

**Jim Whittaker Oral History Interview –RFK #2, 4/26/1969**  
Administrative Information

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**Interviewer:** Roberta W. Greene

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**Biographical Note**

Whittaker, Jim; Friend, associate, Robert F. Kennedy, 1965-1968; expedition leader, National Geographic climb, Mt. Kennedy, Yukon, Canada, 1965; campaign worker, Robert F. Kennedy for President, 1968. Whittaker discusses outdoor trips, such as river and ski trips, that he took with Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] and his family, touching upon the competitive nature of the Kennedys as well as RFK's personality. Whittaker also discusses the moments that led up to RFK's presidential candidacy (1968), among other issues.

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## Jim Whittaker – RFK #2

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Oral History Interview

with

JIM WHITTAKER

April 26, 1969  
Hickory Hill, McLean, Virginia  
By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: All right, why don't you begin where we left off yesterday? You were comparing the second trips with the first one and you were talking about Kerry and diving off a very high rock.

WHITTAKER: Yes, I guess the point that I wanted to make was the senator was standing on the far side of the river gorge with Ethel [Skakel Kennedy] and some of the other children and myself. And Kerry [Mary Kerry Kennedy] was over on the point where we had all dove off which was, I'd say, a good twenty to twenty-five feet above the river. The rock cliff fell away, and there was this huge pool and then the current of the river sweeping down so that it actually was quite a challenging area to dive into — much less the height. And so she stood there and her knees, you could see, were vibrating as she stood on the edge. I think it was Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy III] or one of the other children who was holding her so she wouldn't slip because when you dove, you had to spring out from the rock. If she had slipped, she'd have skidded down the face. And I think at that point my natural reaction would have been to say, "Well, Kerry, I think it's too rough for you." But instead, Bob and Ethel both said, "Come on Kerry, let's go, come on," and encouraged her. But Bob saw that the current was a problem and so he said, "Jim, maybe could you get in the water to catch her when she comes up, in case she hits and can't swim," this sort of thing. So I went in the water quickly and she stood there shaking and jumped and actually did it which was.... Well, I mean that's the extent to which the children were encouraged to do those things. And I think it just showed this was the

way Bob was, and he would do things at the fullest. And so this is what, I think, he taught the children that knew him.

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GREENE: Did you ever see Mrs. Kennedy restrain the children in any way?

WHITTAKER: Well, she would have been the most concerned, yes. And she might have even said, “Well, Bob, do you think she should do it?” or something. But she was more protective, I think, as a mother would be. And I know in the rapids, too, when we’d float down with life preservers and so forth, she’d be very concerned about them. And Bob would kind of encourage them to jump in and do it. And of course, he’d jump into the wildest rapids. In fact, the guides were concerned over that. And one time he jumped into a big rapids, and I remember those guys swearing; they were so alarmed. They said, “My God, we’ll lose him.” They were really concerned, but Bob just rode right down through them and got a big kick out of it. Of course, then it was hard to keep the children in after that. They wanted to jump out, too. And so they had to lay down the law that the children couldn’t do it only maybe one or two adults, so that the guides could keep an eye on them. And this was in sections of the river where they had lost a guide. The oar that he was maneuvering the raft with flipped him out and he was dragged under. I think his life belt hooked up on something and it held him under. So they were concerned that Bob might be in serious trouble, but he wasn’t. Actually, he knew, for instance, in kayaking on the river. . . . And this bothered me, and of course, I said, “Well, he had a better boat.” We had two kayaks on one of the trips, and Willy Schaessler who’s a good kayak white water man brought them along and he was showing Bob how to do it. Well, Bob would go down through these rapids without any trouble at all. And he went down through — in the Middle Fork, he went down through — they call it the River-of-No-Return, and the Impossible Canyon. And he went through that thing without tipping over, and I’d get in the blasted kayak and go about a hundred yards and tip. And when you’re upside down and the rocks are rushing by, it’s pretty tight. But Bob went through them and Willy Schaeffler who’d done a lot of white water work said he’d never seen anyone adjust, learn as quickly and become so proficient in such a short amount of time. And Bob seemed to be able to do all of these things like he had done in the mountains. This is what impressed me. I think he had a way — he could control himself. He could be comfortable in natural surroundings. And I think that he just had that natural ability, athletic ability or skill or whatever it is, timing and so forth, so that he did well in those things.

GREENE: There’s been a lot said about his physical daring. Some people even say that he was foolhardy, not because he took risks, but because he did things for which he really wasn’t adequately prepared.

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WHITTAKER: Well, I don’t think so. No, I think, I know a lot of people have mentioned the death wish and this sort of thing. But he, for instance, I think there is a

margin of safety. A mountain climber for a certain goal might exceed that margin of safety a little and take a great risk. Well, on the mountain Bob didn't exceed his margin of safety. Yet people would say, "Well, that was a foolish thing, to climb mountains." Well, as a professional mountaineer myself, it wasn't. I mean he was safe. But they might have thought he exceeded his margin of safety. I think in the river, too, the fact that he could do these things.... He didn't get into trouble. He's never been in trouble from these things. He knew his limitations and how far he could go. And the hell of it is that he could go farther than most people, and that a lot of these people can't do a damn thing and they think that he's taking a risk when he's really comfortable in what he's doing. And it's their own dumb ineptness that causes them to criticize his daring, when it's really not so much daring as skill, knowledge of what he can do.

GREENE:                   How did he feel about people who went along on these trips, or just friends in general, who might not be quite so eager for all this?

WHITTAKER:           Well, he understood it. On the Salmon [River in Idaho] there was a jackass mountain that we all started up. And it was pretty hot and we started walking up, and some are better than others in hiking, you see. And so we hiked along, he and Ethel and myself and a couple of others stuck together in kind of one band. And there were a couple of others. You know how you kind of string out, and the children string out. And I remember Lem Billings strung out way — first of all below, and then we got up to this high point. Well, the mountain kept going higher and higher, a series of rolls, false summits. There was no true summit. And we stopped and turned around and came back down. Lem Billings kept going, and Lem was suffering. I mean, he's not in the shape that Bob is in or anything else. But Lem [K. LeMoyne Billings] thought we were higher to begin with, and then after awhile concluded that we probably weren't because he hadn't seen any of us but then he thought, "Well, I'd like to get up to the top." So it was almost dark, and we wondered, "Where is Lem?" We'd been down at the camp on the river for an hour and a half or two hours. And we thought, "He could either have had a heart attack, or did a snake get him or what was it?" So finally I said, "Well, I'll go up and begin to look for him because if we don't find him before dark, then it's flashlights and we could really have a problem. I thought he might have had a heart attack

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and so I went up looking for him and found him coming down. And he was very thirsty. I had a canteen because it had been dry. And he was so tired that his legs were almost buckling on every step on the way down. But he had wanted to do it and he said, "I just wanted to do it." And Bob appreciated that fact. He appreciated the fact that Lem really extended himself in his own particular activity as far as he could. I mean somebody else like Bob or myself would have walked up there and down, but it meant more in Bob's mind that Lem had done this thing. And so he didn't criticize him for his inability to do it, but rather he praised him for the idea that he had and following it through to the fullest. And so this was what Bob would pick out. But then where would be the jokes like, "Nice going, Lem, so we find you up there prostrate over a rock," you know — and the kidding that always goes on. You always hear it, everybody kids about ,and in a sense challenges the others, questions and so forth. This is good; it stimulates activity.

GREENE: Were there ever people along that just weren't interested, where wasn't even a question of not being able to do it, but just weren't challenged by it in the same way?

WHITTAKER: Didn't participate?

GREENE: Yes.

WHITTAKER: On some of the trips yes, on some of the trips. But then some that came along, like Eunice [Mrs. R. Sargent Shriver] came along on one trip. I mean she's not the outdoor type that you'd associate with the river or rough river group. But yet she enjoyed, and she participated in the things that were less challenging. But everybody — I don't know. The people that would be invited all had something to contribute in some way; even if it was family, they contributed.

GREENE: So he didn't necessarily apply his own standards of challenge and daring to other people?

WHITTAKER: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I think his great facility was to see and to know people — I mean to really look into people. In the amount of time that I've spent with you now, he could know everything about you just about, which is how I felt he knew about me. The questions he would ask would be so damn accurate. I mean he would go right to the point, and he'd really — without embarrassing you so that you would volunteer information. It was just an amazing facility to look into people, so I think he would accept them as

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what they were. I don't know how he would act with someone if he intensely disliked them, I imagine it would be silence. But he had a feeling for people so that he, really, I think he handled them rather than let them handle.

GREENE: In your eulogy, you mentioned the Grand Canyon climb, the heat and the difficulty of getting out of the canyon. I think you even said that you thought for a while you might not make it.

WHITTAKER: True. I had considered that I might not make it, the fact that I might pass out from heat exhaustion or something.

GREENE: What else do you remember? Could you expand on that a bit?

WHITTAKER: Well, basically, it was just that it was so hot, that it was seven miles, and it was two in the afternoon and the sun was beaming down. It was a hundred and ten degrees, and most people sit in the shade and don't do anything. And he said, "Well, let's hike it." The fact that he could pull this group together and start up... I



was concerned for Ethel because I didn't know how any woman could do that. And Kathleen [H. Kenedy] went along too, but she was younger. But then Ethel is like steel. She doesn't look it, but she is. And so as we went up, Willy Schaeffler, who left just behind us, didn't show up. And we stopped under a cliff to get a little break in the sun and Willy still didn't show up. So I went back. I said, "Well, I'll go back and see what happened." Well, Willy had stopped and decided to turn around. He'd given up. And Willy Schaeffler is a mountain man and he said, "I can't make it." He said, "I'm going to go back." And so then I thought, "Boy, if Willy can't do it — and I knew how I felt, and there were little sparks in front of the eyes and everything else, we could really be in trouble. And we had a certain amount of water, and you had to ration it as you hiked, so it was a tough thing. I'll never forget then as we rallied in one point, and it was a question of going on or turning back and you really can't turn back because you're halfway up and this sort of thing. And then Bob quoted that...

GREENE: St. Crispian...

WHITTAKER: Yes, "St. Crispian's Day." It was a beautiful thing and I thought that... The hair on my scalp just rolled as he spoke that. He spoke a few lines of it, then Ethel would say, "Say the whole thing."

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And so he said the whole thing, and fantastic! But something that I didn't bring out in that eulogy was that then as we went up, we had with us Andy Williams...

GREENE: This is now climbing out of the Canyon?

WHITTAKER: Right. Then we had with us Andy Williams and George...

GREENE: Stevens?

WHITTAKER: No, Plimpton, George Plimpton. I mean they play tennis and they're fairly active. And Plimpton trained for the fight and, you know, he does certain things. Well, both of them were just almost out on their feet. So Plimpton — I was walking behind him and actually for a good part of the trail — and he'd weave, actually weave. I'm sure if he'd been with another group, he'd have gotten on a mule or waited for a mule to come. When we were almost near the top, a mule team came along catching up with us with some of the children. And Andy was really suffering, and he just didn't think he could make it. He said, "I'm not going to make it."

GREENE: Was Mrs. Kennedy the only woman there at this point?

WHITTAKER: And Kathleen....

GREENE: You were talking about Andy Williams, I think.

WHITTAKER: Yes, and Andy Williams said, “I just can’t make it.” And of course, everybody felt sorry for him and said, “That’s okay, Andy, what the heck! Get on a mule.” So Andy climbed on a mule. Here’s Ethel plodding along, you know. And it must have been just demoralizing as hell for Andy. He must have felt bad. [Interruption] So here’s Andy that gets on the mule; Plimpton is wobbling. He’s walking on his ankles, he’s so tired, but he’s not going to get on that mule. And you’ve just got to hand it to him; he didn’t. But he was the slowest in the party and wobbling and so forth. And then the thing that really, I think, shows what Bob Kennedy was was that as we came up near the top of the rim, there were people that knew we were coming up. And there was a fairly large crowd on top of the rim and the trail switches back up to the crest. And you can see from a distance that there is a crowd. And as we approached the thing — and I’m the mountain climber in the group, really, and the hiker and the one that should be aware of the total party and concerned,

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And I think I am aware of them — but as we approached the crest and we get into the swing of it and so forth and Andy’s riding on the mule and George is back always behind the party, Bob said, “Well, Andy, why don’t you get down now, get off that mule. I don’t think you have to ride this last section. Why don’t we just all walk up together.” And then he said, “George will be here in a second. We’ll all go up together.” And I thought, my God, here we are completely exhausted, and Bob was concerned enough for Andy’s well being and that he didn’t look bad riding on a mule and Ethel’s walking and so forth, that he has him get down and we all walked up. So the people don’t know who was riding or anything else. And I thought, my God, this to me is a guy that’s got a hell of a lot of compassion, that is looking out for other people, for his friends. And God, that is Bob Kennedy, and that’s the way he was — just an amazing man. And I was the one that should have noticed I mean, you know it’s my game — hiking. And here he had, in all that damned heat and the stickiness and the exhaustion, he was the one with the presence of mind to do that.

GREENE: Maybe he understood how cruel publicity can be.

WHITTAKER: Yes. He was a little more aware of publicity and.... Still, I mean what a tremendous depth, what depth he had. I mean he could have let him go up and he’d have looked better himself, incredible man!

GREENE: Did he frequently quote like that, from memory?

WHITTAKER: Yes, he had many things memorized. At night he loved the campfires and sitting around and everybody would say, “Well, let’s quote something.” But that was a stimulation. God, I’ll never forget riding in the car the first time, almost the first week that I stayed here. We drove somewhere and it took about three quarters of an hour. We all piled in the car together and we started this game of — and this is why I think the children are so aware of things. They played mental games, so that you’d be in the car and they’d say, “Okay, we’re thinking, who’ll start.” And they’ll say “Okay, you start.” And you’re thinking of the name of a famous person that starts with M. And then so then they

begin to guess, and then they say, “Okay is it a famous painter? nineteenth century?” and so forth. And the person that is thinking of M, if it’s Melchizedek or something, will say, “No, it’s not Michelangelo.” And so then that person doesn’t get a chance to ask a question.

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But then if that person that is thinking of M can’t think of a famous painter that starts with M, then they have to answer a question. Then they’ll say, “Is he alive, living in the present?” And then you’d have to answer truthfully. And then they continue to guess. Well, these games go on. I mean I was embarrassed. I’d get in the thing and they’d say, “Is it a president that was in office in — was it the fifth president of the United States?” And there’s little Michael [Lem Kennedy] over here answering these things and so forth. And then I would be mortified because I didn’t know those things. And so here they are building memory and stimulating and learning and....

GREENE:                   And always a game.

WHITTAKER:               And always a game and fun and laughs.

GREENE:                   Are there any other things about the river trips that you think are worth recalling?

WHITTAKER:               Not really specifically at this time, Roberta. There probably will be but I can’t think of them now. We went down the Hudson River on a trip, but that’s more Ethel than Bob. We went down for a white water trip on the Hudson. I flew back for the weekend for it. And Bob got in a kayak and went down. I think he placed fourth in the total race. There were over a hundred people participating, and I had just gotten in another one. But that’s more of an Ethel story. She got in our kayak. It was a two-man kayak, and it’s got a seat in the middle for someone to maneuver it singly, so that they aren’t sitting in the front or the back when they use it alone. Well, Ethel saw the third seat, and she said, “Well, that’s for me.” And the canoe is built for only two light people, and both Willy and I are fairly big. Well, Ethel got into it. Well, of course, it just would tip. You’d look sideways and the thing would tip over. So we just tipped over all the way down the Hudson. And we just tipped and got cold and the temperatures were freezing, and the boat was filled with water. And we’d tip a go through the rocks, and I mean it was just a horrible thing. And we did it for about three hours and in the final big rapid, we went through the boulders and Willy got thrown out and I mean it’s rough. And Willy got thrown out and went down backwards and hit some rocks with his head and saw stars, and he says this is the closest he’s ever come to drowning. And he finally ended up on a big boulder. And Ethel and I wedged with the canoe on another big rock in mid-stream, and Willy finally jumped from rock to rock and got to shore on the far side of the stream. Well, the finish of the course

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was down at the bridge, down another five hundred yards. And all the people are down there, and Bob’s waiting and all the people are hollering. We were about the last to finish because we tipped

over so many times. And I'm blue; I'm literally blue from cold, and Ethel was shaking. And there's no way we can get off this damn rock; the canoe's upside down and wedged against it, and there's no rope big enough to throw out from shore. And finally someone, an expert in a canoe, comes out above us and then whips down through the rapids and gets into the eddy behind our rock. And Ethel climbs aboard and goes into shore with him. He shoots down — he's very skilled — shoots down and goes in. Well now, I'm wandering about myself, and then I think well maybe I could use the canoe myself. And I turned it over and used it as a surfboard; I lay on it rather than — the paddle was gone. And so I paddled down through the — I let the current just kind of take me half in the water and half out. I came into shore and then Ethel says, "Well, are we going to finish?" And so we find some paddles and we come down through the race course. We come down and under the bridge and finish. And there's five thousand people there that give a cheer for Ethel.

GREENE:                You were the last ones in?

WHITTAKER:           We were the last ones in. And cold — they handed us coffee at the end of the race course. And I took that cup of coffee and the cup was empty before I got it to my mouth; I was shaking so much I just shook the coffee all the way out. I've never been as cold. Oh it was terrible. But that's more an Ethel story.

GREENE:                Did you also take skiing vacations with them?

WHITTAKER:           Yes, we went to Sun Valley [Idaho] three years in a row and had great fun skiing. Bob was a good skier, too. He went fast. He had more speed, I think, than style. But he loved to go fast.

GREENE:                Anything, in particular, that you remember about those trips?

WHITTAKER:           I remember one morning when he went to the top, and he'd been there a few days, and I came up. He always wanted to beat me, and we really competed. And I'd done some instructing as a — I'd instructed in the army a little bit, skiing, and I'd also had a ski school up in Seattle where I taught some skiing. And so Bob always — whenever

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I'd beat him or something, do something a little better — he said, "Well, as a ski instructor, don't you think you should really do better?" [Laughter] But that kind of kidding went on all the time.

And I remember he'd been skiing about five days at the Valley, and I came out the first day and he said, "Let's go up." And we went up before anyone else and before the crowds were on the mountain. We were standing at the top of College run, and I had a pair of new skis on that I hadn't skied on before, and I felt a little rocky. And he said, "Okay, let's go, and I'll see you at the bottom." And he started off down this run and he started — straight, just straight. And then I was behind him and I thought, "Well, I'm going to stay with him." I had made up my mind that

I'm not going to — he's not going to turn around and not find me there. And so we went down this mountain at about forty-five miles an hour, bouncing off the tops of these moguls just like a bat out of hell. I was terrified, terrified. I mean if I'd have lost a ski or something, it would have been almost total destruction, at least I would have been black and blue for a long time. So we went down, and he went like gangbusters, shot down this hill in good style. And we did a turn at the bottom and stopped and I was with him when we stopped. And he said, "Not bad for a ski instructor." And I said, "It's pretty good for someone who has so much trouble in a kayak."  
[Laughter]

GREENE: Did you ever get the feeling that he had any difficulty in leaving his job behind?

WHITTAKER: How do you mean?

GREENE: Well, sometimes I guess...

WHITTAKER: That he would take it with him?

GREENE: I don't mean literally....

WHITTAKER: Well, I think, for instance on the climb of Mount Kennedy, that perhaps he was so involved on the way up that he, I know, expressed to me the thought that it's so good to be doing these things. It's just like skiing. I think he expressed it to me, "Isn't it good to be doing these things because you have to be totally occupied with them." And so it's a form of complete recreation and rest. And I think occupies completely on these subjects rather than have to think about some of the other things. But I know it's true in climbing the mountain. I know he was more

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Preoccupied on the way down thinking about now and that he was coming back and the jobs that had to be done and this sort of thing. I know that's true and I know that's why he liked to ski hard and to ski fast. He wanted to be occupied with the problem then, and that's why it was such a great relaxation for him to do it. One can't really leave behind everything, but there are times when you've got to face what you're doing 'now' because, you have to. And so he liked those times. And that might have been in a sense why he extended himself as much as he did — why he did the things that he did.

GREENE: Did you ever get the feeling when you were around here and not doing such challenging things, that sometimes he was preoccupied and maybe the children felt it?

WHITTAKER: Well, what is preoccupied?

GREENE: Well, that he couldn't really give as much time to his family and the things he was doing with them as he would have liked, that the other things took precedence.

WHITTAKER: Well, no, I'm sure he felt that, but I don't know what father doesn't unless he doesn't have a job. I mean I don't know what father doesn't regret all of the time away from the children in a sense and so forth. But I mean you've got to have things in order, and there are certain things that have to be done and then there's a certain amount of time that has to go here and there. It's difficult to regulate it. But no, I'm sure that there were times when his thoughts were not necessarily in the activity that he was doing at the time. I mean my thoughts get that way, and I'm sure yours do too.

GREENE: You had mentioned yesterday that at a certain point you started to discuss his career and his political activities more with him. What kind of discussions would you usually have on these subjects?

WHITTAKER: Well, he'd ask about things, what was going on in Washington state. And then I'd tell him how the governor's race was going and what the man was like and what the senators were doing.... And then I'd ask him about things that I had heard that were going on in Washington. So we discussed this and I was very unsophisticated in those discussions. But I would have a basic, I suppose, public reaction that he could get, the way the general public would feel about a certain individual or certain issues. But

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then I would sit down to dinner at Hick Hill up here, and there'd be [Robert S.] McNamara on one side and there'd be General [Maxwell D.] Taylor and there'd be you know.... And I mean, my God, I'd sit there and I mean I had to pick it up, and I got interested in it. I realized that there's so much going on right here at Hickory Hill that's determining the shape of the nation. And so I would sit there.

I think the first dinner or two I thought, "My God," you know, and I wasn't up on current events. And these people were out and they'd throw me a tidbit about, "Well, what are the mountains like and so and so?" you know, which they felt was my only contribution. So then I thought well, at the time I thought, "By God, this is the last time that I won't be able to participate in these conversations." So I began to read. I mean I bought ten books when I left Hickory Hill on political history and on.... I thought, "By God, I can do better than I'm doing," which was Bob's attitude — "I think we can do better," and so that's how I felt. So that's when I began to get the interest and I grew in political knowledge. And I began to work with the party in the state and mainly on issues or things that were wrong and should be righted — these sort of things. I had been appointed on the State Parks and Recreation Commission; it should have been bipartisan but it was, in a sense, political. So I began to become more involved.

GREENE: Was he aware of this effort you were making?

WHITTAKER: Yes, he was. Every now and then there'd be a comment, and he'd say, "You've been reading, haven't you?" or something, "You've been doing some homework," he'd say.

GREENE: Do you think that this was a problem with many of his social friends, that they had difficulty or felt uncomfortable mixing with the...

WHITTAKER: Well, I know the politicians felt some of his social friends were clubs, I mean that they were not really any asset to the party. And I think that there probably were some that were not. But then that's all right; everyone has their own bag, in a sense, and if you've got it, flaunt it.

GREENE: Right. [Laughter]

Did he make any effort to keep the social friends and political friends apart, the way the president is said to have done?

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WHITTAKER: Not as much, I don't think, as the president. Certainly here at Hickory Hill, there was a cross section of athletes, politicians. I mean they all sat down in the same arena and went over everything. And so the politicians got a little bit of the athlete, and the athletes got a little bit of the politicians, and the poets and.... I mean it was a cross section, I think. I think it was a real hodgepodge, a real mix, and yet it would be comfortable. I know I felt, after some of the associations, comfortable sitting down with any of his people no matter what facet they represented because there was something that I had learned by then that I could discuss all evening if need be. And then, too, those people would extend themselves enough to make it interesting to me so...

GREENE: More give and take?

WHITTAKER: Yes, his friends had that ability to get beyond themselves. They would get out from themselves and they'd be interested in other people.

GREENE: You mentioned McNamara and General Taylor. Who else was around Hickory Hill between, let's say, '65 and '67 or early '68 before the decision to run? Who were most of the people with whom he'd be spending his time?

WHITTAKER: Oh, there are a lot of, oh gosh, there are a lot of people but.... I mean people would be coming in from all over and they.... Lord Harlech [David Ormsby-Gore] and Lem was around a lot, all those people. The [Pierre E.G.] [Nicole] Salingers would be in and all the people, a lot of Jack's people. And Teddy would come up a lot and the whole — all the Kennedy people. They had a lot of the theater people, movie people in, and of course, Andy Williams and that kind.

GREENE: Would you agree with those who say that most of their social friends, except perhaps people like you that he met himself, came in through Mrs. Kennedy?

WHITTAKER: Well, no, not necessarily. Well, I think I would probably, yes, to be honest about it. I think probably that most of the friends were accepted, by Ethel, and so that they were encouraged to come back a lot by Ethel. And Bob liked it, too, except Bob wasn't the social arranger. I mean he wasn't the one that said, "Well, let's have a..." I don't think. I think Ethel was the one to say,

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"Well, let's have a party tonight," or, "Let's have this and that." I think she was more socially inclined than Bob. And then she knew that if Bob liked them, well, he'd say, "You bet. Let's have this and that." Ethel was the catalyst, I think, that got it all going. I don't know. That's my opinion because if you asked me if Bob liked me and Ethel didn't, then I probably wouldn't have seen that much of Bob; I think that is a fair statement.

GREENE: Would it work in reverse, too?

WHITTAKER: Yes. If Ethel liked me and Bob didn't, I wouldn't see anything of Ethel. [Laughter] And that would be true.

GREENE: At what point did he...

WHITTAKER: But then I think he asked the opinions of anyone essentially, of anyone that had any feeling for politics. This was his great thing was that people would be in to interview him but, hell, they'd be answering the questions. I mean that's.... God, he had a facility to do that. And the interviewers, I'd hear say, "Well, I'm the one that should be asking the questions." But he'd be saying, "Well, how do you feel about...." and he'd turn the whole thing around.

GREENE: Some people have said that they got the feeling that that might be, at least partly a defense mechanism since he didn't like exposing himself too much.

WHITTAKER: I know it's easy when you ask a question. I like to ask a question, too. It's a nice thing. But I think the whole reason he did it was that he wanted to find out. I think he wanted to grow, and that's how he grew. And hell, that's how he grew so quickly. I mean he tapped every one of these sources and he had a fantastic reservoir. And then he could remember what they said and he learned from them. That's the only way he could grow the way he did. That was the reason for it, I'm sure, not.... He had answers. If you asked him a question, he'd have answers. And he wanted to know how other people thought and felt and what the rest of the country thought and felt.



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GREENE: At what point would you say that you first discussed or heard the possibility of his running for president ever, not just in '68, but when the topic first became a subject of discussion?

WHITTAKER: Well, I think when I first met him. I didn't ask him, "Are you running for president?" I think the first time, the most definite indication I had was when I introduced him at Seattle University as the next president of the United States.

GREENE: When would that be?

WHITTAKER: That was in '66. He came out to Seattle U. to deliver an address, and I at the time, I said, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to introduce you this way." And I said, "Do you mind?" And he said, "Well, do you mind?" And I said, "Hell, I don't mind." And I said, "Do you mind? I mean would it upset you?" And I don't remember asking him directly. I think I asked his advance man. I know who I asked. I asked Ethel on the phone before he came out. I said, "I've been thinking about this introduction and I'd like to do this." She said, "Well, it's up to you." And I said, "Well, will Bob really object?" And she said, "No, if you don't mind." She said, "Okay." And I introduced him and it was a fantastic introduction. I told them about the Mount Kennedy.... I graduated from Seattle U. and I received an honor when I came back from Everest. I'd been knocked off the basketball team for saving a life in the mountains. I wasn't supposed to be skiing because I was on the first string, and you're not supposed to ski. Well, I had been skiing, and there was a person that was caught in an avalanche. And I made the front page, and the coach read the dumb thing and, of course, he had to out me on the bench for the rest of the year. Well, I didn't get a letter. And so when I came back, there was a big ceremony and they awarded me my letter in mountain climbing. They made a sport of mountain climbing, and they said, "Anyone else who goes to the top of Mount Everest...." [Laughter] And so I was in the hall of fame at Seattle U., and so when I introduced him, I talked about the Mount Kennedy climb. And I kind of ribbed the senator a little bit, and I said, "Well, we got up the mountain," and we did this and that and so forth and it was a real terrifically funny.

And then I said, "Well, now I'd like to introduce the next President of the United States." Gees, everybody went wild. And there were people all over that campus. We had set speakers up outside, and there was a good two thousand people outside

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that couldn't get into the auditorium. I mean the place was jammed. And it just went wild. And so then Bob stood up and he talked about me a little bit which was damn nice of him. And he said, "We went up to do this thing and Jim said it was just a nice little trip," and he had them rolling in the aisles. And then he said about the mountain, that he got up there and he said that, "Jim said, 'Just stop right there on this cliff and I'll get this picture', and he said, "Excuse me

Reverend Fathers” — it’s a Catholic university — “but I said, ‘Just get me the hell off this mountain.’” And everybody went wild. But that, anyway, that was probably the most positive thing. And then, of course, as it built, his friends took stands on what he should and shouldn’t do.

GREENE: When do you think it became a question of people talking about it seriously and actually taking sides?

WHITTAKER: I think his Vietnam speech. Well, right in ‘66.

GREENE: That early?

WHITTAKER: Yes, I think so. In ‘67 it was going strong. There was so much pressure on him to do it. There were so many people who would come up to me and say, “What’s he going to do?” So I think it started that early. And I know he wanted to do it. He wanted to do it so much sooner than when he finally did. He was so sick about it. Most all of his political — I find — most of his political people said no, and I know my wife Blanche kept saying, yes. Nicole Salinger said, “You’ve got to do it, Bobby,” this and that. And I’ll admit that I was slower to come around than they were. I think they had a pure, feminine gut reaction.

GREENE: Would that have extended to Mrs. Kennedy, too?

WHITTAKER: Yes, I think so.

GREENE: Who can you remember that was in favor of it fairly early, besides the women, any of his political or staff people?

WHITTAKER: Well, I don’t know as well who came into it first. I’ll never forget that last night, though, when we had all decided, “Bobby, you’ve got to do it.” And everybody was more or less in accord and Bob wanted to.... It was one in the morning, and we stayed up until two still talking talking about it. This was the night of the day he made the.... The next morning Teddy came around, and I

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came down. Well, Bob had been down for breakfast about ten minutes earlier, and I came down and said, “Well, how is it this morning, Bob?” And he said, “Well, you won’t believe this, but everybody changed their mind.” Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] came around, and he had been talking to them. [Laughter]

GREENE: Changed their mind...

WHITTAKER: ... that he should run.

GREENE: Oh, that he should. This was the night of the fifteenth when they were writing the announcement?

WHITTAKER: That's right, when we were writing it.

GREENE: And people were still against it?

WHITTAKER: They were still against it.

GREENE: Who?

WHITTAKER: Well, as he said, the whole.... Of course, Adam [Walinsky] wasn't, but it's really not clear in my mind who was there that night. I happened to be out on something so I was spending the night. Al [Allard K.] Lowenstein was there. And you maybe, have talked to him about that evening. I mean he'll tell you it was, God, it was the.... The arguments went on all night on the thing whether he should or shouldn't, and I wasn't sure he was going to do it even then until the next morning when we were getting in the car to go. And then I thought, "By God, we're going to do it." I mean I really wasn't sure then. Well, I was, but I mean it was that much of a .... The friends were going over it then; Bob had made up his mind, and the friends were going over it then. I mean there were a lot that said no and a lot that said yes.

GREENE: Well, who were the holdouts?

WHITTAKER: The old guard, [Theodore C.] Sorensen. Well, Teddy [EMK] was not in favor.

GREENE: How much of a restraint was that, the fact that his brother was against it?

WHITTAKER: Well, I think Teddy was a big vote. You know, what if your twin brother said, "Well, look, I don't think you should do this," I think that's a real factor. I remember when we were leaving to get into the

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cars to go out there. Bobby had picked up little Maxwell, [Matthew M.T. Kenedy] no it was Douglas, [Douglas H. Kennedy] he picked up little Douglas and was holding Douglas in his arms on the step, you know, he was saying good-bye to some of the children. Some were going. He was standing there as we were kind of filing down to the cars, the speech writers, all his friends, and he said, "Do you think maybe I should take Douglas and hold him while I make this speech, so that it'll take away that ruthless image?" [Laughter] How he could joke at a time like that, I'll never know.

GREENE: Saving grace.

WHITTAKER: Oh, what a saving grace.

GREENE: Were you with them when they were writing the announcement speech?

WHITTAKER: Yes.

GREENE: Who worked on that, primarily?

WHITTAKER: They showed it to me. Well, Adam was working on it and. Well, I don't know. That information is best gotten from them, from, I think, [William] vanden Heuvel and those people.

GREENE: Vanden Heuvel is kind of an interesting figure. He sort of falls into both categories, a political and a social friend. How did this come about, and how does he fit in with the others?

WHITTAKER: You'd have to ask him.

GREENE: You don't have any....

WHITTAKER: Well, no. They knew him before I came into the scene, I think. I haven't mixed, I haven't plumbed the, I haven't analyzed the contacts of the friends that they have in Washington, D.C., which are most of all of the people they know. I've just come in and taken them at face value that they were friends. And if they weren't I knew about it, in a sense, so that any friend.... I've not looked into their past, in a sense, at all. I've just taken them from when I met them and gone forward, so that I don't know how they got involved or what particularly.... In most cases, I don't.

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GREENE: Anyway, how did your own role in the campaign develop?

WHITTAKER: I was growing politically, and then when all of this was going on, I kept my contacts in Washington alerted to it. And so we had Brock [Brodskman] Adams completely for Bobby. There were so many that weren't. I'd felt them out and felt somehow they shouldn't get into it at all. And these were the people like [Henry M.] Jackson and Maggie [Warren G. Magnuson] was the same way and most all of the political side of the state of Washington felt that Bob would be making a mistake to do it.

GREENE: What was the reasoning behind that? Were they pro-administration?

WHITTAKER: They were pro-administration, pro-Vietnam. Brock was the first one I went to. And so I called Brock and told him this was happening and that this was building and so we better get this organization going. So he turned his staff over to the initial planning of it. And when I came back that Sunday — Saturday

was the announcement? — I came back Sunday night I got in at nine o'clock and we met until three that morning shaping up the state.

GREENE: Who had asked you to take the chairman's job?

WHITTAKER: No one.

GREENE: You just took it?

WHITTAKER: I just took it, yes, and I told them that I had it. I mean no one said anything. I guess they all thought that I either could probably do the job at it, or they were afraid to say that you better not do it. I don't know. Nobody said yes or no. If they had said no, then I'd have wanted to be on some.... I'd have listened to him if Bob had said no or if his head campaign people out there had said no, I wouldn't have (kept the position). But they didn't and I just went ahead and took the damn thing.

GREENE: Yes. I forgot, I wanted to ask you one question a little bit back around the time before the announcement. Were there people who were holding out for some course other than either not going in at all or going in full force, some course in between, like supporting [Eugene J.] McCarthy?

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WHITTAKER: Yes, but I don't know who they were. There were all those middle grounds. Some people felt they should support, back McCarthy, but those people were the McCarthy people that wanted support there. Of course, most of them said, wait. For God's sake, wait because he can do it in '72. He's just got to wait." And the general advice was wait, and I talked to many of the senators. I remember talking to Maggie and he'd say, "Well, Jim, would you just...." And I talked to him for quite a bit and I'd bother him. I'd call his office and say, "Mag, what the hell are you doing now?" And finally he says, "Jim, damn it, I can't talk to the candidate." He said, "I'd just as soon you didn't keep hounding me on this thing." And he said, "I understand how you believe, but I've got my own problems." And I said, "Well, Okay, Maggie, I just want you to know. Well, I just don't want you to work for the other person, and I don't want to see stuff up around the state here that you're helping him." And he said, "I'm not." And I said, "Well, I heard there's somebody in your office doing this." And he said, "Well, it's not true." And I said, "Okay, whatever's fair, I'd appreciate it." And I did the same thing with Scoop [Henry M. Jackson] and most of them wanted to sit where they were, you know, you can understand. I suppose you've heard that they were hard to move. And of course, Brock went all out and Brock worked hard. Then I went to some of the others like — you've got that list — [Thomas S.] Foley who Bob went out and campaigned for. It's hard for me to justify some of their actions. Who was it, the president that said, "Forgive but don't forget"? I'm inclined to go along with that. There's some people that should've moved and didn't.

GREENE: How did he feel, particularly about Senator Jackson who had been such a strong supporter of his brother? Did he feel....

WHITTAKER: Well, he knew how he stood on Vietnam, and the whole issue was Vietnam. And Scoop is the biggest hawk there ever was, my God, look at this AMB [Anti-ballistic Missile] thing now. It just proves it. I tried to get together with him. When I was back in Washington last summer — no, the summer before, yes, the summer before, it was in October — and I said, “Bob, could we maybe have lunch with Scoop? And why not have Ethel come in and, you know, just have a casual lunch? He’s my Senator and I don’t think....” And he said, “Well, it’s not going to do any good, Jim.” He said, “It’s obvious how he stands.” And I said, “Well, let’s knock it around?” And so we had a lunch in the Senate chambers —

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Senate bean soup — and talked for half an hour. And Ethel is quite frank in her opinions and she asked Scoop, “Well, how can you justify this?” And so Scoop would talk about it. Then Bob finally excused himself, and Ethel and I sat and talked to Scoop a little bit longer. And Bob said he liked Scoop and Scoop said he liked Bob. Scoop told me that, “Any other time I’d be so far for him that....” He said, “Any other time, Jim, I’d be all for him.” And then he said, “But I won’t do anything against him in the state.” And then he said, “We’ll see what happens at the convention.” And so I said, “Well, would you promise that?” He said, “Yes.” He’s, I think, the greatest hawk in Washington. I think he’s more of a hawk than [Melvin R.] Laird. I’m glad that Laird got the damned secretary of Defense instead of Scoop because Scoop is really - gosh, I mean, he’s all military complex.

GREENE: Do you think that’s a personal philosophy or does it come also from the industry in Washington?

WHITTAKER: I think it comes partly from the industry in Washington. I really think that’s part of it, and I think part of it he really does believe. But I think that he’s had a military posture all his life, and I think that he feels like he’s the one that’s going to have to have this attitude.

GREENE: All right, then how did you go — oh, one more question. It’s all coming back. What was the senator’s relationship with the president at this point? Was he having any contacts with [Lyndon B.] Johnson during the period preceding the decision? How did this whole feud which became such a public point of discussion develop?

WHITTAKER: Well, yes. I mean isn’t that on record though? I mean that’s on record, I think.

GREENE: You don’t have anything to add to it?

WHITTAKER: Well, no, except that there were attempts made up to even the last week, and I think it's on record that....

GREENE: You mean the commission idea?

WHITTAKER: Well, the commission idea and, yes, just approaches to get some softening of pressure, some changing in attitude, and the president just getting berserk — I mean actually, hysterical. I think there are things

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off record that indicate.... And as far as the personal exchanges that there were — I think that enough is said, and I'm not one to relate what went on I think between them.

BEGIN TAPE II, SIDE I

WHITTAKER: You asked me a question then, right?

GREENE: Why don't we back up a little bit more and go over the whole situation that was working on Robert Kennedy during late '67 and early '68, the issues which he was confronting and which were forcing him into considering the presidency and...

WHITTAKER: Well, the overriding issue, of course, was Vietnam and the administration's lack of ability to really solve that problem or at least to move in a direction that might solve it. And the status quo seemed to be maintained; that was no prospect of any change in attitude. So that, I think, when Bob went to the president on this commission, to form this commission, and received no cooperation, and when he, I know, personally made many contacts with the president.... There was one time when Teddy went at three in the morning to discuss with the president the problem and...

GREENE: Edward Kennedy did?\*

WHITTAKER: And received a...

GREENE: I didn't realize that.

WHITTAKER: Yes, and received a totally irrational response.

GREENE: Do you have any idea about when that was?

WHITTAKER: Well, no. Except I know that it happened and that it was done, I think, within a week and a half of Bobby's announcing, as a final gesture. And there was no cooperation, no indication from the administration that any

change in attitude would take place. All right, and then there was no apparent hope that at that time Senator

\*Whittaker explains in interview #3 that he actually meant that EMK's 3 A.M. visit was to McCarthy not the president.

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McCarthy would be able to carry the necessary votes to make any changes. And it was felt that he was totally — well, not capable of winning an election. He was an unheard of man, essentially. And there was really only one other person that could maybe do it, and that happened to be Kennedy. And this, I think, was general public knowledge. Although most of the politicians felt he didn't have a chance, the public, I believe, felt he did. And I think Bob had this feeling or... Well, I wouldn't say that he wouldn't have run unless he had it because he believed so totally in the Vietnam thing that he had to get into it. Then I think because of that lack of direction, new direction, from the administration and because no one else could really do it, Bob was forced into it; he had to do it. He felt morally obligated to participate in this thing and go. I know at the time, too, Senator McCarthy was approached to form a group, a coalition, between the two, in all sincerity in Bob's own mind to form a united front against the administration.

GREENE: Who would have made this approach?

WHITTAKER: Well, Teddy made that approach.

GREENE: And was that before New Hampshire?

WHITTAKER: I think it was after New Hampshire. I think an approach was made before; a final approach was made after. But by then Senator McCarthy believed he had enough strength to do things on his own, I think. But anyway, that's Bob's reaction to the whole thing — it was the only thing he could do. And all of his friends, his social friends, all thought that that is what he had to do. His political friends, I think, told him to wait. I think if you made a universal statement, that was how it started because the wives, I know, and the people that were really involved in that had the emotional reaction. It was, in a sense, an emotional thing first and then a reasoned thing. But they said, "We've got to stop this. I mean it's got to stop and there's only one guy that can do it. And, Bob, you've got to do it." And so I think that was the thing. Politically, it was not a smart thing to do. I think morally, he had to do it. And then it began to be more politically reasonable as time went on.

GREENE: What was his personal feeling about McCarthy, aside from the fact that he didn't consider him presidential timber?

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WHITTAKER: Well, I think that in trying to communicate with him and to form this front that he found him to be detached, to be quite a detached person. I have my



opinions about McCarthy too, having visited with him and having run against him, run our campaign against him in the state of Washington and having campaigned with Bobby in Oregon against him, I mean I have my opinions, too, but Bob, just to be gracious, I think, Bob felt the man wasn't presidential timber. He just didn't have the capacity for the job. I think that's been proven, the fact that he didn't even participate in any further programs, the fact that he said he won't run for any Democratic post; if he ever ran, it wouldn't be in the Democratic party. I think the man is a professor living in a dream world. He's not practical and not...

GREENE: Would you say that those feelings were more or less shared by the senator?

WHITTAKER: I think so. I think that Bob felt that he'd done a great thing in coming out against Vietnam, that he'd done a good thing. I don't think that he felt, like some of the people that worked for McCarthy felt, that he was the only one that risked everything that he had to do it. He had nothing to risk and he knew it. But Bob would always say that he felt that the senator should be highly commended for his public stand on Vietnam and doing what he could do to stop the war.

GREENE: What other factor... Some people have said that the Kerner Commission Report [Report of the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders] were weighing on his mind at this time? Can you think of other things that he was influenced by in making his eventual decision?

WHITTAKER: Well, there were a lot of issues, but basically it was that the administration couldn't handle the problem, and we had to get that fellow out that was running the country, or that was trying to run the country. I mean there's no one else that could have done it, that really could have done it. And this was before the president decided to drop out. I remember calling Bob. I was in Los Angeles at the time that the president made that speech and, of course, I was jubilant, God. I called him — eleven o'clock from Los Angeles. So it was just about three in the morning — two in the morning, it was.

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GREENE: Only a very good friend would dare to do that!

WHITTAKER: And I talked to Bob and Ethel and I said, "I think it's the best news I've ever heard." And I said, "Congratulations." And he said, "It's not that easy, Jim." And I said, "Well, by God, as far as I'm concerned, you've done it." And he said, "Well, time will tell."

GREENE: Would you say that he felt he was the major factor or a major factor in the president's decision? Did he feel...

WHITTAKER: Yes, I think that he felt that he was the major factor. I mean I think it would be dumb to think that it was Senator McCarthy. He wasn't a threat.

But I think it was Bobby. Bobby was the guy that had him worried, and that's why the president hated Bobby so much.

GREENE: Did he seem happy even if he still wasn't sure he was home free? Did he seem like he felt that was actually a good start?

WHITTAKER: Bob, oh yes, yes he did. I mean it was one more camp established on the mountain.

GREENE: When you "elected" yourself Washington state chairman, did you run into any kind of problems either with the Kennedy professional staff or with the Washington local politicians because of your novice status?

WHITTAKER: Well, no. Most of the professional politicians in the state probably were happy to see me get into it because they thought I wouldn't be able to do much. Brock thought I could do the job. The other people that I knew thought I could. And they felt my contact, my close association with the senator would help strengthen our field out there in the state of Washington. Well, I think it... I mean it would be bragging, but it's not bragging, really; it's a fact to say that I think that we had the state. AND the fact that we carried even Humphrey because we got out and worked even for Humphrey. We were the only state west of the Mississippi. So we had built a force that would have nominated Bobby Kennedy. We participated. We got so damn involved that we didn't know what — we saw nothing else. We lived and ate and slept that campaign.

GREENE: And enjoyed it?

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WHITTAKER: And enjoyed every bit of it. Yes, because we were working for a cause and a guy that we loved. And the love I had for Bob, I gave to my campaign staffers, and they knew it. And we'd talk with him on the phone and we'd talk to Ethel and we'd have a communication with the main office. And these people loved him.

GREENE: Who were your main contacts back at the national headquarters?

WHITTAKER: Well, after the campaign got rolling and it was set up, we worked with the boiler room staff back there, and they had all of the people the whole campaign program. We were set up as a state, as one of the states, and the boiler room had control. The girl that had the control of our state was Carol Paolozz. And then in charge of the boiler room.... Well, in charge of a group of the states was Wayne Owens — have you met Wayne? He's working for Teddy now. And of course, Teddy was the one I'd contact, Teddy and Dave [David W.] Burkner were the ones that I'd contact for any key decisions. Teddy was kind of the one that oversaw the whole Boiler Room operation, and I suppose more with Dave than anybody else.

GREENE: Were you also serving kind of as a liaison between the candidate and the Washington (state) organization; as a personal friend if they had something they wanted to....

WHITTAKER: Yes, if there was any plans that they had or anything else, I would, yes. Well, I served more that, I suppose, than campaign chairman. I hired an executive to handle the headquarters. He was a paid executive who'd done campaigns before, and we had that staff working for us. And we had people assigned throughout the state. And so that was the good thing, I think, that made our organization so strong was that I could be that personal contact and then I'd say, "Well, the candidate.... This is what Bob did." Then I'd come back once in a while, and they'd say.... Then I talked to Bob and I talked to the staff, talked to the boiler room. And then I could go back out in the state, and we'd hold a meeting of all the staff out there and I'd tell them frankly everything, the details — "Well, we did this, then we went for a swim, and then we sat in the sauna and talked for about an hour." Well, you know it would just capture the imagination of the staff, and they'd be so fired out that they'd have the enthusiasm, you know, they would have done anything to do that. And so when Bob would come out or something, well, they felt like they knew him personally. So we had that. I think it was good.

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GREENE: You mentioned Brock Adams several times. Who else were you working closely with from the state of Washington?

WHITTAKER: Well, politically, it was first Brock, and he gets the credit for being the first congressman in the state to come out for the senator. And then we would pick up some of the lesser officials, and then Brock and myself would work on the senators and the Congress. We'd pick up (Floyd V.) Hicks and (Lloyd) Meeds. Foley, we couldn't.... Foley would vacillate and say, "Well, I'm in a very Republican area, and I'm really in trouble in my district and I really can't do anything." So he'd vacillate but then we went to his staff. I had four on his staff that were for Bobby, and so the staff were working on him.

GREENE: Was this frequently the case, for instance, in Jackson and Magnuson's cases.

WHITTAKER: In Jackson's staff there were people that were for Bobby, and in Maggie's staff there were people that would come and tell me how Maggie was going and how this was working. And Maggie — I felt good about Maggie. And all this was building and the state leaders that had been active, the old timers and so forth, were beginning to come around. And we went to the state convention down on the ocean, and we had a hospitality room. And our hospitality room was filled until three in the morning. And the others closed up at nine o'clock in the evening, the rooms of the other candidates. I mean they were all in there; they were all coming over. They were all moving. And of course, as I said, that night I think I talked to you about that night. Well, I don't know if I did on tape or not.

GREENE: At the end of the campaign?

WHITTAKER: Yes.

GREENE: No, I don't think we got that on tape. So if you want, we can say it now or you can save it for when we get to that point.

WHITTAKER: Well, maybe we should save it because.... Yes, maybe we can talk about that later because I see the children are milling around and we...

GREENE: It's time for the Blue Meanies?

WHITTAKER: Yes.

GREENE: Okay, why don't we stop?

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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