

**Roberta Greene Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 11/04/1981**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Roberta Greene

**Interviewer:** Sheldon M. Stern

**Date of Interview:** November 4, 1981

**Length:** 22 pages

**Biographical Note**

Greene was an oral historian for the Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] Oral History Program for the John F. Kennedy [JFK] Library. In this interview she discusses how she started working for the RFK Project; the process of obtaining an oral history, including how the interviewer should act and how to get the interviewee to speak more candidly; her relationship with Ethel Skakel Kennedy; the similarities and differences in the relationships among the Kennedy brothers; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and his work on the Kennedys; and the difficulties in an oral history project, among other issues.

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Roberta Greene, recorded interview by Sheldon M. Stern, November 4, 1981, (page number), Robert Kennedy Oral History Program for the John F. Kennedy Library.



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Oral History Interview

With

ROBERTA GREENE

November 4, 1981

By Sheldon M. Stern

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

STERN: Why don't we begin with how you became interested in the RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] Project? How you found out about it \_\_\_\_\_?

GREENE: Okay. Well, actually you have to go back to before there was an RFK Project. I had heard about the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] Oral History Program while I was still overseas in the Peace Corps. Had read about it and sort of was fascinated by the idea. My background is in journalism and political science in a combination. But it seemed like an intriguing sort of activity. And when I came back and moved to Washington, I got the Career Bulletin for the Peace Corps, in which there was an ad for an oral historian for the John F. Kennedy Office of Projects.

STERN: What year was this?

GREENE: It was late '68. I would say September, October '68. And I had just moved to Washington. And I thought.... Oh, it asked for a master's in history. I had no history background to speak of. And I had no master's. But I thought \_\_\_\_\_. And so I called the number that was listed, and I spoke to John [John F. Stewart]. No, I spoke to Larry [Larry J. Hackman]. And he said, "Well, come on in." And it was an interesting conversation because he listened, asked a lot of questions. I felt like it was a really good interview. And he set me up with a tape. He had never considered hiring a

woman for this project. He said, "It's not the lack of a master's or the fact that you aren't a history major."

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He said, "We have just never considered a woman." And I thinking, that's—this is 1967, and the climate was quite different from what it is today.

STERN: Sure.

GREENE: Because, you know, you can take us to the Civil Service Commission, but we just feel that political and academic projects are stuff that \_\_\_\_\_ among politicians. And that we've probably done more now \_\_\_\_\_ yet \_\_\_\_\_ finished with this activity. So I argued with him. And he had some other things that they were also looking for people who were outstanding, and that's why they welcomed \_\_\_\_\_. And he wanted to know if I was interested in any of those. They were not... it's not even that they weren't interesting. It's just that I was so intrigued by the other. And John at that time was out of town. And he said, well, he'll speak to him when he gets back. But he said not to feel too encouraged. Well, I don't think I'm working for them. I think I called several days later, and John \_\_\_\_\_. And he said also, "Well, come on in." And we went, and I brought writing samples and, you know, we went through a very \_\_\_\_\_ and detailed interview. And I knew a great deal about the Kennedy Administration already, having gone through in journalism and in political science at precisely this period that he was in office. Had studied it very closely and then read extensively. So \_\_\_\_\_ a better chance of it coming out while I was overseas. So he seemed \_\_\_\_\_. Everything's fine, but they'd never considered having a woman do this. And we went round and round on that. And I put up a bit of a battle. And again, he said, "Would you be interested in \_\_\_\_\_?" I wasn't particularly. So we left it hanging and then went away. And a couple of weeks, I would say, went by, and it was pretty much a dead issue, I thought, and I was considering another job. And I got a call from him, and he said that they had just been given the Robert Kennedy Project \_\_\_\_\_ decided to give it to the library rather than to give it to Columbia University, which also was vying for it at the time. And would I be interested in coming on with setting up the project and in doing all the research and correspondence? And the general setting up the files. So I said, "Can I just handle the interviews?" And he said, "Well, we'll see. Maybe we'll let you try one or two." And that's really all that it took... it was just for someone to say, Okay, we'll give you a chance. And wore \_\_\_\_\_ clothes to impress John and Larry. And set up the files and set up—did all the correspondence. And really by the time it came to do the interviews, I knew more about Robert Kennedy than anybody else, because I had been working that closely on it. And it was just a given that I would at least take charge of handling the interviews. And the first one I did was Art Buchwald [Arthur Buchwald]. He was the first. It was really... it was a good first effort, a good first interview in some ways and in others it wasn't. It was good in that he was a very effusive, cooperative subject; a remarkably perceptive and candid interviewee as well. The bad part about it was that I had no experience, and that I don't think that I did as good a job with it as I could have done had I had more experience at that point. Nonetheless, because he was so good and so forthcoming, \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: What was your initial perception of the project? What were your goals? What did you think you wanted to accomplish? And did that change over the years?

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GREENE: Well, I think they knew pretty much what they wanted to accomplish because they had already gone through the whole JFK Project.

STERN: Mm-hmm.

GREENE: And the overall goal was the same. Of course it was a much-scaled-down version. And when we started, we began with a corps of about 25 or 30 people, which represented a very, as you can imagine, close circle when you're dealing with a man like that.

STERN: Mm-hmm.

GREENE: And the idea was to document, to \_\_\_\_\_, his life as a public figure. And to either reinforce or replace some of the mythology. There was very little written at that time. I mean our research had to be basically in the *New York Times* in depth and some very crummy books that had been written, very superficial \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: And a lot of the \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: Yes. And a lot of the JFK interviews, although, you know, they were.... Robert Kennedy was frequently a peripheral figure and they didn't center on him. So you can get \_\_\_\_\_, but you didn't get a lot of detailed information to go on. I remember when the Witcover [Jules Joseph Witcover] \_\_\_\_\_ book came out, *Eighty-five Days*, and that was to us a real improvement. In some ways it was a little scary because it would \_\_\_\_\_ to be a tough act to follow in terms of the amount of detailed answers that we had.


STERN: Yes.

GREENE: The \_\_\_\_\_ chaired it first, but it turned out not to be so. So we really found a lot of things in there that were inaccurate or not totally documented, partly because of the speed with which it was put together. It came out \_\_\_\_\_. But at the time it was like the... it covered just about everything.

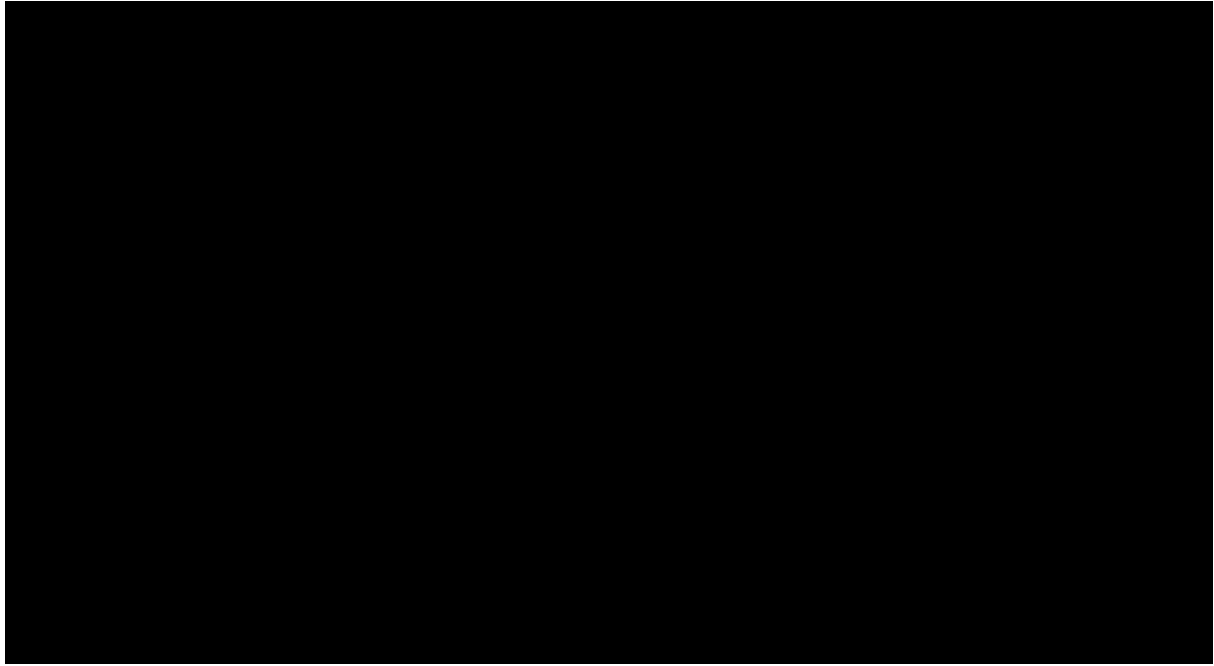
STERN: What about the impact of the assassination, Robert Kennedy's assassination on the interviews?



GREENE: Well, I think—I thought we mentioned that in the car last night.... I've thought about that, because it was very dramatic in that first two years especially when I was interviewing people like Bill Barry [William Barry].



[-3-]



STERN: How long after the assassination?

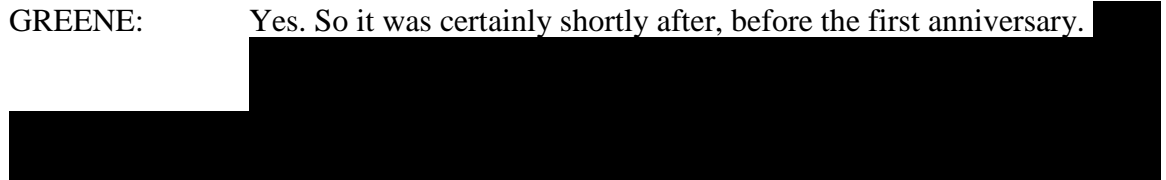
GREENE: Very soon. He was one of my first interviews, and I interviewed him very extensively.

STERN: Within a year, say?

GREENE: Oh, yes. Oh, of the assassination? I would say probably within a year. He was one of my very first, and we started interviewing him in February.

STERN: Of 1969?

GREENE: Yes. So it was certainly shortly after, before the first anniversary.





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STERN: Did you find that people tended to project back into their descriptions of previous events in RFK's life as a result of the assassination? In other words, I just found this in the JFK interviews a tendency to.... I'll give you an example: You have somebody like—I'm not sure what person it was, but I'm pretty sure the one \_\_\_\_\_. But a person who was a congressman at the time that JFK entered in the Congress. And he's saying that... "the first time I saw him, I knew he was going to be a great and inspiring national leader." And that to me, you know... if John F. Kennedy had been alive at the time that interview was done, he would not have said that. Did you have that kind of phenomenon?

GREENE: Well, I think Robert Kennedy was very different.

STERN: \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: Because he started out so much in his brother's shadow. And so a poor public speaker and just not a public speaker. And never really was. Never blossomed in the spotlight in the same way that JFK did. I think his charisma came more from the diffidence and the shyness and his reticence than from coming across as this obviously \_\_\_\_\_ attractive person. I think the qualities that people loved in him were much more subtle than in JFK. And you don't hear that. In fact.... I tell you one thing that was said to me that I thought was very interesting. I assume this is not for publication.

STERN: No. Of course not.

GREENE: But Eunice Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] said to me that... she said, "My brother"—meaning Robert—"would never have been the man that he became without his wife [Ethel Skakel Kennedy]." She said, "I wouldn't say that about my other brothers." But she said there was just no question that Ethel was the key to.... Because she \_\_\_\_\_. When do you think she first started to think about him in terms of the presidency? And \_\_\_\_\_ George Stevens or somebody was \_\_\_\_\_. Well, about 1948. [Laughter] And Angie Novello [Angela M. Novello] had a great thing about that, too. First time they went to hear him speak at Georgetown, she said it was just embarrassing how poor he was. This was when he was still on the Hill. And they went back to the house, and

Ethel just went on and on what a brilliant speech it had been and how it was simply marvelous, and how everybody was just aroused by his greatness. And Eunice said, “Oh, Ethel, come on! He was awful.” But she apparently just never wavered, and really gave him that tremendous confidence to become something that perhaps otherwise he would not have.

STERN:           What were the hardest things to get people to tell you about? And, on the other hand, the easiest?

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GREENE:       Well, I think people love to talk. And in my experience, it doesn't matter what their rank is, whether it's a Supreme Court justice or a senator or, you know, a personal friend, they love to talk. And it's partly, I think, the nostalgia of it. But it's also people like to be listened to. So I very seldom found any difficulty in getting people to be open. What I think worked very well, if there was a reticence on a politically or otherwise sensitive issue, was to let the person know that you already knew a lot. They tended to... were more willing to be candid if they didn't think they were sort of hoeing new turf, if they thought a lot—

STERN:           That's absolutely true.

GREENE:       Do you mind?

STERN:           Yes. Absolutely.

GREENE:       Than if they thought a lot was already known. They for one thing didn't feel disloyal. But also, I think, they wanted to make sure their version got on the record. And if there were any inaccuracies or if they saw things differently, they wanted to be sure that that viewpoint was also considered. There were a couple of time, one, I can remember, actually having to turn off the tape and have a little chat with somebody to reinforce—

STERN:           I've had to do that, too.

GREENE:       —the confidentiality and the good reputation of the Kennedy Library in order to get somebody to put on tape either what they had told me off it and were reluctant to put on, or something that they were hesitating... and of course we had discussions.

STERN:           I've had that experience, too. And in most cases I have not been successful.

GREENE:       Oh, really?

STERN:           Yes. They just... if they have any doubts, especially in these times when

there's an automatic tendency to not trust.

GREENE: Well, that's true. You're working right now....

STERN: In a different atmosphere.

GREENE: A very different atmosphere.

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STERN: One of the points I'm trying to raise, the atmosphere today is very different, I think, than when you were doing this. And I can remember one particular example where a very important person—

GREENE: Refused?

STERN: Well, she was tempted, but she was \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: Oh, really?

STERN: Yes. I think perhaps there were other problems there, too. I think it might have been from the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] Library, might have been a text that if I had been someone she felt a certain kind of real affinity to, she might have trusted enough to put in on the record.

GREENE: That's very possible. And I think there's another distinction between the JFK and the Robert Kennedy Projects. The Robert Kennedy Project, even though it grew to about a 140 people, I think, still remains a fairly intimate group.

STERN: Yes. Oh, it's very small.

GREENE: And although we tried to get adversaries, we tried to get some Teamster people, we tried a variety of \_\_\_\_\_, we were not successful. And part of it was that that aspect came fairly late in the game. There were a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ didn't include in that. But because there was a generally friendly atmosphere and sense of trust, I think of the Library, it made it much less of a problem than dealing with people who in many cases were remote from the President, first of all, and didn't have a lot of remembrances.

STERN: That's a very interesting point, because I have... people have asked on occasion, particularly when I have given talks about oral history, although I wouldn't want to carry this too far, I think very often the people who are remote from JFK have been the best interviews. The personal dimension tends to sometime get in the way. And when you deal with someone who was, say, a relative underling in, let's

say, the State Department dealing with the Italian Desk, and he doesn't have that sense of loyalty, that whole dimension....

GREENE: But it also doesn't—

STERN: They're often more critical. But then of course it's a different kind of interview.

GREENE: And it doesn't have the advantage of being a close-up perspective.

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STERN: That's right.

GREENE: So it's a tradeoff. I did not feel that—and again, I think it's partly a skill in using what you already know—I didn't feel a great hesitancy to say things that were critical, provided people thought certain information would be kept confidential and kept in perspective.

STERN: Yes. That's something I think probably, given the kinds of people you interviewed, you could do more readily than I can. And that's despite the fact that I'm doing it so much later. It's difficult. But with people who are more remote from Kennedy... I mean this afternoon, for example, with the German journalist, I just said something critical about Kennedy's performance in the August '61 crisis when the wall was put up, and it didn't faze him in the least. But at other times I have to be more careful about that.

GREENE: Mm-hmm. There was a first part to that question, I think. I can't remember.

STERN: What were the hardest things to document, \_\_\_\_\_?

GREENE: Mm-hmm. Well, I think the hardest thing to interview on in many ways was legislation, partly because what was in the record was always the very tip of the iceberg. The real interesting and important information was undocumented. And it all took place between people in various places. And trying to cut through that was very difficult. Interviewing someone like Javits [Jacob K. Javits], for instance, to get him off the soapbox and get him to talk about what really happened, not the way he wanted the history books to remember it... Lindsay [John V. Lindsay] was another example. No trouble setting up an interview, and he was still Mayor at the time. The only time, interestingly enough, I ever had anybody call and research... a person that worked for him, that called and wanted to know exactly which subjects so she could research and inform him and very detailed. And ended up again—the only time I ever had anybody sit in on an interview \_\_\_\_\_, it was a very inhibited session. It was basically, you know, we were just great friends, and we worked together on this and that and the other thing. And we were all

working for the same wonderful goal, which was nonsense. And I was really very well prepared for that, probably better than I had for any other interview, because I was interviewing the Mayor and sitting in his office. And I felt that there was a certain \_\_\_\_\_ that had to go through preparing for an interview with somebody who was basically a rival—or viewed as a rival. And I just got nowhere. And no matter what I did, it just came out of this \_\_\_\_\_. And then we turned over the tape at the end, and this gentleman left the room. And he and I sat there for probably an hour and a half and had this incredible, real conversation. One of my regrets is that I did not go back to him after he left the mayoral and after he was no longer going to be President and get him to do that in a way that \_\_\_\_\_. It's just a ridiculous interview. And yet... you know it's just that they're going to have criticism, but I don't think there was really anything I could have done at that point to salvage any of it. It's just obviously the way he wanted it to go.

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STERN: Did you have... what were your relationships with the Kennedy family, your success in getting interviews with the Kennedy family, particularly with Ethel?

GREENE: Well, we had no success really. I had a very nice relationship with Ethel, and I spent quite a bit of time out at Hickory Hill and interviewed Jane Whittaker there several times, and was invited back to her big thing called the Johnson Project. And I still see her occasionally at social functions, and she's always extremely nice. She wrote a very lovely and unsolicited—she grabbed a book from Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] at the book party that they invited me to. And he was signing it, and she grabbed it and wrote a very lovely... Actually it wasn't in my book; it was for my parents. Lovely note to them on that one. But there was no way that she would ever do an interview. And not only wouldn't she consider it—and I even went to the trouble of writing up a very detailed set of questions on their trips... one to South America and also the one to Africa, which, from my conversations with her, I knew, especially the one in Africa, and I had been there at the time and we had a lot of anecdotes to trade, and we knew people mutually, I thought that would be something she would really enjoy talking about. And she said, "I just can't do it." And Eunice did not understand that. And she said, "I'm going to speak to her, because," she said, "it's not like she keeps these things inside. She never talks about anything but Bobby." And she said, "I don't understand why she doesn't do it." But she got nowhere with it. And I went up and had a long lunch with Pat Lawford [Patricia Kennedy Lawford] in her apartment after some correspondence, to talk about an interview with her. And there was just no way. In fact, I even said, "Why don't we have Lem Billings [Kirk LeMoyne Billings] do it?" I said, "You could suggest anyone." I said, "I had Lem Billings in mind as someone that you might feel a little comfortable." I mean with Ethel, too. I didn't care particularly who did it. I just wanted to get it down. And she just couldn't. In fact I remember walking out of the \_\_\_\_\_ and Awards lunch with Eunice and Pat Lawford. And she said, "Now, Pat, you just have to do it. The questions aren't hard." [Laughter] "You won't have any trouble with them."

STERN: How do you explain her reluctance? Is it simply that she can't talk about... But you just said that she talked about Bobby all the time.

GREENE: Yes. And I don't know what it is. The only thing I can think of is that she correctly realized that I was trying to open a door but with something as simple as the Africa trip. But that we were really after something more.

STERN: Have you had any luck—

GREENE: But who I did—to finish the question about the family—I did extensively interview Eunice Shriver, and she was marvelous. I think it's a very good interview, very candid. Difficult for her to do, no question about that, although it was fairly late. \_\_\_\_\_ impressed with something... it was fairly late in the game.

[ -9- ]

STERN: Did you have any luck in getting not just Kennedy relatives, but people in general, to talk very candidly about the relationship between the brothers? Or did you not really \_\_\_\_\_ into that?

GREENE: Oh, no. We did. But I think it was just... I think that was something they all liked to talk about, because there was obviously very—

STERN: Did they talk about it in a way that was more than just this, \_\_\_\_\_ the sort of thing that you just read about all the time?

GREENE: Are you thinking more between Robert and John?

STERN: Yes, yes. I'll give you an example: I tried to get some stuff on JFK and Joe Junior [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], which I think was a great oversight \_\_\_\_\_. And I did an interview with a man who was their football coach when they were—before Harvard, when they were kids. And knowing that I have... I have a brother, and I know what it's like. I know what the rivalry's like and the possibilities. And I suggested to him that when they were on a football field, it might have been a place where they could, in a sanctioned way, take out some of their aggression against each other. Did he ever see anything like that? And he just bridled at the question. "They were perfect gentlemen!" I mean just couldn't deal with the issue. He was almost protective, so much I thought, that there was no \_\_\_\_\_ like that.

GREENE: Well, I think clearly that Joe Junior was the star, and everybody deferred to him as long as he was around. I think in the same way, Robert Kennedy completely deferred to the President. I mean not that he wasn't afraid... there are a couple of instances to give you on civil rights legislation and the problems on campuses, where Robert Kennedy clearly was much more assertive with the President than

anybody else ever would have dared to be and prevailed... when it was very clear that the President in this area just let him....

STERN: No, again, of course, this will not be open for public use—at least not right away. We have a number of telephone conversations recorded at the Library, a total of 28 hours, which I have edited. And one of the most extraordinary elements in those conversations is the way in which JFK and Bobby spoke to each other.

GREENE: That's really interesting.

STERN: They are really an extraordinary thing to listen to.

GREENE: Were they?

[-10-]

STERN: Well, there are so many levels. But one of the things that is most amazing is that when you reread the transcript of the conversation, you would think you were talking to two people who do not know how to speak the same language because they didn't speak in sentences. They didn't speak in combinations of words. And they constantly interrupt each other. So you would have this unbelievable clatter. And yet somehow they communicated perfectly almost without words.

GREENE: But that's what everybody refers to, their shorthand, their shorthand.

STERN: It was amazing.

GREENE: And they talk about the shorthand that Robert Kennedy—

STERN: Well, there it is. We have these conversations. You can actually hear it. And it is an amazing thing to listen to.

GREENE: Right. That's why, I mean, the fashion is to say that everything in the book says... it's sort of mythology, and the truth is really black and ugly. Excuse me. [Break in recording] But I think it was a most extraordinary relationship. And I don't know if you ever heard this. But when Larry went up to interview—are you concerned about the time?—to interview, oh, a very close friend. His name begins with an S. Charles—I had it just a second ago. I'll think of it.

STERN: Spalding [Charles F. Spalding]?

GREENE: Charles Spalding. When Larry went out to California and interviewed him—he was with Robert Kennedy the night that they came back to



\_\_\_\_\_. And he described, you know, the black mood. But I remember very distinctly, because I listened to the tape, where it was Robert Kennedy saying, “Why, why did this have to happen when everything was just starting to go so well?” And they said goodnight. And Robert came in \_\_\_\_\_. And his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.], he just knew the door was closed behind him. He just absolutely fell apart.

STERN: This is in some book that I have heard of.

GREENE: It may be that Schlesinger... I just heard the tape and the transcript. But it may be that Schlesinger \_\_\_\_\_ I can't imagine he had access to that.

STERN: It must be Schlesinger, sure.

GREENE: But I mean I think that if Robert Kennedy were not Robert Kennedy, that he would certainly have been described as having had a nervous breakdown in the period after the assassination. He just didn't

[-11-]

function. He didn't... he didn't do any of the things—his whole life changed radically. And he was basically held together by his friends and family. It was many months. And he just, more than any political figure I can think of, began his own political career completely in the servitude of another. But never did I understand something was \_\_\_\_\_ shadow of \_\_\_\_\_; he was perfectly happy there.

STERN: Yes, I just saw—this is all very much documented on those tapes that may be \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: And I don't often hear people refer to that shorthand that he and Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] had, the same kind of, you know, not talking in complete sentences.

STERN: I don't think we have any conversations with Teddy and RFK, although we do have some between Teddy and JFK. And there is a certain similarity, but it is not the same thing.

GREENE: But in the later years, between... when they were both in the Senate, between Teddy and Robert, there was a very close relationship, and they talked all the time: the mutual support \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: Teddy was the only one in any of the tapes that called his brother John.

GREENE: Well, and he used to call Robert, Robert. We have a lot of things in writing. They'd write back and forth: Robbie and Eddie... Robert and Eddie.

STERN: Did you find after time passed into the seventies that you had more accessibility to documents and that that helped you? Or did that not really make that much of a difference?

GREENE: I don't think that made too much of a difference to the interviews that I was doing. Much, if not most, of what I needed was at the library. And when I wanted access to personal papers, it was generally offered. And again, I think it's because there was not the same concern with me pushing my \_\_\_\_\_. People were generally cooperative and tended to be open. My problem with the documents is that the people that I was dealing with very rarely had a chance to review them.

STERN: That's true all the time.

GREENE: Before, and now we're talking ten years, eight years, after—or in many cases more than that if you're talking about earlier activities. That even in the Senate years, you're talking about a long timeframe, and people don't remember. And I tried a number of different techniques for working with that. One was to shut the machine off and just let them look at a document before talking about it. And the other.... And then to turn the machine back on and discuss it. And the other,

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which I ended up using more because I think it was more natural, was to just hand them the document and let them look it over and speak as they were looking at it in a very informal way as they came across something and get their sort of \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: Did you find... did you feel that being separated, physically separated, from the JFK Library was an advantage or disadvantage or both?

GREENE: Oh, it certainly wasn't an advantage. I particularly found it difficult as time wore on, because I had nobody to rub against, you know. And Larry and I were doing interviews together. There was a lot of exchanging of information with each other's questions. We read each other's transcriptions. I was doing summaries for him. He was.... And while each of us, I think, admired what the other was doing, we also each brought something that was different, a different perspective partly, I think, because we were a man and a woman. But he would catch things that I would... he would look at things in a way that I just didn't see. And on the other hand, I almost always... I added a certain perspective that he might not have had. And I missed that terribly. I was really in splendid—un-splendid—isolation, and that got to be a real disadvantage. I don't see any real positive reason for being separated other than the fact that I wanted to stay in Washington.

STERN: Mm-hmm. Sure. At this point, what would you say are the major gaps that are left, if you were telling someone who was about to do some more

interviews?

GREENE: Well, I'm starting to think that we should've had some adversarial interviews, whether it was the Teamsters or people from the McCarthy days. I would like to go back to somebody like some of the other....

STERN: This is just as true, by the way, in the JFK Collection. And I have made some effort to remedy it, but without a great deal of success.

GREENE: We really did write a lot of letters and got virtually no answers, even from people where we supposedly had an in and that somebody was going to arrange it. So I do think that that's certainly a gap. I think it's a shame we don't have Edward Kennedy.

STERN: Or \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: No. But even more I think, you know... and we had talked about the President. In terms of substance there's not a lot. He could bring a personal perspective. But with Robert, I mean, especially \_\_\_\_\_ years that he was alive, they worked together on issues. And I think that's a real disappointment. And I don't know why it never happened, because he agreed to do it, and it was always the timing was wrong. He was going to \_\_\_\_\_.

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STERN: Well, anyone could do it, but \_\_\_\_\_ the one.

GREENE: Somebody was always running for something. But I'd certainly like to get back. I didn't get to Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver]. And again it was a series of circumstances.

STERN: I remember \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: He was involved with all kinds of things, yes. And that would not have been a hard one to set up. He was perfectly willing. Again, it was a matter of timing. Ethel \_\_\_\_\_ how important I think it would be to get Ethel. And she's done so little, and she's a very key factor. I talked to Schlesinger about that. He wrote to me and wanted specifics on some of the things I thought she could \_\_\_\_\_ and wrote back to him. But I don't know if he ever did it. Politically we did the campaign, and we did the New York stuff fairly thoroughly. We could have done some more youth interviews. \_\_\_\_\_. But I regret more the people that we didn't get than \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: Yes.

STERN: Yes. Now would you do things differently today in any significant way if you were starting out now?

GREENE: Hmm. I think it was a pretty solid job. I mean I think we took the right approach. We had the JFK experience to go on. I do think—this is another point that I have to make: I think when you talk about the separation, I think it's not good to have as many interviews done by one person as on the Robert Kennedy Project.

STERN: Why do you say that?

GREENE: Because even though I was trying to be objective, I mean you can only... you still bring your own personality, your own values, your own history, your own knowledge, everything to it. And to have that as a continuum through so many interviews, I just think it would be—it's better to have more variety of interviewers.

STERN: I think you're right. It's inevitable. The mere fact of having a variety of interviewers means you have a variety of perspectives. And that in itself is just a good thing.

GREENE: Yes. And I mean you tend to base things on your own experience and knowledge. And if you have somebody else's to work off, you bring more variety.

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STERN: That's an interesting point, and I think that's probably true. I have missed that because in the phase that I have done, which is sort of the wrapping up of our project, I've done them all, and there aren't that many. But I've done whatever I've done all along. And it really would be nice, I've often thought, to have had someone else or even more than one other person around who was also doing interviews to talk to about it and to compare notes and get ideas. I think it would be an invaluable experience. The closest... Of course I have had John, and I've had even more so Bill [William W. Moss], because they both did it. But they're not doing it now, and there is the difference. John's "era" is really remote in the JFK Project. Bill is much closer. But still, I mean, Bill hasn't done any interviewing for six, seven years.

GREENE: Yes. And he did, you know, he didn't do a cross-section either.

STERN: That's right. I wonder if you can recall high points and low points or what you could perhaps say are unforgettable moments. The good old days.

GREENE: Well, there's one story that I do want to tell, especially because it sort of ties to the very beginning of the whole thing that \_\_\_\_\_. When I was getting ready to interview Justice Douglas [William O. Douglas], John came in for a heart-to-heart. And he said, "Listen, this guy's tough." He said, "After about 20 minutes with me, he just stood up and said, 'Well, I guess that's it,' and left the room." And I thought, oh, my God! Like I'm going to fall apart \_\_\_\_\_. He said, "Well, I just want you to know that that's the kind of guy he is." So I prepared like crazy. And the Supreme Court is a very intimidating place. I mean I'm not easily intimidated, but you have to... it's awesome. It's so quiet, and every footstep, you know, you make in the hall. Where they make you wait behind a velvet rope. And some guard goes to get somebody who comes and click-click-click is coming. And then they shepherd you in, into this enormous holding room. And then finally you go into the chamber. And I should preface this by saying that Justice Douglas had always been my father's hero. And I grew up... I think my father to this day thinks he's the only man in our country who's really suited to the presidency. So he was rather a Titan in my memory. And I walked over to the man at the desk. The man looked up. He finally looked up and said, "Come with me." Went to the office with him and checked in, and he went right on writing. "So what are we supposed to do?" So blah blah blah blah. And he explained. And he said, "Do you have any questions, written questions?" So I said, "Yes. But I'd rather he didn't look at them in advance, but there's nothing there." He looked at them. Nodded and said, "Fine." And he started off sort of gruff and terse, and his answers were very brief. But it really warmed up. And I don't know what the importance of this is except that the day that we were doing it was the day of the March on Death in Washington. I don't know if you remember. It was one of the major, major peace marches. And they had thousands. It was a rainy, miserable cold fall day. And they had thousands and thousands and thousands of kids, starting, I think, from the Capitol steps. Each one with the name and serial number of a dead \_\_\_\_\_ American. And it was so dramatic. When we finally finished this interview, which became more and more animated, we stopped, and we walked over... and we were sitting in

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sort of a window seat, looking out at the parade. And it was very, very dramatic and moving. And he just talked about that.... [too soft to hear] And he said, "We have not seen \_\_\_\_\_, because he \_\_\_\_\_. And he said, "Just call \_\_\_\_\_." [too soft] Well, I came back triumphant, because he didn't get up and walk out in the middle of the interview. He \_\_\_\_\_. [too soft] And went up there and had a delightful lunch and spent a lot of time, much more time, as a matter of fact, than he took with the interview. And in the course of it he said to me, "Do you like the \_\_\_\_\_?" [too soft] And he said, "No, no, no. I mean the \_\_\_\_\_." [too soft to hear] the books that he wrote. [too soft to hear] So that was a \_\_\_\_\_. [too soft] But I think he had a very \_\_\_\_\_. And I think he felt very isolated, you know, \_\_\_\_\_. [too soft]

STERN: Unforgettable \_\_\_\_\_?

GREENE: Well, most of them \_\_\_\_\_. [too soft]

STERN: [too soft]

GREENE: I would like to hear that. [too soft]

STERN: If you were talking to somebody now, say, who was setting up the Carter [Jimmy Carter] oral history project four years from now, \_\_\_\_\_, what advice, what lessons do you feel you could give them on the basis of your experience with the \_\_\_\_\_?

GREENE: Well, it's really the same thing, I think, that I've always said to the families. [too soft]

STERN: Is it right?

GREENE: It's absolutely right. And that [too soft] ...not necessarily \_\_\_\_\_. [too soft] ...his wife if we have lunch again and that kind of thing. But the interview was very shallow \_\_\_\_\_. Very shallow, quite taken with the \_\_\_\_\_. And it didn't work out. I think you're better off finding somebody who has good basic research techniques and a lot of interest and letting them develop the specific \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: What would you think that \_\_\_\_\_ you have to have a really important... you have to have a good sense of interpersonal relationships. You have to know when to push people. You have to know when not to push them.

GREENE: And how to push them if you're going to push them, so they don't they're being pushed.

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STERN: That's right. And there are so many judgments you have to make. And you have to make them instantly. You have no chance to think about it.

GREENE: That's right.

STERN: Do I say that? Do I tell him that he's wrong?

GREENE: See, I would never.... That's an interesting thing that you said as an example, because that's something I would never do, and I always stress that, that you don't ever say you're wrong. But rather how did it fit with what I \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: No, I have never said to someone you are wrong. But I have demonstrated to some.


GREENE: That's interesting because we also have another....

STERN: I've seen evidence that suggests that might not be precisely the way it happened or something like that. Or, on occasion, I've given the person a piece of paper and said \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: I think the same interpersonal skills that work in any other setting work in this.

STERN: Right.

GREENE: And part of it just, you know, you're with me, watching the person, making it clear that you are paying attention, that you think they're just marvelous and interesting. The worst thing you can do is fiddle with the mechanics or write notes or look around the room or... I mean I think no matter how lofty the position of the person may be, their human responses are exactly the same. It's funny because \_\_\_\_\_. I think it's amazing.



STERN: \_\_\_\_\_

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GREENE: \_\_\_\_\_



STERN: Yes, there's an interesting little lesson in that. When I first came to the Library, I was reading transcripts of Bill \_\_\_\_\_. And Bill's method of doing that was to frequently say: "Right, right..." He was acknowledging his sustained interest by saying "Right." But there were times when in using the term "right," he was agreeing. It appeared that he was agreeing with a statement, which looked bad in the transcript. That was not what he should have been doing. I pointed it out to him. He thought that I was absolutely right. And what I did after that was to... I found that the way I do it is by nodding my head.

GREENE: Yes, I would say "uh-huh."

STERN: Right.

GREENE: That, too.

STERN: Just so that the person knows that you're interested.

GREENE: Right.

STERN: And that you're listening.

GREENE: That's right.

STERN: But so that it would appear that you're \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: But thinking of my transcript, when I edited it, I would have taken some of those out.

STERN: Probably. Yes, certainly. There were some examples. Have you been satisfied with the way \_\_\_\_\_ such as Schlesinger? Have you \_\_\_\_\_?

GREENE: Yes. I was disappointed in Schlesinger in one respect, as I told him. I felt that he gave short shrift to Bedford-Stuyvesant, which I think was one of the few real legacies. I mean concrete legacies, as opposed to intangible legacies that Robert Kennedy left. Certainly \_\_\_\_\_ other than his opposition to Vietnam. I mean he was a major figure, but it was a nonspecific thing. But I thought that Bedford-Stuyvesant was a very significant project; not only in what it accomplished, but the fact that to this day it is one of the very few successful urban renewal projects. But also in the way it brought together the private sector, the corporate hierarchy, with the community. And the terrific problems that were involved in doing that. And the enormous skill which

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everybody, whatever their other perspectives may be, agreed could not have been done without Robert Kennedy, and how absolutely crucial he was to them in the birthing stages. And I thought Schlesinger gave that very short shrift and it was very superficial, and for the most part borrowed from Jack Newfield, who also did a very superficial—relatively superficial—job. And it bothered me because that to me... I mean I worked a lot on it and thought had done a good job on it. And he was very contrite. See, the thing is, that when I was leaving... I think it was when I was leaving on maternity leave in '75, Schlesinger was just getting busy on the book. And I don't even remember if I spoke to him or just knew he was coming, that he wanted to have access to these interviews. I wrote him a very lengthy memo, which I'm sure you would find in the files, in which I person by person told him... evaluated the interview and said what specific things I thought were there that he really should look for. I thought it would be useful to him. And which ones, even though they may



have been a name-brand personality, would not, for instance \_\_\_\_\_, were not really.... Unless you needed a \_\_\_\_\_ or something, they were not going to be very useful. And he seemed to find that valuable. And I made it very clear then that I thought the Bedford-Stuyvesant \_\_\_\_\_ was among the best. And so I was \_\_\_\_\_ a disappointment. I think, considering that Arthur Schlesinger is, although he does not claim to be, a fine historian in this respect, I think he did a good job. I think he really gave oral history a good name in that sense.

STERN: He says you did help a great deal. I think that's true. On the other at some point, you ought to take a look. It had an annotated copy of the book which Bill spent a good deal of time on. It was back in Waltham. So it was \_\_\_\_\_ years ago. Bill went through the book and checked the references, the footnotes, in the original oral history, and found some very striking... I felt that \_\_\_\_\_ missed, I think they were misuses of \_\_\_\_\_, yes.

GREENE: That's very interesting.

STERN: Places in which he lifted a section from an interview and then took another section a few pages later and put them together with an ellipse. And really distorted... not distorted in terms of the theme so much. But distorted in terms of the flow of events in the way they actually occurred; he gave it a false continuity, a false flow, if you see what I'm saying. Bill did a very nice job of putting that together. Schlesinger came out to Waltham once not long after. We had a little seminar, and he spoke to the group. I remember that. Basically he spoke about that day, was when Jimmy Carter had no ability to... he had no sense of the educational potential of the presidency to lead \_\_\_\_\_. And Bill asked him that question publicly. And I don't remember now. I can't quote exactly what he said. But I remember feeling that \_\_\_\_\_.

GREENE: Did he look at the annotated one?

STERN: I think he did. One in particular I remember was about J. Edgar Hoover. God know, I'm not a fan of J. Edgar Hoover. But I thought he had really distorted the material in an effort to make it as negative as possible.

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GREENE: Well, if he did that in any significant way with my interview, I didn't catch it.

STERN: Well, you'd have to literally go back and read the transcript and see.

GREENE: But I mean I would probably have an impression, and I didn't, from what he wrote, get the impression that he had distorted what the transcript was saying.

STERN: I'll see if I can dig up this annotated copy and the long memo that Bill wrote and see if I can send it to you.

GREENE: I would like very much to see that. I'd like that very much.

STERN: I think you'd enjoy some of it. How do you feel today, 30 years later, about, oh, the project?

GREENE: Other than old?

STERN: And about all this.... Is your feeling today that it is a very valuable historical tool as much as you thought then?

GREENE: Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't see how anybody can quarrel with it. It's like saying that if you had the opportunity to interview somebody who was with Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] when he delivered the Gettysburg Address, it's not worth doing. I think that there's a lot of oral history going on that's a total waste of time.

STERN: Like \_\_\_\_\_?

GREENE: Vastly \_\_\_\_\_ continuation of \_\_\_\_\_. Nobody's ever \_\_\_\_\_ and get anything out of it.

STERN: Right.

GREENE: But a properly conceived project, which I think both of these were, that fits with the documentation and that supports the documentation, is an invaluable resource, if it's done seriously and it's not flippant \_\_\_\_\_. I think \_\_\_\_\_ the Johnson Library their collection is—from what I know of it; I'm not an expert on that collection. But from what I know of it, their collection is certainly compromised by the fact that they had one man doing all the interviews who was a total insider.

STERN: Yes, I think that was true. I think \_\_\_\_\_ is going to \_\_\_\_\_ that job.

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GREENE: And there's now.... Well, yes, but they're almost having to reinvent the wheel in order to do it \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: In addition to which there is another interesting fact, which corresponds to the way... when you go over to the press room that we talked about an

hour ago. And that is they had a living ex-President for some time, for four years or whatever. And think that's a factor. And in addition even after that living ex-President, they had a living ex-First Lady who was—

GREENE: Intimately involved with \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: Very, very closely involved with everything. And so that in a sense you could say we had a disadvantage of not having had a living ex-President. But in another sense, it's an advantage, because clearly it's a two-sided coin.

GREENE: Absolutely. I think we both acknowledge that.

STERN: So you can't have it both ways. And we have it one way, and they had it the other way.

GREENE: I listened to the interview that he did with Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis]. And I don't know if that was typical.

STERN: Well....

GREENE: It was \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: This is Joe Frantz [Joe B. Frantz], isn't it?

GREENE: Yes. It was absolutely an abomination. In fact I thought she exercised the ultimate in strength in kicking him in the jaw, even for his audacity or his incipient.... It was just awful.

STERN: Well, I'm not surprised. I've got the transcript right here. But certainly the....

GREENE: Very polite and restrained.

STERN: Certainly—I don't think it's worth putting on the record. But that's not the kind of thing that Mike [Michael L. Gillette] \_\_\_\_\_ does.

GREENE: Oh, no, no, no, no. Mike is like too nice.

STERN: Very serious about his work.

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GREENE: No. And I think that was unfortunate, that he's really in many ways having to go back and redo all of them. I think one of the major problems with

oral history is that people tend to measure it against unreasonable standards. You know it's not in any way supposed to replay the documents.

STERN: Of course not. And I've often said when I've spoken about it, why do they assume—and no one should assume—for example, that written records are incontrovertible?

GREENE: Oh, \_\_\_\_\_ diary \_\_\_\_\_.

STERN: There are people who \_\_\_\_\_ lie or don't remember correctly. Or don't remember correctly.

GREENE: Or only have one perspective.

STERN: That's right.

GREENE: And in many ways they're even more... they don't have the \_\_\_\_\_ of a professional cross-examiner.

STERN: That's right. So everything has to be \_\_\_\_\_. And in the end it's a matter of judgment, and people must make judgments.

GREENE: That's right. And if you measure it against a reasonable standard and expect it to do only what it can possibly do, then I think it's a very successful method.

STERN: I agree completely. Do you have anything else to add?

GREENE: No. It's strange to be on the other side of the recorder. [Laughs]

STERN: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Roberta Greene Oral History Transcript – RFK #1  
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