

Robert F. Wagner Oral History Interview -RFK #1, 9/6/1979
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Wagner, Robert F.; Mayor, New York City, 1954 - 1965; United States Ambassador to Spain, 1960 - 1964. Wagner discusses his relationship with Robert F. Kennedy [RFK], RFK's senatorial campaign in New York (1964), and the reform that followed RFK's senatorial victory and changed New York's Democratic Party, among other issues.

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Robert F. Wagner

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Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT F. WAGNER

September 6, 1979
New York, NY

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: This is the first oral history interview with former Mayor Robert Wagner. The date is September 6, 1979, and the place is his office at 425 Park Avenue in New York City. Okay, I was asking you about your relationship with Robert Kennedy, before he came to New York on his own during the administration and. . . .

WAGNER: Well, I knew Bob Kennedy through his brother, the president, knew him through his brother when Jack Kennedy was a congressman and then a United States senator. Way back, right after the war, when Kennedy, Jack Kennedy, was a congressman, we had a group of veterans' organizations, organized to call on congress to pass the old Wagner--what is it, Wagner-Taft [Robert A. Taft]? I'll have to think of the other senator, a senator from the South--housing bill [Wagner-Ellender (Allen J. Ellender)--Taft Housing Act of 1949], which would have helped veterans because of the big housing shortage right after World War II . . .

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: . . . and the four young leaders of the veterans conference, there were Jack Kennedy--Congressman Kennedy--Congressman Javits [Jacob K. Javits], and

Congressman Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr], and myself--I think I was borough president of Manhattan at the time. And then I saw Jack Kennedy off and on when he was here in New York. He was in the hospital here. I would meet Bobby and, of course, Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] was a lot younger. I remember expressing some interest in going to a Yale-Harvard football game. It must have been what, '52 or so, sometime in there. In those days we used to go back and forth on the specials from New York to New Haven for the game and people coming from Boston would take the train from Boston to New Haven, and I ran into Jack Kennedy, Congressman Kennedy, in the New Haven railroad station and Harvard just beat us by one touchdown and it was scored by Teddy Kennedy . . .

GREENE: Ah!

WAGNER: . . . so we were kidding a lot about it. Now Teddy is the one carrying the ball there in Washington. Bobby I knew, too, during the '60 campaign, when I was mayor of New York at the time when we were quite active in the Kennedy campaign, and also before that. I'd come out for John Kennedy well before the convention of '60 and then I was head of the New York delegation at the convention in 1960.

GREENE: Right. What was your feeling about Robert Kennedy's effort in New York? There was a lot of criticism that he was brash and . . .

WAGNER: You mean in '50?

GREENE: . . . arrogant. Yes.

WAGNER: Well, they. . . . The campaign here stunned a few of the old regulars, which was probably good, because the next year I had to battle with them in a primary campaign. And I realized and told Mike Prendergast [Michael H. Prendergast] and DeSapio [Carmine G. DeSapio] and the others that they were going to have some difficulty because I knew, from experience, that a lot of the Democrats--relatively independent Democrats, those with wealth--who would be appealed to for campaign contributions. I knew this from my own experience and the experience of some others that these people would not contribute or be organized by the Democratic state committee or any of the other local committees. We always had to have independent citizens committee for the teachers and labor, independent citizens committee for the academics. It was never consolidated under the political operation here either in the state or city but by a campaign committee of the candidate. The independent citizens would come from there and you would sort of

treat the state organization. . . . Well, they had to be around .
. . .

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: . . . but they didn't stand for very much. Now the Kennedys and their people running their national campaign understood this very well and what they did, much to, I'm sure, the chagrin of some of the people here, not only set up the independent people but had people from outside the state come in to run it.

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: Now this has been followed since then. In the last campaign--in '76--Carter [James E. Carter] had a fellow from--Doherty [Gerard F. Doherty]--a fellow named Doherty from Boston come down here and headed up the state setup. I feel. . . . I could understand that they could trust these people, they could trust them to see what was taking place and that their policies were going to be carried out and the loyalty would be to the president.

GREENE: And, in a sense, they could pull out afterwards and not leave all the New Yorkers. . . .

WAGNER: That's right, and organize it in a different way.

GREENE: Did you feel that way at the time, or is that something that you see in retrospect; were you offended at all?

WAGNER: I wasn't offended because I had done it all along. I had done it myself when I ran for mayor in '53 and then again in '57. '57 wasn't much of a contest, and of course, later on in '61 we just, we fought 'em, We didn't just let them come along as a limited partner, we went out and fought them and, as a result, we got into some of these difficulties that arose in '64 and then later, in '65.

I assume we won't spend any more time on the '60 campaign, but after the '60, in '61, when I ran on my own against the so-called bosses . . .

GREENE: Machine.

WAGNER: . . . both John Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy, whom I used to see in the White House with his brother, and O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] were very friendly to me, but very concerned that I couldn't win. Because they wanted organization, particularly Charlie Buckley [Charles A. Buckley]

in the Bronx, who was a great supporter of Jack Kennedy and very helpful to him when he ran in '60, and Charlie was a good friend of mine but I just didn't agree with him this time. The reason he had this great reputation in the Bronx organization was because nobody ever challenged him . . .

GREENE: Yes.

WAGNER: . . . and in '61 we did challenge him. I remember the . . . One of the ways of showing strength is to get a lot of signatures on petitions. Well, we got over 60,000 signatures for the primary contest. We knew they were all good; we had them double-checked because we knew that the organization people would go after our petitions very carefully and try to knock me off the ballot. Arthur Levitt, who was the candidate of the five leaders, had two hundred seventy-eight thousand signatures and I remember Jack Kennedy saying to me at that time, "Boy, you're in trouble! You know, almost four times the number of signatures, which indicates great strength. Well, Lou Harris [Louis Harris] was doing my polling for me then, who had also done polling for the president in '60 and also some since, after '60. I talked to Lou and we got some young people out and took some sample ballots--sample names--in four of the counties. We didn't bother about Staten Island, and I think we took about four or five thousand. They went out and found out that half of 'em were fake. And the other half, people said. . . . Well, one out of two in the other half said, "Yes, I signed the petition because the captain asked me to, but I'm going to vote for Wagner." So we had to make a decision, because I remember Jack Kennedy saying, "Oh boy, you're in tough shape!" and I wanted to overcome that because confidence is very important in a campaign of this sort to get support. Now, do we bring this out that half of them are fake and half of them are going to vote, in the other half, half of that group would vote for me?

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: Then I decided. . . . We kicked it around in our inner circle and I had to finally make the decision that we weren't going to say anything. Because, if we said that, we would alert these captains who would be a little more particular who they were going to bring out to vote on primary day. We got to primary day and we didn't have enough people in the Bronx who had courage enough to openly come to support, to man more than a third of the districts. They didn't want to have Charlie Buckley with the pad writing down they were against him publicly. A lot of them used to tell me--sometimes you'd believe and sometimes you wouldn't--"Yes, I'm going to vote for you, but

I can't say anything about it." Well, we won every district, even districts where we hadn't anybody there, which just showed the machine meant nothing. And. . . . Pardon me. [Interruption] Sorry.

GREENE: It showed how weak Buckley was.

WAGNER: Yes, it showed that there wasn't this great strength that they had. And, after that, I used to see, talk about this with Bob Kennedy and the president. We go to, in '60. We'll move along now.

GREENE: Let me just ask you one question. Did you tell the president and Robert Kennedy about the Harris poll results?

WAGNER: Afterward.

GREENE: Not at the time?

WAGNER: I didn't know. . . . You can't keep those things quiet.

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: We showed him the results later on. Of course, he and Lou were. . . .

GREENE: Were they kind of surprised?

WAGNER: They were quite. . . . Yeah, they were surprised. They didn't know whether I had made the right decision in not making it public, but, anyway, it worked out all right.

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: Maybe I should have; nobody'll ever know. So, anyway, we operated a little more independently and then we went after the state chairman. DeSapio was out of the picture; Sharkey [Joseph T. Sharkey] in Brooklyn was out; Charlie Buckley was deflated, although President Kennedy liked him very much as a person and I did too. One time we were toying with the idea of, try to make, have an understanding with Buckley, that he would get out as leader in the Bronx, but would not be challenged for his seat in Congress. And we could even get Herbert Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman], whom Buckley disliked and I think it was mutual. Lehman, who was active in the reform movement at the time, to, say after '61 and '62, "He's an older man like myself, why not let him stay in Congress a little more."

I mentioned this to the president one day, that maybe we'd work this and he said to me, "Why don't you talk to him?" meaning me, about Charlie Buckley. I said, "Look, you're the president." He said, "He growls at me. Growls at me!"

GREENE: He was intimidated by him.

WAGNER: Yeah, that's right. Well, he was a friend of his father's, you know, and old Charlie would growl at anybody. It was very funny. Well, anyway, it didn't work out and Charlie stayed on, which was all right with me. I got along well with Charlie, except then we got into the difficulty in '65, '64 and '65. We did get rid of Prendergast and during that we put in Billy McKeon [William H. McKeon], and for a while then I was wearing a few hats. I was mayor, and we had a Republican governor so I was sort of titular head of the party in the state, and I was clearing some of the patronage from Washington. In that, I got to talk to Bobby quite a bit on federal judges. They'd want to get lists from us up here or would tell us about some of the lists. . . .

GREENE: How did you find him on that sort of thing?

WAGNER: He was very reasonable, reasonable and tough.

GREENE: Yes.

WAGNER: You had to be in that job, always protecting his brother, which was very good and for the good of the party, but he was protecting his brother.

GREENE: How concerned was he with the quality of the judges? Was that a

WAGNER: Well, they began to clear them with committees from the American Bar Association. They got some pretty good judges.

GREENE: That wasn't a problem for you? You still had enough?

WAGNER: No. No. Never any problem. One time they sent up, they wanted to put a Republican on the bench. There were so many Democrats on the federal bench here, and they sent up the names of, oh, three or four people who were active in the Republican party, as well as pretty good lawyers. But these were fellows who were being mentioned to run for mayor, run for senator, run for governor, and I said, "What are we doing? You know, awarding people like that. There are a lot of other Republicans around." So they said, "Well, you send us a

name of a Republican and we'll see what we think of it."

Well, I called up a former judge here, one of the top lawyers in New York, Judge Simon Rifkind [Simon H. Rifkind], who was my father's first secretary in Washington when dad (Robert Ferdinand Wagner) first went to the United States Senate in 1927. Sy and I are friends. He used to be in our law firm, and I said to Sy, and he was one of those I used to consult with quite a lot when I was mayor, "Give me a name of a good Republican who is not in the political, active political field."

GREENE: Mainstream.

WAGNER: And he gave me judge, a fellow named McLean [Edward C. McLean] who was with one of the big Wall Street law firms, excellent lawyer. I think actually he was one of those lawyers who had defended Hiss [Alger Hiss], too, at the time, in that group of lawyers who had defended him. He lived in, I think, New Canaan, Connecticut, but that was within the Southern District Lines and. . . . Excellent background, active in the bar associations and they were very grateful and they nominated him. He only died a year or two ago, rather early in life, but he was an excellent judge.

But, interestingly enough, I saw John Bailey [John M. Bailey] shortly after McLean was sworn in as a judge. He was an old friend of mine and, of course, a great supporter of John Kennedy and was national chairman for him. He said, "What are you doing to me?" I said, "What, John?" He said, "This McLean!" "Well," I said, "he's a very high-class lawyer and I didn't want any of these fellows acting politically," and he said, "Acting politically! He's a judge up here in New Canaan and he was on the Republican nominating, the Republicans nominated him for the bench." You know, one of those things where you act at night, I guess, for a couple of hours a week. And he said, "All these Democratic leaders are saying, 'Now I see how you become a judge'--district judge--'you have to be a Republican to do it!'" [Laughter] It was very amusing.

GREENE: So he was no competition from New York but up in Connecticut. . . .

WAGNER: And I never realized that he had anything like that.

GREENE: That's funny.

WAGNER: John used to kid me about that all the time. But, anyway, so I did have, you know, contact. Bobby was attorney general, was very interested in some of our first antipoverty programs here. Actually, we started the antipoverty before the federal government really got into it. It

was in the Kennedy administration, though, that it began, from the national point of view, that they began to get some money, get around and, Mobilization for Youth program on the East Side, which, I guess, is still operating from here. We started that, and we did, out of the first financing of the study. And in those days, the local government, here, we were picking up 90 percent of the bill and the federal government, 10 percent. Now, it's just the opposite.

GREENE: The opposite, right.

WAGNER: And Bobby was very interested and we talked a lot on the phone on that when he came up and talked to me about it. So we funded it here. He was very interested and very active in these programs.

GREENE: Did he often have suggestions to offer, or it was mainly a question of keeping him aware of what you were doing?

WAGNER: No. On Mobilization, he had suggestions; he was very actively involved in it, very actively involved.

GREENE: Do you remember some of the things that he was most concerned with?

WAGNER: Gee, I don't off hand, but I know that he. . . . And he worked at it. He had Herbert Lehman phone me to make sure that I'd get up the money--the city would get up the money--and his. . . . He had some staff. . . . I went down to Washington and used to see him in his office there, in the attorney general's office, on these matters, on political matters as well. I can't remember anything specific.

GREENE: Who was at the '62 governor's race? Do you remember that? Stratton [Samuel S. Stratton] and Morgenthau [Robert M. Morgenthau] and. . . .

WAGNER: '62? Yeah.

GREENE: They were very active in that.

WAGNER: O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor], Frank O'Connor was there and I, we. . . . Lou Harris was involved in this a little bit too because he was, sort of, representing the president on the polls, and Jim Farley [James A. Farley] was very anxious to run for governor that year. It was the feeling that, down in Washington and some areas, that he was a little old, but this would have been the crowning gem for him, the final

gem in the crown of success of his. And O'Connor wanted it and Sam Stratton, and there was a concern because we had a tough opponent, Nelson Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller].

We had a lot of conferences on that with the president, with Bobby, and I was the one up here who was handling it, together with Paul Screvane [Paul R. Screvane], Beame [Abraham D. Beame], who were my fellows who ran on the ticket with me in '61. We took polls and the interesting thing about it was that Morgenthau ran well among the Democratic candidates 'cause the name was known . . .

GREENE: Name, right.

WAGNER: . . . and his father . . .

GREENE: His whole family.

WAGNER: . . . family name, almost like the Lehmans, a well-known family name. And it was decided that we would, at the White House, which included Bobby, that we would push for Morgenthau. Bob is a wonderful fellow; he wasn't a dynamic speaker but, in many ways, he wasn't a bad candidate. He was pretty good when he'd get in a debate with Nelson, but, on the stump, it was a little hard for him. At the convention, I think it was up in Syracuse . . .

GREENE: That's right.

WAGNER: . . . if I remember, and John English [John F. English] of Nassau, was very bitter. He was a big Frank O'Connor man. He stormed up on the platform on a ruling against Frank O'Connor. He was a nice guy, not a great district attorney, but he had won as president of the City Council here in New York and. . . . No, I guess he was. . . . No, that was later on. This time he was district attorney in '62, he was still district attorney in Queens. But he had a good presence and a good speaker and, what's more, he had, in many ways, a more able wife that he--his wife was more able than he was in many ways--Helen O'Connor, very, very able woman.

Well, anyway, we had this plot to put Bob Morgenthau over and we won at the convention. It was. . . . A little bitterness there. And then we had the first black on the statewide ticket, Ed Dudley [Edward R. Dudley]. Ed was borough president of Manhattan, and a former. . . . He was the first black ambassador in our history of the government. He was with Liberia, and a fine man; he's still. . . . He's a supreme court judge here in New York; I see him occasionally. And I had to persuade him to run; he didn't want to do it, but I said you have to break some, break down some barriers here. Well, as it turned out, he didn't

do any better than anybody else in the black areas, interestingly enough.

GREENE: Is that right?

WAGNER: A little bit. That often happens. . . . Exaggerated. . . .

GREENE: Was there ever any thought that he had dragged them down elsewhere?

WAGNER: No.

GREENE: Because I know, later on, when they considered running Paterson [Basil A. Paterson] in '68 as a running, for governor . . .

WAGNER: That was lieutenant-governor, yeah.

GREENE: . . . lieutenant-governor, yeah.

WAGNER: I nominated him, Paterson, at the time, Basil. I think, well, they always try to blame it on. . . . Well, I think that ticket was a terrible ticket. There were three Jewish candidates and one Catholic, and the Catholic was Paterson, the black. But you take, for instance, just to divert a second, I come from the Yorkville area, and it was always supposed to be the Nazis and all that sort of business. I was the assemblyman there. They used to attack me. I was friendly to the Jews; my father was. We were supposed to be Jewish, which was all right. I found out that we were, which was the time, half Irish and half German. But Lehman would run ahead of the ticket in that area. Herbert Lehman would run ahead of the ticket! Of course, most of these troublemakers were coming into Yorkville from the outside, they weren't living there.

GREENE: They weren't voting there.

WAGNER: We had Jewish assemblymen, Jewish aldermen, it made no difference, really. I think they're exaggerated sometime. It's when you lose, they look for some excuse.

Anyway, we also had a terrible time to get Arthur Levitt to run again. He had been beaten in '61. I beat him in the primaries in '61, and he wanted to just become a judge and get out of it altogether. He was an asset to the ticket, I always felt. And, finally, I had to persuade his wife, Dorothy [Dorothy Levitt], who's a great person, a great, old friend of mine. She was a school teacher for many years, and a very, very wonderful

woman, on the phone from Syracuse. I said, "He's going to be all right, he's going to win, and we need him," and she said, "Well, I don't listen to a lot of those politicians, but you, Bob, if you tell me you think he can do it, all right," because he was consulting with her. He ran, won big.

GREENE: And went on to win and win and win and win.

WAGNER: Yes. Well, he had been elected before that, but he thought that the '61 thing would hurt him very much. And it was so interesting, the day after the election, in '62, suddenly he appeared early in the morning at Gracie Mansion and he said, "I took a chance that you were still here." He said, "I just want to thank you for what you did to get me to run again." He said, "It's vindicated me--the vote did yesterday--and I feel great and I just want to thank you very much." We've always been great friends.

Anyway, that convention, I think as they do in so many of the state conventions, they don't pay enough attention to the candidate for the United States Senate. A lot of these politicians aren't that interested in the United States Senate because there's not much patronage: the mayor has it, the governor has it, the president, of course. Those are the jobs where the patronage emanates from. And they sort of let it drift, and they finally nominated Jim Donovan [James B. Donovan], who was head of the Board of Education--had been one of the principal lawyers at the Nuremburg Trials--but Jim was just a disaster as a candidate. He. . . .

GREENE: He had also helped to negotiate on the Cuban thing.

WAGNER: The Cuban thing, that's right. He had a lot of credentials and I knew the family, a Bronx family. But it was just a disaster; nobody paid enough attention to that contest of really trying to get a. . . . He looked pretty good, but I knew there were problems there because he. . . . I'd known him a long time.

GREENE: Was it also because Javits was so strong?

WAGNER: Javits was strong, too, but he didn't put up much of a campaign. But Javits was at that time, was very strong. Javits--I ran against Javits in '56.

GREENE: '56, right.

WAGNER: Lehman got out, and before I could even say anything I was him nominee when he retired, and Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] called me and asked me to run. I didn't

want to; I felt that the mayor of New York was a little more important than a first year senator, and my father had been there. Everybody said I wanted to go but it wasn't really so. You want to branch out on your own; I didn't want everybody to say, "His father did this, now what is he going to do about it?" And dad was in there in a different day and we were. . . . We had different problems than the old labor days and the social security days when we were first enacting these things; it was a different atmosphere then. And this, we get into that in '64, the same thing happened.

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: But anyway, I ran a million one hundred thousand votes ahead of the ticket, but I still lost by four hundred thousand because Stevenson lost by a million six, a million six; he just couldn't make it. But my son--my two sons--and myself are the only ones who remember the vote, you know, because you either you win or you don't win in this political business, no second place. And, well, anyway, that campaign ended with Morgenthau. He didn't do quite as badly as people anticipated; he got some votes because it's a well-known name, and he was a fellow of great integrity. But Nelson is a tough campaigner and had a lot of money. . . .

GREENE: Did you think the Kennedys did enough for Morgenthau?

WAGNER: Well, you know, I'm sure they tried to help all they could. They were interested in him. After all, you can do just so much and then it's up to the candidate, you know.

GREENE: But there's always criticism; it seems that. . . .

WAGNER: That's right. Should have done more here and there. But, after all, there were a lot of other states where they had elections; he just couldn't concentrate only in New York State, because I don't think Bobby, at that time, had any idea of running.

Well, anyway, let me get on to '60. Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] came in after the assassination in November '63. Just as a sideline, when he made his first speech to Congress, a few days after the assassination, suddenly I got a phone call. I was invited to come to the White House for breakfast and then go with, sit with the family for the speech. They said, you're invited, Dick Daley [Richard J. Daley] from Chicago, and a fellow named Sanders, Sanders, Sanders [Carl E. Sanders] of Texas, he was governor of Texas.

GREENE: Barefoot. . . . No, that wouldn't be Texas. Barefoot Sanders.

WAGNER: Barefoot Sanders, he was then governor of Texas, of Georgia.

GREENE: Georgia, Barefoot Sanders, yes.

WAGNER: Whatever his first name was, the only time I had ever met him in my life. And we couldn't figure out, the three of us, why we were picked out, and Johnson had a little talk with us privately before going up to the Hill. We went up and sat with the family, you know, and he said, "You know, in '60, you fellows were right," because I came out for Kennedy eventually, Dick Daley did and Sanders down in Georgia was one of the only ones down there, I guess, who did. "And," he said, "and I was wrong in '60," Johnson said. He was looking for the nomination in '60. He said, "Now I'm right." We said, "Okay, now you're right." [Laughter] That was the extent of the conversation. We went up and listened to the speech and then came back and had a buffet, or whatever it was, and then went on our way.

Johnson kept in touch with me, but I also saw Bobby, the attorney general, you know, I kept up the friendship with him. My first wife--my late wife--died in March of '64. She had been sick with cancer, and before that for quite a while back, six months, and Bobby came up to the funeral, the wake first. She was at Campbell's and then for the Mass, and the president came up, too. Then I lived at the Carlyle [Carlyle Hotel] because I wanted them to. I had the boys up. They wanted to get away from the Mansion until they redecorated the room where she and I lived together, the bedroom. Then I began to talk to Bobby a little bit. He was thinking about New York and he was always very nice about it. And he said, if you're interested in it, if I was interested in running for the Senate, then he had no interest, but if I didn't, then it was a different thing. At the same time Adlai Stevenson was talking to me along the same line, he was interested in it then. And I said, "Well, you've got to make up your mind, Adlai, you know, are you or not?" Well, you know, Adlai was a wonderful fellow but he had a hard time coming to a decision. I. . . . Well, before the convention in Atlantic City. . . . How's your time?

GREENE: Oh, my time is fine; I'm just watching the machine because it doesn't have a signal.

WAGNER: We'll try to make this. . . .

GREENE: No, no. I have plenty of time.

WAGNER: I talked to Bobby a few times, and we met in the Carlyle, had a drink there, and so on and so forth. And he was concerned about running for vice president. He was mentioned as a possibility. I don't know what discussions he had with Johnson about it, but he did say to me, "Well, you know, a president can make or break a vice president. He can just ignore him, put him in a closet and [not] give him any assignments, or he can give him a lot of assignments." And he didn't know what Johnson would do with him.

GREENE: Did he seem definitely to want it, would you say, at that point?

WAGNER: Vice president?

GREENE: Yes.

WAGNER: He certainly was talking about it. It was an attraction to him, but I think this was a fear. At least, I'm sure he expressed this to people who were closer to him far more than he did to me. As I said, my closeness was more with the brother, with Jack, but I knew Bobby and I liked him and we got along quite well. He, I think, had great doubts as to what would happen to him if he were elected vice president. Then a lot of his friends here in New York, John English and some others, who were talking to him about coming here and running for the Senate. Anyway, he would talk to me about it and I told him at that time, "Look, I am not a candidate, I don't want it, my wife just died, I don't know even whether I ever want to run again here, with the two boys and trying to take care of them. They were younger, you know, at school, one was at college, one was at prep school. I'm tired, I don't want to go back and forth to Washington. Plus the fact that I'm not that interested in it, for reasons I said before.

GREENE: Uh, hum.

WAGNER: And then we had some regional meetings. I remember one up in Westchester where a lot of the leaders came around, and they, a lot of them were very strong for Bobby.

GREENE: That was the one with English and McKeon, where they had a poll?

WAGNER: I think so.

GREENE: Yes.

WAGNER: And Adlai was still. . . . He didn't know what he wanted to do. And he had a claim, too, because he was actually living in New York as a representative of the UN [United Nations]; he was living at the Waldorf Towers. But when he finally got in touch with me, he said, "Well, I think I am interested," and I said, "It's a little too late." You know, the thing was too far gone; Bobby had too much of a lead on him, and he didn't try to challenge him. It began to move in that direction and then, in Atlantic City, at the convention, the presidential convention, I flew down with Bobby to it and I had a cocktail reception for him at the hotel where we were staying. I think it was the Ritz; it was terrible, I remember. In the old days the Ritz was great, but by the time, '64, it was in shambles. And we actually had all of the Democratic leaders and the county leaders in the state and some of the rank and file that he hadn't got a chance to meet. But that was my gesture to say that I was all for him at the convention, at the Democratic convention there. He had a lot of Senate rapport.

Johnson, in the meanwhile, was for him. He called me up, "He'd be a great fellow up there and we can control him," and he found out he didn't control him. Then, when we had the Democratic state convention, at that time we had a convention not a primary . . .

GREENE: It was in the Armory.

WAGNER: . . . at the Armory on 34th Street, and I nominated him, and acclamation and then he went on from there against Keating [Kenneth B. Keating].

GREENE: I have a number of questions on this period, up to the time . . .

WAGNER: Right.

GREENE: . . . that the decision was made. . . .

WAGNER: Is this what you want to hear?

GREENE: Exactly, but I have some other things about it before we move ahead.

Well, you didn't want to run yourself, and you say that Kennedy was interested; why was there this great lag in time, between the time that he first started to talk to you about it and, I think your final announcement of support wasn't until August. Why did you hold back all that time?

WAGNER: When was the convention? The convention was in July, wasn't it?

GREENE: No. The convention was in. . . .

WAGNER: The Democratic state convention, I mean, the national convention?

GREENE: The national convention was in August.

WAGNER: Was it?

GREENE: Yes, they were right close together; you went right from one to the other. I have to get the date, but it was very late that year . . .

WAGNER: Was it?

GREENE: . . . later than it usually is. Well, I can get the exact date, but. . . .

WAGNER: Well, I did say to him. . . . I thought it. . . . Well, we had a number. . . . He was in Washington and he'd come up to New York and we'd have a number of sessions at it. And I thought it would be much better that, rather than me immediately come out, let him move around and get the support, but I was trying to put it on him.

GREENE: Did he understand that, do you think?

WAGNER: I'm not so sure whether he did at times. He kept urging me to move. . . .

GREENE: Because your public statements were kind of equivocal. In one case, I remember you saying, ". . . an accomplished public official who deserves serious consideration," but you never really. . . . I thought maybe it was because of your loyalty to the reformers and their reluctance to see him come in.

WAGNER: Well, I think that a lot of them were unhappy about it. There was some gal, what was her name? A blond girl, was never any great friend of mine, but all of a sudden she got very excited about, had to stop Bobby, and I thought that. . . . I have sometimes a different approach to, maybe, those who are more direct. I said I think it has to build up, build up a little more. I think he understood it . . .

GREENE: Yes.

WAGNER: . . . because we had a ground plan and it all worked out. I took him down to the convention, met everybody,

and then we nominated him, and he got the nomination by acclamation. Sometimes people thought I moved too slowly, but at least we didn't have any trouble. Sometimes if you . . .

GREENE: Plunge in.

WAGNER: . . . plunge right in and then it all starts to break all over the place.

GREENE: Uh, huh. Back fire.

WAGNER: I think at least while I said, I didn't say the while that I wasn't interested. We held the floor. I mean there wasn't anybody trying to jump in and all, and, in the meantime, he was building up and some of the reformers, as you said, now that you mention it, were not very happy about it. They thought he was too political and of the old school, attached to the machine, the Buckleys, and so on and so forth.

GREENE: If you remember, also, on June 19 of that year was when Edward Kennedy had that airplane accident.

WAGNER: Oh, yes.

GREENE: And Robert Kennedy withdrew after that, and said he was no longer considering it . . .

WAGNER: That's right, I'd forgotten about that, yes.

GREENE: . . . and there was this real hiatus when nothing happened . . .

WAGNER: That's right.

GREENE: . . . and it wasn't until he went to Poland and Germany, in the end of June to the beginning of July, and that was the period where there was a lot of press, and the whole momentum started again.

WAGNER: That's right. Well, the . . . I think, too, I don't know with Johnson, but they were having little sparring matches, too.

GREENE: Right, and then on the twenty-ninth of July Johnson eliminated him by saying no one from the cabinet . . .

WAGNER: That's right, that's right.

GREENE: . . . would be the vice president and that really . . .

WAGNER: He knew at that time that he had. . . .

GREENE: It's interesting, that meeting that you referred to, which, I think, is the one that I'm thinking of, also, in Westchester where Billy McKeon and Jack English had this poll that English and Crotty [Peter J. Crotty] had, showing that Robert Kennedy had the greatest chance . . .

WAGNER: Peter Crotty from Buffalo, yes.

GREENE: I wonder if you felt that they were really trying to push you on that, and if you resented it at all, or if that was just. . . .

WAGNER: Well, I know they were trying to push me, you know, and I've dealt with those fellows a long while. Peter is still a very great friend of mine. I see him whenever he comes to New York. Yes, they were pushing. They were obviously pushing for him very hard, and I thought, at that time, we should keep it open a little bit. Adlai was still in the picture.

GREENE: That's what I was wondering, was if Stevenson . . .

WAGNER: Adlai was still in the picture, you know, he ran twice for the presidency, he deserved some consideration.

GREENE: What would have happened if Stevenson had decided--this is hypothetical--but if Stevenson had decided he did want to run.

WAGNER: Well, it would have been a donnybrook, I think. I think Kennedy would have won at the convention because. . . .

GREENE: You would have been in a tough spot.

WAGNER: In a tough spot, yes. But I never felt that Adlai--I think he had come to the conclusion himself--I never felt that he would really get around to it. He was being pushed by some of his people here, whether, you know, for him at that stage, to go in as a junior senator, a little odd.

GREENE: What about your concern that Robert Kennedy promised to listen to all the Democrats and not. . . . The whole bossism issue, which was heavily under discussion, was that something you talked with him about or was that something.

. . .

WAGNER: Well, we understood each other on that and he'd been there when I talked to. . . . I was a little tougher on him because I had to fight them, you know, and they were friendly with Charlie, and I was too, but, you know, after all, in the '61 primary Charlie Buckley was using his printing press in the basement of his club up there in the Bronx to get out scurrilous literature on me, pictures of Mrs. Roosevelt [Anna Eleanor Roosevelt], Stalin [Joseph V. Stalin], and myself, you know, it's a communist . . .

GREENE: He must be mad.

WAGNER: You know, it's a little hard to say he's a wonderful fellow and he's your friend and therefore he has to be mine. I remember Jack Kennedy saying to me, "Oh, you know, look what Hubert Humphrey tried to do to me in"--where was it--"West Virginia . . .

GREENE: What they did to Hubert Humphrey.

WAGNER: ". . . and I forgave him, why can't you be the same way with. . . ." [Interruption]

BEGIN TAPE II

GREENE: The other thing I was wondering if you ever discussed directly with him was the whole patronage issue, and did you seek any assurances on that, that you would still be consulted and. . . .

WAGNER: Oh, you mean on. . . . If he was with the Senate?

GREENE: If he was to be elected, yes.

WAGNER: Well, most of that patronage. . . . We had a state chairman, then Billy McKeon, and, at first, when, and McKeon was my choice, as well as the choice of the Kennedys in Washington. I do believe McKeon came from Albany, and for a while he just handled it north of the Bronx and I still kept it here. But it was a chore for me, and one that I didn't like very much. You know, that you had this constant pressure with these fellows. The most difficult thing in the world, as I'm sure you've already learned too, is to--particularly in politics--is to convince somebody that they haven't got the ability to fill a particular job, you know. And why was I getting involved? I had enough of my own patronage problems in the city, and I was glad to turn it over. [Interruption]

GREENE: You were not looking for that. . . . You said the patronage. . . .

WAGNER: That's right. Again, I remember one time, Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver]--he was in charge of, at that time, the Peace Corps--and he was coming up here to clear some names with me, and also to try to get John Rooney [John J. Rooney] over here in Brooklyn, a congressman, who was a real hard-core, but a great supporter of Jack Kennedy, a real hard-core organization man, to approve some reformer over there in his area, which we finally did, because we had to hit him on the head to do it. And Sarge was a great friend, but, you know, he's an exuberant fellow, and he wanted to get a fellow named Bill Haddad [William F. Haddad] . . .

GREENE: Oh, yeah.

WAGNER: . . . of the Peace Corps down there. Haddad was working for the World Telegram, I think, at that time, and, gee, he was beating my brains out, and I used to get sore at Bill because he'd never even ask me about it, you know, he'd write. And so he said would I okay Haddad. I said, "Provided you send him to darkest Africa, permanently," you know. And about two weeks later I was somewhere and Haddad was covering the meeting and he said, "What are you so mad at me for, may I ask? You told Sarge Shriver you wanted me to be sent permanently to darkest Africa." And I said, "You bet I did." But I was glad to get that out of the way and. . . . Well, he and I never had very much problems on the patronage; of course, we'd talk it out. Maybe he had with me, I don't know, but I never had, I never remember having any with him.

GREENE: No, I was more interested in whether you sought any assurances in advance that. . . .

WAGNER: I never had to ask him for any assurances, because the senators had their own problems. I think. . . . I remember the president, Johnson, saying to me, "Well, I'm glad you're for Bobby for the Senate. I think it would be all right." And he said, "You know, a president and a mayor of New York, we can take care of a first year senator." But he found out he couldn't.

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: The first judgeship he wanted, I think, was Rosenberg [Gustave G. Rosenberg] up here who had been president of the Board of Education, and he was being pushed by Alex Rose of the Liberal Party. He was a great supporter of Jack

Kennedy and, I thought, of Bobby, not as close as he was to Jack, you know, they were pushing. And they thought Bobby would give it to him, and Bobby wouldn't move, he wouldn't move at all. He asserted his influence, his independence, rather early. He could do it.

GREENE: On national issues as well.

WAGNER: Yes, that's right, that's right. I never worried so much about that. I know that when we were at the convention in '64, I think there was some concern down there in Atlantic City that there was going to be a movement to try to nominate him and, well, it didn't develop.

GREENE: In fact, Johnson arrange for it, if you remember, the film . . .

WAGNER: Yes.

GREENE: . . . arranged to have that film at the very end of the convention instead of in the beginning when it was supposed to have been presented because he was afraid of that.

WAGNER: They were worried that Bobby would make a speech early and all that sort of business; well, it didn't develop. Johnson, I had spoken to him about putting Ed Weisl [Edwin L. Weisl] in as the Democratic national committeeman. You had to change them at the Democratic convention. I don't know, they've changed the rules now, I suppose they've changed them. But that's when the national committeeman and woman--in those day there wasn't persons--for the next four years. DeSapio was one and, obviously, he wasn't going to be renominated because he was knocked out in '61 as leader and so on and so forth. He played no role in the convention; I think he wa a delegate or something. And I was chairman of the delegation again in '64. Anyway, we, what's his name, had some hesitation about being a candidate--Weisl--because he had had some law dispute with old Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] on some legal problem. He had represented one side, the opposite side. It got to be a little bitter and he had a feeling that Bobby Kennedy would be, the Kennedy family led by Bobby, would be against him, but it didn't develop at all. I called the president and said, "Most people up here thought Ed would be very good." Of course, he was close to Johnson, probably the closest one in the State of New York to Johnson, and man of independent wealth; he wasn't looking for anything for himself, he was older, fit in the picture pretty well.

I remember I was testifying at the '64 convention--I was

head of the foreign language groups with the Democratic National Committee--and I testified at a hearing for one of the committees right after Governor Wallace [George C. Wallace], the first time I ever saw him in action. And then I got a phone call as I was leaving the auditorium there where they had the hearing of this committee in Washington, and I went to a phone booth and called back this number. It was Walter Jenkins on the wire, calling for Johnson, saying, "Okay on Eddie Weisl." I always remember coming out of that. It was Walter Jenkins, one of the few times I ever talked to him. But, he was the fellow who said, "Okay on Ed, the president said okay on Eddie Weisl." Do you have some more questions?

GREENE: Yes. Well I was wondering about some of the, well, your nominating speech, for one thing. Was that something your staff wrote or was that something that the Kennedys helped with at the con. . . .

WAGNER: I think Marty Camp [] wrote it.

GREENE: Yes. And what about planning sessions, do you recall any after the convention, for the campaign?

WAGNER: Well, I know that we had a number of them that I was at. I mean, he had us in a group that were working and I went and spoke for him. And I remember he asked me to tape a television speech for him, I think a fifteen-minute speech, going after Keating as a liberal.

GREENE: Yes, that was toward the end of the campaign. Very, very good.

WAGNER: Yes, and we did cut him up quite a bit. We had a lot of research. We cut up Keating on it and I remember Bobby calling me up after the speech and saying that--I guess I did it live . . .

GREENE: Yes.

WAGNER: . . . and he said, "I think this is the turning point for us."

GREENE: A number of people said they thought that was the best thing. . . .

WAGNER: We cut him down, you know.

GREENE: Who wrote that speech, do you remember? Was that your staff?

WAGNER: Some of our staff, Julius Edelstein [Julius C. C. Edelstein], two or three others we had then.

GREENE: How was it decided that Bernie Ruggieri [Bernard J. Ruggieri] and Debs Myers [] would go over to the Kennedy campaign? Was that your offer or they asked for them, did you offer?

WAGNER: We, they asked for 'em, and we offered them to 'em. Debs was my press secretary and Bernie was my representative up in Albany who knew the Albany scene well. He's a very fine fellow and he became close to the Kennedy people.

GREENE: I was going to say, they apparently worked very, very well, which you don't find very frequently.

WAGNER: That's right. They were the fellows from my outfit that were over there with it. Bernie, I think, traveled with him, too, because he knew. . . . He had been up in Albany that length of time and he knew the local assemblymen and the senators, and he was helpful to Bobby.

GREENE: You said before, you thought of Bill Haddad. Remember he did that piece, "The Myth of Keating's Liberalism?" Do you remember that piece at all?

WAGNER: I think so, yes.

GREENE: Yes, that was a very effective. . . .

WAGNER: Very, very helpful. Yeah, very. . . . I liked Bill; now we're great friends.

GREENE: Yes, but he was, he is kind of brash, I guess.

WAGNER: Oh yes, he'd say the damndest things, never check, you know. I think he thought that was a smart newspaperman, you know how it is.

GREENE: Yes. What about some of the other people that were around Kennedy, vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel] and. . . .

WAGNER: Yes, Bill was a little unhappy with me at one point because I think I turned him down for approval on a job in Washington. I didn't think that he had it at that point.

GREENE: At what point was that?

WAGNER: I think he's improved a lot. This was what, in '62 or something like that.

GREENE: Oh, during your administration?

WAGNER: Yeah. It was quite a big job and I just didn't think he had that much experience. I like Bill now--he's over in Geneva--and we've been good friends since then. For some reason or other, I couldn't be for him when he ran for district attorney. I was for Bob Morgenthau. I was chairman of his campaign, so. . . . But we're good friends. I'd never let any of that stuff ever bother me, myself. Personally I'm not particularly bitter about it, and you can't be for everybody; you've got to make a decision once in a while. Therefore. . . . They were good, very devoted; a little pushy and arrogant, you know, but they wouldn't do it to me.

GREENE: Who in particular?

WAGNER: I used to hear that about them; they never would do it to me at that point. I've forgotten who. . . .

GREENE: What about Justin Feldman [Justin M. Feldman]? Of course he was a New Yorker, but. . . .

WAGNER: Yes, I knew Justin well before Bobby did. He used to be with Frank Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.]; he was in his law firm with him and I think he was, you know, he was associated with Roosevelt way back, in the reform movement on the West Side. Justin's all right, no great bargain, but he's a bright enough fellow, a little chesty, too.

GREENE: And then John Nolan [John E. Nolan] was his counterpart from the Kennedy side.

WAGNER: I didn't know him particularly well.

GREENE: You don't remember him, okay. And Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan] who was. . . .

WAGNER: Dolan is a nice guy. I liked Joe, yes.

GREENE: And John Douglas [John W. Douglas] and Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman]. I don't know if you were in much contact with them.

WAGNER: I know those fellows; they used to fly on the plane

when I went upstate with them a number of times and they'd always send a plane. They were from Washington.

GREENE: Right.

WAGNER: Yeah, I think they were in the attorney general's office.

GREENE: Justice Department.

WAGNER: Yes, they were very able fellows. I like them.

GREENE: What about basic strategy, do you remember discussions about how the campaign should proceed, and how you would handle some of the more delicate issues, and that sort of thing; of course, the carpetbagging was a big question then.

WAGNER: Yes. I know that in some of those sessions, and of course Debs was in there and so was Bernie, and then I did go upstate up with him and campaigned with him, particularly in the labor groups. He didn't know a lot of the labor leaders and I did, of course, did a lot of work with them. I was strong enough with labor at that point, that's why that speech was effective. I did get him, you know, and introduced him at a lot of the meetings with the central labor council here in New York, Dave Siegal's [David Siegal] union [Hotel and Restaurant Employee's and Bartenders International Union], the waiters and the cooks--you know, the chefs' union--Dave Siegal had one of those big ones. I knew all of them here and I went around with him, and I think it helped.

GREENE: How was he on those occasions? Did he work well with.
. . .

WAGNER: Yes, I think he was all right. I think he was most pleasant and he was a good campaigner. He worked at it, he shook hands, he was one of them, he was at the dinner. That was the post dinners. Somebody sent me that picture with him, and you know, he moved around.

GREENE: Because some people complained that he, or at least some said that he . . .

WAGNER: I don't think he was as warm as his brother.

GREENE: . . . that he had trouble with those things, and especially in this campaign because he was still kind of emotionally strained.

WAGNER: That's true, and it was a strain because it was in a new state for him, you know. I think he felt that a little bit but he worked, he was bright, you know, but he learned fast. And it isn't that difficult.

GREENE: How much were you able to do with the reformers? There were some, of course, that, even in '68, were just Kennedy haters, but were you able to . . .

WAGNER: Well, I think they had nothing else, they couldn't go anywhere else once he got the nomination. They began to come around. They talked of running some other people, I remember, at the time of the convention, but it never developed. The name was so good, you know, that it was pretty hard for them to, in light of what the brother did, you know, but they, the reformers, were tough to handle.

A classic was, around this time, or maybe just a little before '64, Ed Costikyan [Edward N. Costikyan] had been the leader, and Sy Rifkind had always given him, given me the commitment that he could do it from that law firm and they were getting, they finally said to him, "Are you going to come back to the law firm or are you going to be out?" and he wanted to go back. And Ed was getting a little stomach full of the leadership.

I wanted to put in Ray Jones [Thomas R. Jones]; he was the only leader in Manhattan outside of the reformers who supported me in '61 and he would be the first black in the United States to be a county leader. And he was smart, and he was loyal to me, and gave me some excellent people from his club. Herb Evans [Herbert B. Evans], who's now administrative judge of the court, Constance Baker Motley, Ed Dudley, Carter [Robert L. Carter] with the federal court now, any number of them, all came from his club in his area. You'd tell him, "Get me a good one, you know, and he would produce them, and if it was bad, he'd say, "Look, I can't take him, okay, I'll get you a good one."

Well, anyhow, I had to talk to the reformers from, I should say, eight o'clock 'til twelve-thirty every night for four or five nights, to persuade them to take the man who worked with them in the '61 campaign. Some of the co-leaders, the ladies, were the toughest of the lot. I finally got them all to be, some of them rather reluctantly, I got 'em to be for Ray for leader. Now I had to get the regulars; and, you know, it was about half and half.

I called up my friend, Duke Viggiano [Prospero V. Viggiano], who was the leader on the East Side--his son was just elected an assemblyman down there--and the Duke was the controlling influence on all of the leaders on the lower East Side. He went to Harvard [Harvard University], actually, and Lewis Academy, where I went to Taft. I played sports against him when I was at

Taft and then he went to Harvard and I went to Yale [Yale University]. So I got him on the phone from Gracie Mansion after I finally got the reformers all settled. They were in the other room; I was there with Ray and I said, "Duke, I think we ought to put Ray Jones in as leader"--to him Tammany Hall and the others New York County. And I said, "I want to give some reasons why I think Ray would be good." He said, "Just a minute, mr. mayor, do you want him?" I said, "Yes." He said, "That's good enough for me; [Laughter] you don't give me any reason."

GREENE: Isn't that something.

WAGNER: Here I worked for four or five nights with these people, from eight to twelve-thirty, you know, to convince them and in half a minute we got the whole lower East Side. It was the real difference between reformers and regulars, the classic example. So, Ray went in without any trouble.

GREENE: He was, later, kind of nasty to Kennedy and went after him on his civil rights record.

WAGNER: Yes, well, you know, and I liked Ray; he was a pretty good leader, but as somebody said, I wasn't there any more as the mayor with the muscle. I was around. He offered that surrogate spot to me and I wasn't the least bit interested in it. It was nice of him. It would have been a way out for him, but I told him he ought to be for Owen McGivern [Owen P. McGivern] who, at that time, could have both the regular and reform support. Owen had run as a sacrificial lamb against Keating for Court of Appeals. You know, everybody felt bad about Keating in '58, or rather '64, and he won big, but Owen is a very capable guy, and attractive, honorable, and so on and so forth. But I knew Jones had something going, and I was no longer the mayor. He called me, "What do you think?" and I told him, and he said, "I'm not going to do anything. I'm not going to do anything at this meeting tonight. Oh, come, we'll talk about it further." We went to the meeting and then he looked for this fellow, Klein [Irving J. Klein]. And I no longer can say, "Ray, you can't do it," you know, I could just say, "I don't think you should do it." Ray, he said, "We need a Jewish candidate," well, a lot of nonsense. He had the deal, which was too bad.

Well, how, what now, do we want to get into? I don't want to hold you up, or hold myself up.

GREENE: No, you're not holding me up; I don't want to hold you up.

WAGNER: Yeah, make it, what, another fifteen minutes?

GREENE: Sure. Fine. Do you recall any joint appearances with Kennedy during the campaign? Did you appear together? I can't even remember the. . . .

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, I remember going up in the airplane with him a number of places: Buffalo, Utica. I remember he told me up there, he said, "Boy, I didn't know the mayor of New York is so popular in Buffalo." Well, I'd been up there a lot. My father had run well and a lot of labor fellows up there, too, and they come into Utica, which was a tough town in more ways than one. We campaigned. . . . I'll always remember we had a private plane. . . .

GREENE: The Caroline. It was still used.

WAGNER: Yes, that's right, the Caroline. And when they hit the ground, they'd all applaud, or something like that. First time I had ever seen that--they were all glad to be down, I guess. It's this group around him. They were all good, bright fellows.

GREENE: Do you remember in the first week in October the polls were showing him almost behind, very, very barely ahead? Do you remember thinking he might lose, or did you feel that that was just the way you had expected it to go?

WAGNER: Well, I thought that he was going to overcome this. This was an initial reaction and Johnson was going to win so big. Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] was miserable; he was a miserable candidate. And that head of that ticket was very important, you know, in an election like that. I mean, I remember I was just the other way with Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] and Stevenson. I remember being upstate somewhere and the first polls came out in the Daily News on Stevenson-Eisenhower, seventy-five, twenty-five. I turned to somebody, I said, "Is this trip necessary?" You know, we were dead. Johnson won by two million that year. He did very well, himself, but, you know. . . .

GREENE: He still ran behind Johnson.

WAGNER: Yes, he had eight hundred thousand, if I remember, wasn't it?

GREENE: Yes, that was it.

WAGNER: Yes, he was way behind, but. . . . So, I mean, he had all the benefits, he had everything going for him, himself as well as Johnson and a terrible candidate,

Goldwater, and, who the hell ran against, oh, Keating. Bill Keating was not bad, but I think we broke him down a little bit.

GREENE: Do you remember the empty chair debate? That whole incident where they kept challenging each other to debates and . . .

WAGNER: I do remember, yes.

GREENE: . . . finally, Keating ended up debating an empty chair, claiming that Kennedy hadn't showed up when Kennedy was actually outside the studio and they had him locked out. Do you remember that incident?

WAGNER: Yes, I remember that.

GREENE: Because, that, supposedly, was a, really helped clinch it.

WAGNER: It seems that those dirty tricks always hurt you. I remember that, yes. But I. . . . Yeah, we went. . . . I did a lot of campaigning, as I remember, I mean, you know, some of the upstate, and then with the, particularly with the unions here and up in Harlem.

GREENE: Well, let's move on a little bit, since we don't have too much time, to the period following the election. Did you have any, before the whole leadership question arises, did you have any contacts with him in that period after the election that you remember?

WAGNER: Well, I was there election night at his headquarters and all that sort of business and. . . . Well, I think we saw each other. . . .

GREENE: Nothing of major. . . .

WAGNER: Nothing special. He was getting. . . . It wasn't any sort of great transformation for him. He was living in Washington, you know, he had the home and family. And I remember a few times when he was attorney general or maybe when he just went in the Senate of going out to the house there in Virginia for a swim and a meal or something like that. We talked politics with himself and some of his staff, maybe it was during the early part of the campaign, I forget which, but being out there a number of times. I always liked Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] and my late wife, Susan [Susan Edwards Wagner] came from Greenwich.

GREENE: Same place.

WAGNER: Her family came there and my wife was one of ten--the Edwards was an old family in Greenwich. They were there long before the Skakels got there, Skakels, rather, and the Edwardses used to go over and play at their place a lot and vice versa. The boys knew each other so it was a friendly relationship there. Jim Skakel [James Skakel] I see every once in a while here in New York and, well, anyway. . . .

No, we got back into our relative positions. But I had, since '61, the victory in '61, I had been working with the legislative leaders closer than I had before because the organization was a little decimated and they had. . . . Travia [Anthony J. Travia] was the minority leader in the Assembly and Joseph Zaretzki [Joseph L. Zaretzki] the minority leader in the Senate.

Well, after the election of '64 they woke up and they were, one was the potential speaker and the other one was the potential majority leader and I had, trying to get them to cut down on the no shows in Albany and get issues. Rockefeller was killing them on the issues; he had a good staff, these fellows had nothing and talked about stuff that, you know, twenty years ago may have been something for that time, and they were beginning to develop a little better. Right after the election they came to see me at Gracie Mansion and I said to them, "When do you start the budget hearings?" Well, they said, "We haven't heard of the budget hearings. We have to wait for the director of the budget," a Rockefeller, a fellow named Norm Hurd [Thomas Norman Hurd], H-U-R-D--"he'll tell us when they're going to have the hearing." I said, "Look, you fellows now are in the majority; you tell him." "Oh," they said, "we can't do that." They were so used to being the minority, you know, and I said, "Get on the phone there now, or I'll get on the phone, and you call Hurd and you tell him when you want to start the hearings, legislative hearings." They got on and Hurd said, "Of course, anytime you say." And they felt pretty good about it, you know.

But it took them a while to get adjusted and then the rumbling started, about then, that there should be a change in the leadership and that Stanley Steingut wanted to be, succeed his father. His father was a nice, fine man, and I knew Stanley from a boy. His father was often nice to me when I first went to Albany as a young assemblyman just after law school. I was elected, nominated, two weeks after I got out of law school in '37.

GREENE: No kidding. I didn't know that.

WAGNER: In '39 I went to the Assembly. It was a big change for me. Irwin Steingut was the Democratic leader up there.

Well, then they went after Joe Zaretzki, this and that. They were going to have an upstater, and they were floating some names and I said to them, I said to these fellows, "What do you want to start a fight about? These men were good enough to be the minority leaders; why, how do you justifiably dump them?"

GREENE: Who were you talking to at that point?

WAGNER: These were Buckley . . .

GREENE: English, McKeon.

WAGNER: . . . English, and my friend Bill Luddy [William E. Luddy] up in Westchester, Peter Crotty . . .

GREENE: O'Connell [Daniel P. O'Connell].

WAGNER: . . . and old Dan. Dan, interestingly enough, he and I became closer friends when I beat the organization in '61. He was one of the first ones to call me up and he said, "Attaboy, you're like Andy Jackson [Andrew Jackson]. Get rid of all of them out of the house," and he said, "and get rid of that Prendergast out of Albany." It was very funny; he didn't like any of them. But, you know, they were talking about this, well, Dan had a candidate for senator to be the leader in the Senate.

GREENE: Bronston [Jack E. Bronston]?

WAGNER: Who?

GREENE: Bronston?

WAGNER: No. He was down here. No, he had a fellow who, it was this senator up around that area. Later we found out he was such an archconservative, nobody could take him. No, he was either Irish or WASP, or something or other; whatever he was, he didn't last long. He was one of the first to . . . I just thought this was outrageous to these fellows. I mean they didn't say they were incompetent; they wanted somebody, somebody else wanted the job. This is a hell of a way to run a railroad. And Ray Jones backed my position in Manhattan and Weinstein [Moses M. Weinstein], he was a leader over in Queens, and he was an able guy, an assemblyman, and we had some of these leaders who agreed with me. This got a little tougher, and then Bobby sort of teamed up with . . . They got him in to some agreement, he was very friendly with Peter Crotty, and Charlie and I used to go up and see Buckley on the QT.

GREENE: During this period?

WAGNER: During this period, fighting all along. I used to go up to a fellow named Frank Barry [Francis J. Barry], own the Circle Line. He was a great friend of mine and a great friend of Charlie, and he had a lovely home in Riverdale. And I used to take a small car, go up with Charlie, he had another car and we'd argue. And I said, "Charlie, do I have to beat you again? I beat you once in '61. You think you'd learn a lesson. Why do you want to fight?" Well, blah, blah, blah, he was a grouchy fellow but he was amusing, though. He'd rather talk about his horses than anything else. "Well, I made a commitment." They got him; they caught him one time. They all had a little pow-wow and they made commitments that it was going to be Stanley and some upstate fellow. Dan O'Connell, they got him in there because they were going to put this senator from up there--I can't remember his name; I'll try to look him up. But Bronston lied to me. . . .

GREENE: In what way?

WAGNER: Well, he told the truth to me. He said he was offered a lulu to vote some way or other and then he got under oath and denied it and I happened to be right there. From then on it was something, but that's off the record. I don't want to say that about anyone because that's a pretty rough statement, but it's true.

Well, but anyway, the up-shot of it was. . . . I remember Weisl came to me and he said he had to get the party together. And I said, "Get the party together, fine, on your terms!" I said, "I think this is a terrible thing."

GREENE: Where was Weisl on this?

WAGNER: Weisl was trying to be the man in the middle but he was trying to please Bobby, I think, on this they were together a little bit on this one and Bobby never talked to me directly on it.

GREENE: Never. That's what I was wondering, in the whole . . .

WAGNER: No, he never. . . . Some of his people said why don't you go along with these other fellows. . . .

GREENE: Did you have the feeling in that time that Kennedy really was behind it, or that he was just . . .

WAGNER: I think he was just part of it. I think that Steingut, Crotty, English, these fellows wanted to take over.

They wanted to take over the. . . . They wanted to have their men in and they wanted to take over the state.

GREENE: You must have seen this as a threat to your own . . .

WAGNER: That's right.

GREENE: . . . power base, too.

WAGNER: That's right, sure. What are they going to do down here in New York. Same old crowd getting back into power again. We kept them down. But this was Buckley emerging, these other fellows, Steingut emerging, 'cause we beat him in the primary. He was against us in '61, all of this element. And this is what I was concerned about, this element was going to, you know, really turn back the, in my opinion, whether rightly or wrongly they'd turn back the clock. And I don't think Bobby wanted to get into that. He wasn't that deeply involved, but he was sympathetic to them because they were all his people, I mean, he didn't put them off. I then got in touch with Mr. Rockefeller.

GREENE: Okay, but before that there was the whole incident where you sent Ray Jones up there . . .

WAGNER: Yeah, that's right.

GREENE: . . . and he met with McKeon and English and I guess a few of the others and there was, supposedly, the offer of the lulu to Zaretzki if he would step down and . . .

WAGNER: That's right.

GREENE: Yes. And they came back . . .

WAGNER: And I suppose, I think they offered a lulu to Ornstein [Franklin H. Ornstein], too, if he would vote for them. He didn't. He stayed with us, he and Wilson [Jerome L. Wilson] and some of the other senators from New York. The reformers were all with us.

GREENE: Also with Raymond you sent O'Rourke [Maurice J. O'Rourke] of the election commission.

WAGNER: Mossie O'Rourke.

GREENE: Yes. He was. . . . When the commission was established to investigate this, O'Rourke, who was present at the meeting, denied having. . . .

WAGNER: That's right.

GREENE: I'd love to hear your version of that. Did they just decide they didn't. . . .

WAGNER: They didn't want to get involved. He was friendly with the Kennedys and Mossie was a great fellow. I liked him. I was rather shocked when he didn't have much courage, you know, because he told me, he came down with Ray and told me what took place there and then he said he couldn't remember. And that got my German and Irish up.

GREENE: Both, simultaneously, eh? Because Edelstein went out and he, for the first time, referred to it as the Kennedy block and that was the first. . . .

WAGNER: Who did?

GREENE: Edelstein.

WAGNER: Eddie, oh, Julius? yes.

GREENE: Yes, and that was the first time that anyone had linked Kennedy to this . . .

WAGNER: Well, these were all . . .

GREENE: . . . and then you came out and called a press conference and denied that Kennedy was behind it.

WAGNER: Yes, his supporters were, lucky we're not responsible for all of his supporters, but they had a meeting and they all took a blood oath and this was what Charlie. . . . It was his problem, you know. And I said, "What the hell's the matter with you. What's wrong with Zaretzki and, they're all right." "Well, I made a commitment; maybe I made a mistake, but I made a commitment." And he felt he had and I'd almost convinced him, and then he'd say, "Ah, no I can't do it; I made a commitment." And he was going to get something; they were all going to get a piece of the pie.

GREENE: Did you see this accusation as a real attempt at bribery or was that just a kind of a behind the scenes wheeling and dealing that always goes on?

WAGNER: You're right on both counts. I assume it's a form of bribery but I suppose it's done at every, not only in public life but in corporate world, and the business world.

GREENE: Sure. But it was an opportunity for you to turn it to your own advantage.

WAGNER: That's right. That's right. I testified on it before the state commissioner.

GREENE: Legislative Investigation Commission, I think it was called.

WAGNER: I think it was the . . . no, it was the State Investigation Committee, created a number of years before, crime, something or other. So did Ray Jones. And a couple of these fellows conveniently forgot a lot, and I'm not saying Jones did, but some of the others conveniently forgot things.

GREENE: O'Rourke, particularly was interesting.

WAGNER: That's right.

GREENE: Okay, I didn't mean to interrupt.

WAGNER: But anyway, we just. . . . We had enough votes in Albany to block it. The Republicans wouldn't give any votes to the other side--to our side--because, if they did, they had, they could. . . . All they needed was to give them some and they had a majority to elect a speaker and they. . . . Stanley was always the one who wanted it, the speaker. In the Senate they were changing around on. . . . I think they mentioned Bronston and a couple of upstate fellows. Their argument was it was about time upstate had some leadership and they didn't have any, any material for the leadership. And I said, again, "You've got two men who you say served well as minority leaders; now, just because they're in the majority, you've got to discard them." How do you do that, unless you go back to the old days of, "The boss doesn't like them," and out they go and team up and we put who we want in there. I was being blamed for holding up progress because, six weeks, I guess it was . . .

GREENE: At least.

WAGNER: . . . and couldn't organize and the world was going to come to an end; I was getting really kicked around. Finally, we just wouldn't quit, we just held, the reformers held, and one day I got a call from Nelson Rockefeller in the morning and he said, "I think you're right in this and I think I can get along with Joe and Tony. I had been getting along with them; I thought they were all right and I got the

votes for them." And, I said, "I'll tell them to get in touch; we'll get over and see you right away." I called them and said, "Get over and see the governor." He gave them the votes and they were elected, much to the chagrin of all these other . . .

GREENE: Oh, it really caught them. Totally . . .

WAGNER: And the interesting thing about it was at the end of the session, even people like George Hallett [George H. Hallett, Jr.], who'd been up there many years. That name may mean nothing to you, but he was always a representative of the citizens union, a big reformer. He was always trying to put all sorts of reform legislation through for years, even when I was a young assemblyman, said, "It was unanimous, the most progressive and most fruitful session in the legislature that any of them could ever remember."

GREENE: Well, Kennedy began to work very well, particularly with Travia.

WAGNER: That's right. And what happened was, Rockefeller could be somewhat of his own master as a liberal Republican. These fellows could supply the votes for the good causes. When they had the Republican, either they controlled both the houses or one, he had to make the deals with the conservatives to get anything through and compromise, in many ways the liberal position. With this one there, they got more things through and this was the unanimous consent. Here, the beginning of their world was coming to an end because they couldn't do anything for six weeks, and when they got through in May or June, whatever it is, they all said it was the greatest session they ever had. It was interesting, sort of a little vindication.

GREENE: What do you think was Rockefeller's motivation? It wasn't just to end the stalemate because they were benefiting from the disarray.

WAGNER: Well, I think he did feel, finally, they had to do something. I mean, you know, they were beginning to say, "Well, Nelson, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to let this thing go?" We hung on long enough till he finally said to . . . He knew me, I think he felt that I was on the level with him--I knew him personally--also that he felt that these fellows were far better. That, look, always thought of himself that he could get more out of it with them than with the others. He just got to a point where he finally said he had to make a decision and he made it this way.

GREENE: That's very interesting; that certainly did shock them.

WAGNER: What?

GREENE: That certainly did shock them when they took that, when Hurd called for that vote.

WAGNER: Yes.

GREENE: Was it, not Hurd, Hurd? No.

WAGNER: You mean the Republican leader?

GREENE: I knew his name, I just can't . . .

WAGNER: Which one? Was he a leader? Walter Mahoney [Walter J. Mahoney], was it?

GREENE: No, it begins with an H, I'm sure of that. I have it written down.

WAGNER: One of the legislators?

GREENE: Yes. But a Republican, of course. A Republican leader, I think, called for the vote and they were just totally caught unawares.

WAGNER: Not Carlino [Joseph F. Carlino], was it? No.

GREENE: I'll look it up afterwards; I do know what the name is. Why didn't you ever contact Kennedy directly? Did you think that wouldn't be a way to do it or . . . ?

WAGNER: Well, he was on the other side on it.

GREENE: No, but I mean to try to move through him to reach some kind of . . .

WAGNER: I don't know whether, I can't remember whether we ever met on it. I mean I used to see him at things. He was all right, I mean, there wasn't bitterness or anything.

GREENE: The only thing he ever said publicly was once he called for a secret ballot as a means of ending the stalemate, but that didn't work either. I forget. There was a reason why it backfired.

WAGNER: Why not. Let 'em all do it publicly. We'd rather see 'em declare themselves . . .

GREENE: Maybe that was the reason, that you people objected. That's right.

WAGNER: Yes. Right. We didn't know who they could get at, you know, and, at least when they got to raise their hand, you know.

GREENE: You know where they are.

WAGNER: With a secret ballot, all sorts of mischief can be charged.

GREENE: I wonder if you, at any point, felt any sense of, like they were, not they, but Robert Kennedy was, it was a sign of ingratitude. You'd done a great deal for him during the election and they opposed you.

WAGNER: Well, I was disappointed that he was with these fellows; it made it a lot tougher. I guess I'd been in it long enough to realize that you don't feel that way. We had a friendly feeling; I liked him, I thought he had a real future. I knew he was tough. He was much tougher than his brother and, I think, he once in a while said, "Why don't you work this out?" I said, "I can't do it; I think it's wrong." He was more sympathetic to the organization people that I was, you know. He operated with them. I think they'd operated up in Boston and Massachusetts. He knew them here and they supported him; I don't blame him for that.

GREENE: Because in the press it kept being played as the "anti-Wagner" versus the "pro-Wagner" and that's--I mean, otherwise--but this made it a very personal thing, that's why I wondered if you had any sense of ingratitude.

WAGNER: Yes, and I always had to keep it away from being a personal thing with him or any of them. And they all, once it was over--I'm not talking about Bobby--these other fellows, the small potatoes, you know, they immediately said, "Okay." I remember . . .

END OF TAPE II