious of the D & S-Restoration structure and. . . .

THOMAS: Partly. They know there's some unholy alliance up here with folk who don't look like they do, but. . . . I really don't know what the general community attitude is toward D & S. I think most people out here look at Restoration as an institution that's fairly responsive to them; they see tangible thing happening and generally respect it. I suspect they just don't think about the other. They don't worry about John. Or about me, for that matter. I mean, they just think about what the organization does. I've tried to, both by personal style and just by strategy the. . . . It's really only through the press that Restoration is all hooked up with me. Locally, the community meetings that are attended are attended by the staff people working in that particular area. I don't go to the political clubs, I don't go to dances and the rest. I haven't felt the need to try and establish and identify myself as the embodiment of Restoration. In part because I was born out here and I know most of the people anyway, but also because the real strength is in all those people who work here, who get out and do what needs to be done. So we haven't built--locally at least--I haven't built the kind of personal base that say Ted Watkins has out in Watts, or Leon Sullivan down in Philadelphia. Where, I mean, Leon, when you think of OIC [Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America,] you think of Leon Sullivan; you think of progress, industries, you think of Leon Sullivan. And he makes that point over and over again locally. And he preaches there, he controls the meetings. We haven't tried to do that here. It happens, in part, despite our efforts or despite our lack of efforts, because the press likes to focus on an individual. But largely it's been the organization that we pushed, and my hope is that that's what will survive out here. The worst thing would be to have. . . . It's like Common Cause, which is John Gardner, or the Urban Coalition [National Urban Coalition] that was John Gardner. When John left, there is no National Urban Coalition, because

all it was, was John. It was embodied in him. He was the spokesman. You didn't know who the number two guy was there.

GREENE: That's right. Same thing with Common Cause.

THOMAS: I just think that's wrong. For an institution it's wrong. It's all right, I guess, if you really don't have institution building in mind, but just have the notion of making a particular point. Then it's not so bad. But we're trying to build something that will survive here. We've taken forty-year mortgages on these buildings. We're building. Somebody's got to be around here to take care of it.

GREENE: Well, despite the fact that you're not happy with the two-corporation structure you seem to have a very good working relationship with the D & S people. Is that accurate?

THOMAS: Oh, yes, that's accurate, absolutely. Both staff and board.

GREENE: Yes. Who among them do you think has been especially effective? I know Mr. Schimdt you mentioned.

THOMAS: That's Benno. He's just tremendous, has been and remains that way. Always available. Just very supportive, helpful and smart and tough and, you know, all of it. And sympathetic, too, which is good. Andre's been helpful in some of the technical things we've gotten into--housing strategies, the early work on the commercial center--helpful in the sense of highlighting where problems may come up, and forcing us to develop a strategy for dealing with those contingencies, which is great. On the education side it was Bill Paley who was the real tiger on that one, getting this college out here, On the mortgage pool, it was the bank. George Moore really pushed that, and Jim Oates [James F. Oates], a little bit.

GREENE: What about Watson [Thomas J. Watson, Jr.]?

THOMAS: Watson, I've really only seen him maybe a dozen times, the fact is. He's been good, attentive and helpful when he's been there, but And of course we've got the plant [IBM] out here. But I can't say that there was major help to us.

GREENE: Do you think it was a question of how he viewed his role, that he felt his contribution was getting the plant in, rather than being active on a broader level?

THOMAS: Never really could decide that satisfactorily. On the one hand, the process we went through with IBM to get that plant would have suggested that his view was just the opposite; that his view was not to bring a plant to Bedford-Stuyvesant, and that Bedford-Stuyvesant had to compete with all other possible sites. They had decided to bring a plant to an inner city area. The question was, which inner city. In fact, the judgment was going towards the Harlem area at the time we got word of it. We made the big fight with them on their committees and [a] trip up to Armonk [Armonk, New York]--I spent a day up there with all their staff people--and arranged the community meetings out here and helped them find the site and really went through a lot. Without reference to Tom, I think Burke Marshall was helpful on that, but again, not as an instrument of Tom Watson, more as a friend of the project, who happened to be general counsel at IBM. So that in the plant negotiations, it would have been a more logical conclusion to me to say that Mr. Watson felt that his role as a board member did not necessarily include bringing a plant out here. He was a board member and if a plant was to come we had to convince IBM on the merits that this was the place to bring it.

GREENE: But do you think that was part of his philosophy, of sort of forcing the community to show that it could do it, and that it could put a plant in, bring it up to the standards of other plants within a certain amount of time? And that that would be a greater achievement than, sort of, anointing you with the. . . .

THOMAS: Yeah, yeah. Well, I guess, certainly from IBM'S overall standpoint, that plant was a tremendous contribution because they have made it work. And now if they'll loosen up on the publicity and start letting the rest of the industrial world know about the experiences here, the positive side of it will have been a major contribution. I just don't know that. . . . And Tom Watson could legitimately say that is his contribution. I have no problem with that. It just seems to me that doesn't mean that that was his role as a board member. Because he could have done that and never have been on the board at D & S. He could have been supportive of Kennedy's effort out here, and that support reflected in the presence of an IBM plant and all that it would do. But by going on the board he took on a broader responsibility, it seems to me, and that he didn't attend very often. Now Burke was around, and so in a way, you know, it was like having Tom Watson here. But he himself, I don't think, attended that much. He didn't offer a lot, as near as I can tell.

GREENE: Was there anyone else who you sort of feel was a bit of a letdown and could have done more?

THOMAS: Well, I don't think of anyone who was a particular letdown, because I didn't know that many of them before. But I've always felt that Andre could have done more, even though he did things that were helpful, I always felt he could have done more.

GREENE: Were there occasions when you would ask him to do things that he wasn't available?

THOMAS: No, I can't remember any that we actually asked. And that's partly one of the consequences of the dual structure, that you really don't ask Other than Benno, I don't remember asking any of the D & S people anything. Because, you know, they've got their own staff, and so you identified the problem, and it gets to. . . . And I haven't seen Mr. Meyer in the last year. And John goes to see him, meets with him--used to anyway before he resigned--and would come back with messages from Mr. Meyer. I don't think Mr. Schmidt saw him.

GREENE: Oh, I see. I was going to say, is this a reluctance on your part to go directly to Meyer because it involves circumventing . . .

THOMAS: In part.

GREENE: . . . Doar?

THOMAS: And because the invitation to do that wasn't forthcoming from Mr. Meyer, you see. I mean, I don't have any hesitation with Benno, at all. One, because he offers it openly. He says, "Frank, you or John call me if you have something." He says that in John's presence, he says it in mine, and so it's clear. That's in addition to the personal relationship that existed, or developed. But Mr. Meyer's never done that. He's never said, "You know Frank, if you have something, you just call me." Or, "Here's my number, here's where you can reach me." We've had one or two situations that I can remember where I had some contact with him years and years ago, but that was largely through his secretary. I don't ever remember visiting him other than in his office, even though I know that--John says--he would hold weekend meetings with him from time to time. But I never would be there on those occasions.

GREENE: Have you been disappointed at all to the extent to which these board members have brought along their organizations with them? Had you imagined and hoped that their involvement would be broader than the personal involvement, that they would involve their organizations?

THOMAS: No, I think by and large It's a split on

that. In some cases I've been surprised at the extent of their involvement; that is, the involvement's been larger than I would have expected. The City Bank [First National City Bank of New York], for example. They really are into every damn area that we can turn around in. They bring things to us.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: Well, J.H. Whitney [J.H. Whitney and Company] has done similar things through the cator(?) program and giving us staff people on loan to do business analysis work. The CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] people have been helpful, mainly with money. They would give a healthy contribution every year. What else? They may now put a store in the commercial center, which would be the first corporate activity other than money that you could point to. Who else is there? Andre never brought his organization along to do anything for us. IBM, of course, had the plant. Oh, Gilpatric would use his law firm all the time.

GREENE: Right.

THOMAS: We probably overused them, in fact, as I mentioned, when we were writing the application, we literally took one conference room for, it must have been a week, twenty-four hours a day, with all their secretarial help to back up. We've always had their lawyers on call, usually at no costs, and whenever we paid it's been some nominal amount. Dave Jenkins [David Jenkins] who's general counsel at D & S was provided us by Cravat. They've been very helpful. You know, any time we had questions, tax question--they're now there on voter registration drives, and whether or not we can get involved under the new tax laws. I noticed in a memo sent to me that they. . . .

TAPE II

GREENE: How important, do you think, Robert Kennedy was, looking back on it, in keeping the businessmen interested in the early period? Getting the whole thing. . . .

THOMAS: I think he was critical to it all, not only in getting them started, which we've talked about, but there were low points, in the beginning particularly. The fundraising wasn't going on and everyone was kind of. . . . I guess the business guys sat back and said in effect, "Unless somebody beats me over the head, maybe this is just another of those great announcements." And I can remember him, Bob, at this one meeting up at CBS in the board room. He really just gave them hell. I mean, it was

incredible to believe that they would sit still for that.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: There wasn't any question about what he was saying. He was pointing it right at them, and there were no dissents.

GREENE: Saying they weren't holding their own?

THOMAS: That's right. They just were not doing what they'd said they were going to do, and that it wasn't a problem that was going to go away, it was going to get worse and if this group couldn't come to grips with it and do the things asked of it, then what the hell was going to happen to the country? And you know, what kind of representatives were they, of the best that the business world could produce? He really went right at them. And it was doubly fascinating because of the history of it: these were not personal friends of his, these were people he had gone and presented an idea to and solicited their help in working there.

GREENE: Did that make a difference, that method?

THOMAS: Oh, yeah. There was always activity. Oh, Jesus. It sustained the activity, the fact that there was going to be another meeting because. . . .

[Laughter] And I assume this was in addition to whatever he did one-to-one. I know he always worked on Andre. And he would get pledges out of them. It was our job to kind of follow up on it, but he'd get them. And, let's see, he would get everybody. He could get Mrs. Onassis [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis] to work on some of these business guys, you know. He was good. He was very critical to the whole process.

GREENE: Did she get involved at all at that point, except in an informal manner?

THOMAS: No, only informally. But, she, too, was kind of available and persistent. I mean, you know, she asked the right questions. She still does when we see her. Asked them very gently, but very direct questions that required direct answers, and they usually mean some explanation or commitment from you as a person, rather than your talking about other things or other people. You know, "Well what are you doing here? Can't you help on this? Can't you. . . ."

GREENE: Like a hammer. [Laughter]

THOMAS: I can remember the opening of the showing of the

[Bedford-Stuyvesant] Design Works fabric last November, I guess it was at the Metropolitan Museum [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. Mrs. Onassis was there. And the people who have a license to use the design from Design Works on carpet are the Star Carpet people. And so, in the course of all this gala event, and all the music and people and happiness, and the fabrics are all over. And Jackie was standing next to me, and on the other side was the representative or the owner of the Star Carpet people, and it's a beautiful carpet that was displayed there. And so Jackie said to me, "How much do they pay us?" I said, "I think it's nine percent." She said, "Is that on the gross or the net?" I said I didn't know, or something. She said, "Is that enough?" I said, "Well, I really don't know. I didn't negotiate the deal, and I don't know that much about this area, but that seemed to be acceptable." So she turned to the woman, who was standing there, who was trying to engage her in conversation, not knowing the questions that Jackie had been asking me. And she said to her, "Why don't you just pay us more?" And the woman said, "Oh, we will, we. . . . The whole thing." I just started to laugh. I had to hold myself, because she went right at her, and I think we had another two percent just on the strength of that question.

GREENE: That's interesting because you don't think of her. . . . You think of the other Kennedys in that light, but you don't think of her.

THOMAS: I know, I know. She's all right. And she was available during this time, too.

GREENE: Did your relationship with Robert Kennedy ever evolve beyond the more or less business framework of Bedford-Stuyvesant? Did you see him occasionally?

THOMAS: No, not really because it. . . .

GREENE: Of course, there wasn't much time.

THOMAS: It was just about a year, really. I'm trying to think, I can't think of anything social. There may have been receptions and things like that, but nothing where, you know, we'd be as two people or two couples or something that you might have gotten together. I don't remember any of that.

GREENE: Can you recall any occasions where he might have done more, where you had hoped he would push something harder than he did, or you asked him to do something and he was reluctant to?

THOMAS: No, not really. Again, the span is so short. By

the time the real crises are coming along he was either right in the campaign prior to his death, or his death had taken place. Because John comes in '68 and . . .

GREENE: By March he's in the campaign.

THOMAS: . . . in March he's in the campaign, so. . . . And he's away a lot then, you know. Really there was very little time to share some of these things that were evolving.

GREENE: You spoke briefly about Lindsay's part in your departure from the police department, and your own view of how you had to walk the tightrope, I think you said, between the two of them. Can you comment more generally about Lindsay's cooperation and interest in activities on behalf of the whole project?

THOMAS: John's been very cooperative and supportive, when asked, and on a personal level he's been supportive. But I think he's never really thought of the project as his, or one that he was an equal partner in, and I think he put his marbles into the Model Cities pot and other ventures around town. And you really have to push him, you have to request of him, the kind of support that ought to flow naturally. I mean, he ought to be touting this program wherever he goes. You can't talk about the urban mess in this country without talking about the steps that are underway in his own city, the most important of which is this one. Yet--and I haven't read his speeches, but I don't remember hearing anything about it--I doubt if there is anything in there. I think that's a mistake. And it's hurt us because I think that despite the fact that he'll help in a specific case, a specific situation, the general tone that needs to be spread throughout his administration of active support doesn't get spread. In fact, I think what persists is a, "John and Frank are friends, and though it's a good project so, if we're asked, you're helpful, largely because Frank can get back to John." Right? But with some exceptions--this isn't universal, of course--you really don't feel coming from the city's side the kind of encouragement and interest and enthusiasm.

GREENE: What's your explanation for that?

THOMAS: Just competitiveness. That it got started . . .

GREENE: He still regards it as a Kennedy project?

THOMAS: . . . in a competitive atmosphere, and it's a Kennedy project, and I just think that's what it is.

GREENE: Did you have an opportunity to observe the two of them together, or their attitudes towards each other?

THOMAS: Not often. I remember one, February of '68, I guess it was, we were announcing the community college that we'd all worked so hard on. Well, it was a part of City University [City University of New York], so that's how the city got into it. But it really evolved out of that Educational Affiliation group that Birenbaum [Dr. William M. Birenbaum] headed, and we spent the money on, and the marriage of the two was largely the product of Bob Kennedy and Bill Bailey and all those meetings that I described to you. So the announcement was to take place down at the Borough Hall in Brooklyn. And my office was then in the Hotel Grenada [Grenada Hotel] which is five minutes from. . . . And they were all going to be there, Kennedy, Lindsay, the rest of them. Lindsay calls me to tell me that he has to talk to me, and I have to meet him in Manhattan and we'll ride over together as a consequence. So I go to wherever he was--in City Hall or someplace. I don't know what we talked about, but we talked about something.

GREENE: To do with the project?

THOMAS: I don't even remember, because I don't think that was the issue. I think it was. . . .

GREENE: He just wanted you to come with him.

THOMAS: We arrived together, right? And a little late, too, as I remember. The room was full. It was a big room, maybe three times this size. It was filled with people. The announcement was going to be made in a big assembly that was outside this particular room where we were all gathering. But the press was in this room. I arrived with Lindsay, and Kennedy was on the other side of the room. I can't remember the words, but I went over and spoke to Bob or something, and I think eventually Kennedy and Lindsay spoke. But I could feel the pull from John to stay over there near him, right? Finally, I think I just stayed next to nobody. It was easier for me to just go check the arrangements on the press release or something than stay there. And I don't know how conscious John was of what he was doing, but I remember Kennedy commenting to me that he knew.

GREENE: Yes.

THOMAS: And Jay Kriegel knew--I mean Jay, on John Lindsay's side knew. You know he observed and understood it. It's kind of funny. But it was never spoken, never articulated, just kind of. . . . You know, it's with each

other over nothing.

GREENE: Did you ever notice Robert Kennedy being particularly attentive to the fact that Lindsay be included and invited, and that he not be left out and that he be given every opportunity to?

THOMAS: Yeah, he was very keen on that point, which was helpful to me, because it made the tightrope walking easier since each side in a sense understood it, and Bob understood fundamentally that the city support was critical to what we were going to do. They could really knock us off if they wanted to.

You may remember in the beginning, in order to get the Labor Department grant to come directly to us and not flow through the city of New York, John Lindsay had to send a letter with our application saying that he approved of this financing mechanism. And there was all kinds of trepidation that he'd never sign such a letter. In fact, the day I went over to get him to sign it, Benno was standing by the phone in his office, and everybody. In case I needed help, I was to call Benno who also knew John. I'd worked it out with Jay or some of the staff people--I can't remember--and we were all sitting there and I told John what we needed. They explained to him the consequences of it, that there'd be repercussions in the city, that the other groups within our competitive group were going to complain. Certain city officials would complain that you'd bypassed the city structure, but that in their judgment it was a practical and sensible request from our side because it would facilitate our operation. So John asked me a couple of questions, and then he said, "If we're going to do join hands, let's join all the way," and he signed it. He said, "We'll draft it on our stationery and do it," and he did. The whole thing didn't take ten minutes. So, there again, at a critical point he came through, as he continued to do afterwards. It's just in between those points, the natural turn of mind was not to elaborate on, and push and emphasize this program. John might disagree with that observation, but I think the facts would support that conclusion.

GREENE: We talked about Javits last time, but is there anything on Rocky [Nelson A. Rockefeller]? Did he get involved at all?

THOMAS: Not to my knowledge.

GREENE: Was there any effort to get him involved?

THOMAS: Not by me. I think Mr. Schmidt may have done something. I think the sense was, better left alone. In his case let's just hope he doesn't hurt

us in some way. I think that there was some effort to turn off Brooke [Russell Brooke], Aston [Marshall Aston] from supporting us initially by Rockefeller, and I think a little bit by John V. Lindsay, but that's very early. I've never gotten that story straight, but she made her grant to us way before the corporations ever got straightened out. Her grant is, I don't know, January or something, and we're still deciding if we can live, back at that point.

GREENE: I'm trying to rush you now because I know that your time is limited. Do you remember talking to Robert Kennedy about his plans, as far as a race for the presidency at all, before the actual announcement?

THOMAS: No.

GREENE: And was the reaction within Restoration once he did announce?

THOMAS: Oh, loved it.

GREENE: There was no concern that it was going to hurt the project?

THOMAS: No. We never thought about that, but on the whole the bigger picture was there. I can remember--how to describe it to you?--talking to Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] about not campaigning for him or anything, keeping the project really removed from the political arena as much as possible. That was all. That was our assumption throughout, and we stuck to it.

GREENE: Were there any problems created by his candidacy? I had heard that there were people looking at it very carefully for campaign cannon fodder.

THOMAS: I suspect that probably was true. Nothing ever surfaced out of it. I remember when the debates between himself and McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] first came up, and McCarthy didn't really know anything about it. He'd never been out. He was just going on the classic notion of dispersal versus guilt in the ghetto, and all that fancy sounding crap that they talk about, which ignores the fact of a half million people living here, who'd like to be able to say for themselves where they want to live, to be able to make that choice.

GREENE: You were not aware, then, of people, like from McCarthy's group, or from maybe even the administration who were coming in looking for controversy?

THOMAS: No, we were under such constant scrutiny that nothing seemed strange to me then. I mean, we had a fulltime monitor and there were evaluators in during that time.

GREENE: Did you connect the two? Or was it just a routine. . . .

THOMAS: I just figured it was more bothersome stuff going on. [Interruption] At some point I have to interview you. [Interruption]

GREENE: Okay. The only other thing about the campaign period was if it made a difference as far as Kennedy's staff people being less available. Does that affect you when you. . . .

THOMAS: Not really, no. I mean, Tom wasn't that active in the campaign, so he was around, and he was the key staff person.

GREENE: Anything else up until the time of the assassination?

THOMAS: Nothing we haven't connected that I can think of.

GREENE: And what about the impact of his death? Was there a great loss of momentum and enthusiasm, and what could you do to try to hold the line?

THOMAS: I think that we all just flattened out, emotionally drained. For a period--I don't know how long it was, a couple of weeks maybe--there was kind of numbness that went with it all, and then speculation as to whether or not that would mean the end of ongoing support for the project, for Bedford-Stuyvesant.

GREENE: Did you see that as a real possibility, that the support would drain off?

THOMAS: Well, I felt the businessmen might lose some of their enthusiasm, and I thought the foundation heroes and the others, some of whom. . . . I think, they were committed to the ideas behind the Bedford-Stuyvesant effort, but they were also committed to the man. I think the prospect that he might become president of the United States increased the willingness of some to support the effort. So there was that kind of practical question. And then discussion came up, I guess after they sent around a note--Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] did--about a memorial they were going to set up. Ideas were being solicited. It seemed to me that the appropriate thing was this project, Bed-Stuy [Bedford-

Stuyvesant]. I was looking forward to writing to Ted and Ethel, and meeting Ted on behalf of it. In any event, they had a meeting, I guess it was in Hyannis [Hyannis, Massachusetts]. I didn't go to the meeting, but I remember there was one, at which time the idea of a foundation was apparently approved. I really think it's wrong. I didn't have any objections to a foundation, but. . . .

GREENE: You mean the living memorial?

THOMAS: Yeah. It just seemed to me that that was static, and so unlike him and so riskless, that it wasn't worthy, no matter what the foundation did. Here was something that he created himself, had gone through the turmoil, the battles. He recruited all the people, all the principal actors. He was identified with them already, and it was a challenge whether or not, one, we could keep the support going, and two, could we use the support effectively to bring about the kind of results we all wanted. It was the kind of risk that I think his life was built on. So should his memory. But anyway, they opted for the foundation, and then there was the meeting down in Virginia of the foundation.

A little later, I guess. I remember speaking about the need to keep the Bedford-Stuyvesant effort alive and foremost in everybody's mind, because if we didn't get a follow-up grant after the first one, there wouldn't be much there. So, I don't know. I think the concept of a project as a memorial was difficult to grasp, and there were a lot of people who just knew the idea of the project--hadn't been there, didn't know the people--may have felt less uncomfortable with it. It certainly is less manageable than a foundation or a building, or a park. But despite that, the businessmen all got together, and we met, talked, and we signed it, that we were to recommit ourselves. And we passed resolutions of the board. Everybody kind of set off, really, with a little added push to make things work. Ethel joined the board later, and. . . .

GREENE: I was going to ask you how important that was, and who went about bringing. . . .

THOMAS: Yeah. It was very important because it symbolically said that the Kennedy family was remaining, would be for. . . . I don't remember who asked her. I think it was Benno. But we all thought it was great and important. And the business people did stick, for the most part. Worked hard. Benno certainly worked hard.

GREENE: Since this project was originally conceived, at least in part as a laboratory, an experiment, can you evaluate it from the perspective of hindsight, as far as the lessons that you think have been learned, and

the mistakes that have been made?

THOMAS: Well, I think the idea behind it is a good idea and it remains a good idea. I think the notion of building institutions in areas like this, that have some accountability to the people in the area and the capacity to respond to the needs of that area, and giving that institution some resources to work with--financial resources to couple with the human resources they could find--is a major step in the right direction towards parleying the cities and building them. The notion that the rebuilding process--tearing down of old buildings and renovation of abandoned ones, the starting of businesses, providing of services--the notion that that is an industry itself is something that is so simple and so fundamental, and yet so often overlooked, it's incredible. There are still major programs in the country designed to improve conditions in a given area which are conceived outside the area, financed outside the area, and the people brought in from outside to accomplish it. And then they turn the end product over and wonder why it hasn't made the kind of impact they thought it would. The reason, I think, is that you've taken out ninety percent of the impact potential by moving the process away from the people who should be the beneficiaries of the process. And this program really illustrates that as well as any that I know of. It is in every sense the recognition of new forms of industry. People in a given community can benefit from it, and rebuild all kinds of institutions, contracting, mortgage loans, fabric houses and we're now trying to get the sanitation district under contract. Not only would we render a better service, but we would make money at it, and some of that money can go into other needed things in the area. And as to the cable franchise for this area, I see the ownership of the cable system as a tremendous economic resource that shouldn't be lost. So that when other communities are just talking about it, people are saying, "We'll provide access. You can originate shows, you can reach the people." That's fine, but that assumes the way of ownership. And since a major portion of the revenue comes from the subscribers themselves, why shouldn't those revenues find their way back into the area? So I think that the benefit of five years, in looking at other things and seeing this one, that the idea was right and that the model is a good model, if an imperfect one, and that the results are already being felt in a positive way, and that impact's just going to keep multiplying.

GREENE: What about the original idea of involving the business community in an urban poverty program? Is that realistic?

THOMAS: Yes. I think it is. Take the banks, for example. We would not have gotten very far without access to

those big money centers, and we'll only get it. . . . For whatever the reasons the banks originally thought they were getting into this--social responsibility, "We'll just give a little trickle, and then maybe people will leave us alone"--the fact is that we've been able to tie them in on all kinds of levels of involvement. They're going to finance the construction of the commercial center, they're doing conventional lending with no government insurance on some of our housing. They're just in it. Business loans, some with SBA [Small Business Administration] guarantees, some without. All centered around credit courses being given out here, and teaching our staff that works in the centers how to teach local people the ways to make sensitive credit judgments. Very routine, very simple. We've got accounting firms out doing tax returns all over the area free of charge. There just is a whole range of services that start to happen as a result of businessmen starting to feel comfortable and gaining some confidence.

GREENE: Would you say that there's almost no limit on how much you can expect businessmen to do, once you get them deeply involved and interested?

THOMAS: If you start with the premise that we're a capitalist country, which means that most of the things that happen turn in some way on the flow of capital, that if you can tie in the sources of capital and the controls of capital in what you're doing, that you're going to find a tremendous variety of ways, most of which may well be beyond your imagination when you start out, to involve them in the process.

We've got a mortgage pool here, and with all the FHA [Federal Housing Administration] problems going on now and all the scandals and all the rest of it, the banks and the insurance companies get gun-shy about making mortgage loans because they figure, who needs it? Why go into the inner city with all these problems happening? But they're not going to be able to walk away from this problem. First of all, because we don't have any scandal, but beyond that, their experience with us is already established. It would be like turning your back on a friend, someone you've built a relationship with. Despite the fact that the agreement ends in May, this next week, the technical agreement under which the pool was formed, I have no doubt that we'll have the present pool or some facsimile of it operating out here. Other areas that have similar local institutions can do the same thing. That will only happen because the individual banks have an entity to which they are accountable now. They can't walk away from Bedford-Stuyvesant and expect they won't have to deal with us. Since we've always dealt fairly with them and the record's good, they just can't do it.

GREENE: How do you account for the fact that you've got such a reputation for fiscal soundness? That's been a major problem in urban. . . .

THOMAS: This corporation?

GREENE: Yes. Is there anything unique about the way it was set up? Or was it just the integrity of the individuals involved?

THOMAS: I think it's a combination. Well, it got set up well. We had Arthur Anderson in early, which was a help. I think the leadership was honest in the program, which helps. But that doesn't preclude in an organization of two hundred, three hundred people that somebody's not going to steal something or do something, nor does it mean that somebody hasn't stolen something. I don't know that for a fact. But it allows you to put everything into perspective. If you've gone for five years and you've handled twenty-five to thirty million dollars, and it's all accounted for through outside independent auditors, presumably, you know, we could stand defalcations around you and not collapse.

One of the frustrations that I was alluding to earlier with the judge is the instinct to turn on one another the first time there's some item you can grab. That's a hell of a problem to solve because, you know, if the major institutions did that, the finance world would collapse. Human nature being what it is, we can't assume that just because we've got a high social purpose, every one who comes to work or has anything to do with us is going to share that purpose, and in so sharing be absolutely straight in every thing they do. Because it isn't going to happen. I think finally it's just luck. I mean, we picked the right people, and you've got pretty good systems and you monitor if they work hard at it. You keep pretty close tabs on things, but it still comes down to a little bit of luck. Three people could steal, enter into a conspiracy, and beat you. Through the first five years of this program, every single check that left here in an amount over a thousand dollars had to bear my signature. Every single check request, no matter how much it was for, had to have my initials on it. Well, I mean, that's an impossible way to run an organization. It was necessary in the early days when. . . . We're changing it now.

GREENE: Was that mainly to satisfy the other camp?

THOMAS: No, this was our decision, and mine.

GREENE: You just felt it was the only way to do it?

THOMAS: Because part of what I want to be able to feel

confident in representing to anybody is that, you know, we're not buying Watts some place. If we are, we're buying it through eighteen different skills that I don't know about. No, I've been criticized by Benno for over-centralization, and he was right. This was about two years ago. But there's a purpose behind it. I look at every expense account that comes through here, even though a lot of them involve the use of private cars going back and forth to meetings and the like. Each person, the discipline is so that you list where you've gone and what the millage was when you started and ended. I've actually seen cases where we've bounced them because somebody claimed that he'd gone sixty miles--in order to justify them--it's only six bucks, but I mean it was the notion that it just isn't sixty miles to go from where you say you went to where you ended up. You may have gone someplace else that you didn't list, but given what you've listed, it doesn't figure. Well, obviously you don't do that very often. . . .

GREENE: You do it once in awhile and that may be enough.

THOMAS: And everybody gets the word. You all kind of push it. The people are tremendous. We've got a hell of a staff, very skilled, and they've all grown with the job, as I have, too. I don't mean to suggest that I came with it. We all came as novices in this business and we just learned it. We like each other, we like to work together, and just do it well.

GREENE: Is there anything that you'd point to with particular satisfaction, or is it just the fact that you are where you are today?

THOMAS: It's a combination of where we are and the fact that we avoided intensifying the internal warfare in this community. There are a dozen people here, any of whom might feel perfectly comfortable with you or anyone else, spending as much time as you wanted asking them any questions you wanted about the program. That's a lot, to have a dozen people you can feel that way about.

We haven't been perfect. We're out of balance in terms of providing significant opportunities for women. We just haven't done enough of it. We're better than we were a while back, but we're still not there. Everybody's aware of it. We talk about it. We meet once a week. The senior policy people have just said, "We can't turn around now and start giving as excuses the things that people have given as excuses for years for not having any blacks. If we're going to give those same reasons as excuses for not having enough women around here in high positions, Christ, we're just perpetuating the old system." So everybody's agreed, and we're out at it. We've got in house, and everybody's moving well. We're kind of

laughing at ourselves, because there's still a lot of chauvinism around. But it's on the table. We know it's going to change. I also know that you've got to do it with five people, not with one. Because invariably what happens, or too often what happens is that you make a move and you get one woman in--right?--at the senior position, and she turns out to be a dud, so that justifies you're not doing it again for a while. We're not making that mistake. We're going to bring five people along, so out of the five we're going to get a couple who are good, just as you'd get a couple who are good in any group of five. We're not going to worry about the other three. If they turn out to be duds, they're just duds. We'd do what we'd do if they were male duds. We'd fire them, right? So in that sense, we've learned.

GREENE: Is there anything else that you'd like to memorialize on tape?

THOMAS: Not really.

GREENE: Perpetuate, I should say. Any major bloopers that we haven't talked about that could have been avoided perhaps by better initial planning?

THOMAS: No. This building, which is a tremendous building, I love every square inch of it. But I suspect if I knew as much in 1968 as I know now about buildings and construction we would have proceeded a little differently. That is, would have had all the plans in hand before we started, we would have anticipated more of the problems that resulted in time delays and increased costs and frustration. But that's not monumental. I mean, it's the same with the Superblock. We'd have built it a little better, but we'll build the next one better, because we'll build the next buildings, renovate the next buildings, less expensively than this one. I don't think we'll renovate any buildings better than this one. It's really a great building. But that's really all, I think.

Maybe a little more realism on how much time it really takes to do anything. The notion that, in two or three years, you'd see a difference is crazy. We talk of a decade, and that's the kind of commitment we need from people. If you're not willing to make it, then I question how serious and sensible they are about talking these kinds of issues at all.

I think maybe a serious blunder would be, going back, I would have fought the mayor harder on the creation of the Model Cities setup. I really didn't fight as hard as I might have to make that thing work better, or not have it happen at all, because it really has not as of now been a plus in my judgments of the area.

GREENE: Has that created problems for you?

THOMAS: Yeah. In fact, they've added another series of layers of processing, so that for each building that we want to renovate we go through three different committees before we get to that building plan. On one housing project we started last July, we still haven't gotten through the first committee. They've had all kinds of problems. They've had new elections, they got a new group, they lost the papers. There are a lot of explanations for it all. The fact is that the cost of that construction has gone up three hundred thousand dollars in the process.

GREENE: And it may be obsolete by the time it's finished.

THOMAS: It's the building we've built. We're just going to repeat that same building twice on another site. I mean, they can go look at the building. There's nothing really to examine. The plans won't tell you anything nearly like what you can learn from going over to St. Marks [St. Marks Avenue] and going into the building. There it is. It's right there. We have to do that for every single building. The competitive aspects of the Model Cities program versus us, which go back to the origins--and that was Lindsay's answer to Kennedy--have been an obstacle. I mean, they've got twenty-nine million dollars a year, we have five. And yet, there's no question about who's doing more out here in the area. That doesn't bother me so much, except that they now have intercepted our. . . . And put themselves into the processing stream which is resulting in delays and frustrations for us. I think, looking back, that should have been a real head-to-head in the beginning. We should have been excepted out of whatever the hell they were going to do, or they'd have found another district and excluded Bedford-Stuyvesant--like they do in East New York and Brownsville [Brownsville, New York.]--and let us run Bedford-Stuyvesant. But I wasn't ready to make that kind of a power fight. I didn't understand it well enough then. I thought it was just another one of those city things that would happen and maybe disappear. I was half right.

GREENE: That was what--'68 also?

THOMAS: '68.

GREENE: Did Robert Kennedy get involved in it all?

THOMAS: No, it's right around the time of his death. I don't know. We all got fooled. It began in '67, but we didn't feel anything from it then. It's really '68 that it gets bad.