

Jack Valenti Oral History Interview – 5/25/1982
Administrative Information

Creator: Jack Valenti
Interviewer: Sheldon M. Stern
Date of Interview: May 25, 1982
Length: 15 pp.

Biographical Note

Valenti was the Special Assistant to President Lyndon Johnson (1963-1966), Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Motion Picture Association of America (1966-2004). This interview focuses on Lyndon Johnson's relationships with John and Robert F. Kennedy, his role as vice president, President Kennedy's trip to Texas, and the plane ride following the assassination, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

No restrictions.

Usage Restrictions

Copyright of these materials have passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Jack Valenti recorded interview by Sheldon M. Stern, May 25, 1982, (page number),
John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

Jack Valenti

Although a legal agreement was not signed during the lifetime of Jack Valenti, upon his death ownership of the recording and transcript of his interview for the Oral History Program passed to the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The following terms and conditions apply:

1. The transcript is available for use by researchers.
2. The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.
- 3; Copyright to the interview transcript and tape is assigned to the United States Government.
4. Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request for a fee.
5. Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Jack Valenti

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Lyndon B. Johnson's early opinions of John F. Kennedy
3	1960 Democratic National Convention
4	Vice presidential selection
4	Issue of religion
6	Johnson's role as vice president
7	Vice President Johnson's relationship with President Kennedy
9	Rumors Johnson would be dropped from the 1964 Democratic ticket
10	President Kennedy's visit to Texas
12	Plane ride following the assassination
14	Robert F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson relationship

Oral History Interview

With

JACK VALENTI

May 25, 1982
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon M. Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: I thought we'd begin with--you mention in your book that your first contact with Senator Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] was in 1957. I wonder if at that point you got any sense, during those senate years, from 57 to 60, of what his relationship was like with Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]? Did you ever see them together, or did they...

VALENTI: Well actually, no. My knowledge of ah, Lyndon Johnson's relationship with John Kennedy really came in the 1960 campaign. And then in his tenure as vice president. Johnson was always affectionate towards Kennedy, when I talked to him. This was in the 59, 60 days. He felt that John Kennedy was not qualified to be president, and that he, Lyndon Johnson was. But it wasn't in a vindictive sense, or hostility or anything. He regarded him as charming, and delightful, a man of some education, coming from a shrewdly based family. Johnson was a great believer in genetics. And he had a great respect for Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy]. And figured anybody who sired sons, that came from the loins of Joe Kennedy, couldn't be all bad. And so during the 1960 campaign, I think John Connolly and others, within the Johnson entourage, were probably--virulent toward John Kennedy, but Johnson had a rather paternal attitude to him. While he thought he was a back bencher, he found him a charming and delightful man. But simply without the credentials to be a suitable president. He, Johnson, after all, at least in his own mind, and probably in the minds of some objective

[-1 -]

observers, was the greatest parliamentary commander of the modern era. He felt he was more suitably equipped to be president. Indeed, he was somewhat fond of recalling that John Kennedy said that "There is only one man that is better qualified to be president than me, and that is John Kennedy-Lyndon Johnson." When Johnson became vice president he--

STERN: Yeah, go ahead.

VALENTI: Shall I continue?

STERN: Well I was going to ask--interrupt with a question. Why do you think Johnson did not attempt, openly, before he declared his candidacy, days before the convention, I mean opened publicly July 5, I think, 1960? Why do you think he didn't enter the primaries, and contest it with Kennedy?

VALENTI: Well. First I have to tell you, in those days I was not in the inner circle with Johnson. I later entered the inner circle, but in those days I was something more than a spear carrier, and something less than an intimate advisor. But, from what I understand, was Johnson, took the position, rightly or wrongly, that he could not run the senate, and invade the campaign, the primaries at the same time. He believed, actually, that by some divine intervention fate will say "We want you because nobody else is ready to take over." Johnson felt that he was so experienced that he would be selected. First, John Kennedy was the first one to prove that you need not be "experienced or otherwise." If you had the shrewdness and the talent and the resolution and the battle design to enter primaries, you won them. He proved that. As a result, everybody who stood on the side lines never got called. Johnson thought that he would better serve his electoral interests by being there in the Senate, the field commander deploying his troops for the good of the Democratic Party. And that he would be summoned by the party elders to take over.

Second, he relied too much on congressmen and senators. And was again jolted by--for the first time--by a young upstart senator who didn't deal with the establishment, but who dealt with people in the states who were stronger electorally than some of these aging senators and congressmen. Arizona was a good example of how John Kennedy went in and just took it right out from Johnson's nose. Johnson thought Carl Hayden and all these guys were going to sew it up for him. Those are the best reasons that I can give. He thought being on the floor of the senate, commanding the parliament, was a better sort of endorsement than going out and slugging it out in the primaries.

[-2 -]

STERN: In retrospect, I suppose that it would be easy to say that perhaps if Kennedy had to prove that a Catholic could win, then Johnson perhaps should have tried to prove that a southerner could win.

VALENTI: Johnson always told me no southerner would ever be nominated president on

the Democratic ticket in his lifetime. He believed that. He believed that before he got into the race. He always said that if sheer ability were enough, Dick Russell [Richard B. Russell] should have been nominated in '52. But of course, civil rights was the albatross around Dick Russell's neck. So he said there'll never be a president, a southern president, a southerner nominated in my lifetime.

STERN: I wonder if you could go into the convention at all? I know you were there working with Johnson, trying to round up delegates, perhaps. Were you at that joint appearance between Kennedy and Johnson?

VALENTI: Yes. I was.

STERN: At the Massachusetts and Texas delegation?

VALENTI: That's right. That's when I really became a great fan of John Kennedy. Because he was so masterful. And I yield to no man in my love and affection for Johnson, but he was handled with such skill by Kennedy who was like some great toreador handling one of the great Andalusian bulls. Kennedy just massacred him. It wasn't even close. I remember so well when Johnson-the glee in the Johnson camp-when this invitation was accepted, they thought they were going to handle Kennedy. Kennedy came in, was deferential to Johnson, obliging to him, smiling warmly at him. When Johnson was saying about how he was the great Majority Leader and what he did and so forth, Kennedy got up with that wry smile, sardonic wit, and said "I certainly agree with the Majority Leader. I think he's the greatest parliamentary commander of our era, and that is why I think it is in the best interest of this country that he remain as Majority Leader of the Senate, to lead us on to greater victory" and blah, blah, blah. He just tore Johnson a new ass hole is what he did. I thought, "by God any man who can retain his cool like that under fire, with just the right kind of retort, is a man to be reckoned with." And as one who found Adlai Stevenson's skill on the speaking stump to my satisfaction, I decided that Kennedy was going to be one hell of a president.

STERN: There was of course some bitterness at the convention due to the remarks that had been made about his father, JFK's father, and about his health.

[-3 -]

VALENTI: Well that's right. That's the Parkinson's disease issue. I think, when you get into a campaign, any kind of campaign, you start out by saying look, we don't want to get dirty or anything, but campaigns take on a life of their own. It's like the snowball that begins very tiny, rolling down the hill, and by the time it gets down the hill it's a boulder. And I think a lot of things were said and done that Johnson regretted. If he had it to do all over again, he wouldn't do it. I suppose that Messrs. Robert [Robert F. Kennedy] and John Kennedy felt the same way. That's part of campaign life. I've never seen a campaign yet that was conducted under Marquis of the Queensbury Rules. They just never

are. Eventually somebody decides to use a nuclear tactical weapon, and all of a sudden you got nuclear war going on.

STERN: What was your reaction to the whole vice presidential selection? Were you in on the...

VALENTI: No, I was not. Again, I was on the periphery. I was trying to work the New York delegation, where I got the impression that I was a leper after a while. I was rebuffed so often by people in the New York delegation I was trying to entice into the Johnson Camp. No, I did not have a role that took me in to the inner cloakroom. So I was really like a lot of infantrymen, I was in the platoon, out in the trenches. I wasn't at the war-cabinet level. So I was as surprised as anyone else when Johnson was selected as vice president.

STERN: Did you think that he would accept?

VALENTI: Ahh, in a strange way I did. But not for the reasons, that later on I found out. Johnson later on discussed with me in great detail--that he believed that he, Johnson, could help Kennedy carry the south, like no other person. Kennedy had to carry the south to win. Johnson correctly interpreted that the great issue was not going to be foreign policy or anything else, it was going to be religion, the Catholicism issue. To have a strong Protestant evangelical type, like Johnson, leading the way, LBJ would be able to persuade his fellow southerners to put aside their animus for Catholicism. The enormity of that task is marked in the Texas campaign itself, because my agency handled the media, I was given the stricture by Johnson that we weren't going to lose Texas. And yet we almost did. We won by only 36,000 votes. When you consider that Johnson won by a million in the next election you can see the disparity. But that animosity, which became cancerous, was everywhere in the east Texas thicket, along the northern tier, in the hill country, in the urban centers. Only when you got to San Antonio, and south, that you were able to overwhelm that issue. And that's why we almost lost that campaign. Without

[-4-]

Johnson, who had a working constituency, with an energetic, virile organization in every one of the two hundred and fifty-four Texas counties, Kennedy would not have won that state, no question about it in my mind.

STERN: Are there any examples you could think of? Specific anecdotes about the religious issue, a case that shocked you, or examples...

VALENTI: Well I was in charge of the television event, in the Crystal Ballroom of the Rice Hotel, when the famous confrontation with the ministers took place. I did not have any responsibility for setting it up, I just merely worked out the time, got the television crews there. That was really the turning point in the campaign. Johnson took that half hour of television, that telecast, and we put it on damn near every station in

Texas. Time and again and time and again. It showed JFK at his best. And, indeed, as I was told later on, it was used all over the country, where there was anti-Catholic bias. That thorn had to be plucked and it was. But Johnson used to tell the story about at the Alamo. He would cite the roll call of the names. Nobody asked what their religion was when they died. Here they were at Iwo Jima with no one asking about religion. You know, he was really wringing it, wringing [laughter], wringing the washcloth dry. But he brought it up time and time again, about when they died on the battlefield saving you from the Hun and the Nazi, and nobody wanted to know whether they were Catholic, Jewish or Muslim. That was his big theme through the south.

STERN: What about that incident in Dallas...

VALENTI: Yeah, when he got spit upon with Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson] at the Baker Hotel. You know, if we'd staged that ourselves it couldn't have been better. Johnson handled that with great calm and coolness. It was just one of those fortuitous events. There was--I forget the man's name, who was running for congress, or something at the time, he was in the congress, from Dallas, his name was ah, it began with an "A" I believe, something like--oh, Bruce ah, Bruce [Bruce Alger] something, was a damn fool, absolutely unfathomable stupidity and it backfired. One thing about Texas, particularly old fashioned Texans and southerners, is they don't want women treated in a disparaging, discourteous way. You could spit on Johnson and get away with it, but you couldn't spit on the wife of a candidate. And that cost him a lot of votes in the Dallas area.

STERN: When I interviewed Mrs. Johnson she felt that that might have made the difference in the election.

VALENTI: Well, it's hard to say, it could have. Particularly

[-5 -]

you know when you have 36,000, all you need is 18,000 people to switch and you've got it.

STERN: You weren't there when it happened?

VALENTI: No, I was in Dallas but I wasn't at the Baker Hotel.

STERN: Anything else in the campaign? Did you go on any of the train trips with the Johnsons?

VALENTI: No, I did not. I stayed in Texas working the media, and I worked Texas. That was my assignment, so I stayed there. And was not involved in the travels around the country.

STERN: Okay, let's move on to the vice presidency. When Johnson became vice president, do you feel that his expectations about the office, and what he would be doing were realistic? I know I found some things in which he seemed to say, quote "Power is what power goes", he is supposed to have said to someone. He seemed to have had the sense that he might be able to continue to have a very commanding role in the congress, as vice president.

VALENTI: Yes, I think his expectations of the vice presidency were delusive. Number one, he was not given any congressional role. I think that was a big mistake by the Kennedy administration. I think that Johnson's memorandums, for example on civil rights, were right on target. He could have been very helpful, in my judgment. But for reasons which I'm not privy to, the president, Bobby Kennedy and Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], did not use him. Number two, he was thoroughly, visibly, and persistently miserable. Probably the most unsatisfactory years of his life. He was a raging, restless animal, and he was caged. And indeed, when he was given Equal Employment Opportunity and Space thing [National Aeronautics and Space Administration], he leaped on to it with his typical Johnson relentless energy and fanaticism and resolution, deploying people around, and probably getting more involved in space than Jim Webb [James E. Webb] and everybody else wanted him to be. But that was his nature, he had something to do. Number three, he was treated contemptuously by Bobby Kennedy and the people who followed Bobby Kennedy. No question about it. And I think that rankled him, it certainly hurt him, he was humiliated by it. Here he was the former second most powerful man in the nation, and now was treated like a school boy by school boys. He resented it. But he said, time and time again, that the one person who treated him with durable and persistent respect was the president. He could not fault John Kennedy one jot. Kennedy invited him into meetings, he was always deferential to him. LBJ told a story one time, when there was a lot of

[-6-]

gossip going around about Johnson being dumped, or somebody leaking pejorative material about Johnson, that John Kennedy called in his staff and said that the vice president was a man of power and influence, and had done great things for this country. That if he, John Kennedy, ever found out anybody leaking something about the president--the vice president, that person would be fired. Johnson was almost weepingly happy at that. And then I remember one incident at his ranch, in 1962, I guess, where there were a group of men at the table, about seven or eight or nine of us. All of whom were very wealthy, conservative, democrats and all of whom had a distaste for John Kennedy. One of them, a very close friend of Johnson's, longtime contributor, neighbor, close friend, began to inveigh against Kennedy. I remember being at the table, and I thought he was pretty strong. Johnson fixed the fellow with that stony stare and finally he said to this man, called him by his first name, "no one sits at my table and criticizes the president of the United States. You've got two choices, you shut up, or you leave." It was very unusual for Johnson to speak that way to a man who had been--was his friend, large contributor, very close to him, and who thought, I guess, he had warrant to make these statements. Suddenly the table fell silent, and the man said "I'm sorry

Lyndon, I'm sorry. Let's let it go at that." Johnson was furious, and he made clear that nobody criticized Kennedy in his presence. He mentioned to me many times that, after he became president too, how President Kennedy was solicitous of him. Always. He invited him, oftentimes, to second floor dinners where just the Kennedy social crowd--Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] was enormously affectionate to him. Always gentle to him. And I think he didn't feel comfortable at a lot of these social gatherings, these weren't his kind of folk. But the Kennedy's never once diverged from this embrace of Johnson and Ladybird. And he never forgot it.

STERN: Back in the first days, just before he became vice president, he tried to get the democrats of the senate to vote to allow him to preside over the Democratic caucus as vice president. He actually carried the vote forty-six to seventeen, but some of his closest old friends, like Clinton Anderson [Clinton P. Anderson] voted against him. He was very, very disappointed. There are some who say that it was as a result of that that he sort of withdrew, and became convinced that you could not have any influence in the Senate as vice president.

VALENTI: Well, he never mentioned that, he never talked about that. But I always had the sense that Johnson felt badly about that because he considered it to be an error of judgment. There was no greater indictment that Johnson could make against himself, or anyone around him, that that they lacked judgment because he believed judgment was

[-7 -]

the supreme asset of intelligence. And I think later that he realized that it was bad judgment to try to do that since it was extraordinary, unprecedented and would have disrupted the authority of the Majority Leader. It was just a piece of misjudging the temper of both the Senate and his new position in life.

STERN: Perhaps that was a reflection of what you earlier referred to as his unrealistic, initially unrealistic, perception of what the vice presidency was...

VALENTI: Right. I think he did withdraw. I think he realized, maybe, about that time, I certainly couldn't specify, that he's now--he was the great sailing ship becalmed in the windless sea. And this great proud vessel was just simply unable to move. Stuck there in the Sargasso Sea, no wind and no tides. If my metaphor is not too bulky (laugh). At any rate, that's why I think he seized with such ferocity on the two kinds of responsibilities that he was given, Equal Employment Opportunity and Space Agency. And I think he enjoyed his trips as vice president.

STERN: You went on some of those with him didn't you?

VALENTI: I went with him to the funeral of Pope John [Pope John XXIII]. I also went with him to the inauguration of Juan Bosch [Juan Emilio Bosch Gavino] in the

Dominican Republic. Those were the two I went on. My wife went on one with him shortly--in 1961 I think, when he went to Tehran. She went on that trip. I couldn't make it because of business. But I did go on two trips with him, had long conversations with him, where a lot of what I'm telling you now developed.

STERN: Very interesting. Let me just take, as an example, cite to you what one journalist said, about their relationship, I wonder how you would respond to this. Said "Although Lyndon Johnson was a scrupulously loyal and dutiful vice president to JFK in public, I saw numerous indications that this relationship was a facade behind which lay a mutual distrust and dislike which extended to the intimates and families of both." Do you feel that that's an accurate...

VALENTI: I think that's totally inaccurate.

STERN: Inaccurate.

VALENTI: I'd say totally without substance. When Johnson was with me, or just a few of his close friends, where he had no reason to be on stage, and no reporters around, he's not reporting for posterity, he's speaking his

[-8 -]

mind, it was nothing but affection for Kennedy. And a desire, he wished he could be of more use to him. He was not happy about his treatment by Bobby, because he thought Bobby put the word out to cut him out of meetings if he had to. And he-several times he got word back that meetings were held and he wasn't invited. And John Kennedy found out about it, he said, "Where's the vice president? I want him here." That sort of thing. But, not one time did he ever give any kind of pejorative view of the president. So I would say that journalist is writing third or fourth hand, without substance of any kind.

STERN: What about the rumors of the mid sixties period, the late sixties period, that he would be dropped from the ticket? Did he take those...

VALENTI: Yes, I think that hurt him, hurt him a good deal.

STERN: Did he attribute those ever to the president?

VALENTI: No, never. As a matter of fact, he many times pointed out how John Kennedy, went out of his way, as a matter of fact I think in the last press conference before the assassination of the president, he tried to say, "Listen, it's a lot of bunk and junk, and anybody who says that just doesn't know, and I want to put it to rest for all time." You know, as much as a president can do--it was almost a William Tecumseh Sherman statement. I mean unambiguous. So Johnson felt good about that. But those rumors assaulted his pride and did not make him feel comfortable or joyous.

STERN: One, one interviewee said to me once, that in some ways that relationship was similar to the one between Rusk [Dean Rusk] and Stevenson. In the sense that Stevenson felt that he should have been the secretary of state, and Rusk was so solicitous and careful about Stevenson's feelings. That in a way, that was the way it was with Kennedy and Johnson. A very similar sort of thing.

VALENTI: Well, it could be. I can only tell you what he would tell me. I can't speculate what went on in his mind. And I certainly wouldn't know what went on in President Kennedy's mind. Except, Johnson felt that he could not have been treated with more respect and decency, and even affection, by the President. On the other hand, he felt like he was treated with a singularity of contempt by some of the staff members of Kennedy. But he never, ever, attributed that to John Kennedy. I have since come to know that all vice presidents are miserable. That all vice presidents are subject to fits of depression. That all vice presidents are

[-9-]

powerless, and they're never going to have any power except what the president gives them. That they're always subject to rumors, which invade their pride and their passions, and their inner soul. As a result, if there's a happy vice president, I haven't met one yet.

STERN: Although--just an aside, I think President Carter [James E. Carter] certainly, in many ways, initiated some very important changes since--in the position of the vice president...

VALENTI: Well, that's true, and I'm not going to speculate on that cause I don't know. But from what I'm, maybe given by the same third hand information, that I find without substance in Johnson, and Kennedy makes the point that a lot of in-fighting went on that the press didn't know about, that Mondale [Walter F. Mondale] and his staff felt badly about. But that's another subject about which I know so little that my judgments are worthless.

STERN: I think you're right, it's the constitution, that's it. That puts the vice president in this essentially...

VALENTI: What is even worse, I think, in the Mondale case, is to come that close to the embrace of power and then be denied that final kiss. It must be even worse than living in limbo, I mean to get that close to where you're in the decision making apparatus but when the time comes to make a decision your mouth's to be closed. You can only give a suggestion and then you have to grind your teeth when it goes the other way. That's even worse I suppose sometimes.

STERN: I think no one ever said it better than the first vice president John Adams...

VALENTI: Splendid misery. I guess that was Jefferson [Thomas Jefferson] who said that.

STERN: ...he said to his wife, "Today I am nothing, tomorrow I may be everything."

VALENTI: John Garner [John N. Garner] said it even better, said "It's not worth a bucket of warm spit", and that may be so. I've been in Washington what, nineteen years, I don't know happy vice presidents.

STERN: Did you have anything to do with planning, logistics, planning the trip to Texas?

VALENTI: Yes. I handled all the Houston visit, totally. Johnson called me one day and said that he was very

[-10-]

upset, he didn't want Kennedy to come to Texas, but that John Connolly came up to Texas, and without letting Lyndon Johnson know, went up to the White House and cut a deal with JFK. So he was reluctantly coming down, so he said "I want to make sure that everything goes well." He was worried about Yarborough [Ralph W. Yarborough] and Connolly. He was worried about Yarborough and himself. He was worried about what the *Houston Chronicle* and so forth was going to say. At any rate yes I was involved in it, did all the--Marty Underwood was sent down as an advance man by the Kennedy people, but I knew the local terrain, and he was very good about letting me handle it all. Because the centerpiece was going to be a big evening, as you know, celebrating Albert Thomas.

STERN: Right.

VALENTI: I was the chief lieutenant of Albert Thomas for many years. And also the chief lieutenant of Lyndon Johnson, so I handled the logistics of that big dinner that we had. Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] came down once.

STERN: Jerry.

VALENTI: Jerry Bruno came down one day I remember, spent several hours, took him to the coliseum. He looked at everything and grunted his satisfaction and left. I never saw him again. So I was in charge.

STERN: Did you feel that until the unexpected occurred, the trip had been basically successful?

VALENTI: The trip had been dazzlingly successful. San Antonio was unbelievable, and when we come into Houston it was just stunning. People were everywhere, we had not a hostile face in the crowd. Johnson was jubilant, absolutely jubilant. That's when he suggested to me that instead of me going to Austin--By the way, whenever you have to leave just tell me.

STERN: Okay. I have fifteen more minutes.

VALENTI: He was jubilant, and that's when he suggested to me "that instead of you going on to Austin"--I had printed--I'd made the program for Austin, and indeed one of the regrets of my life is that those programs are printed and I can't find a single one. I don't know whether any of them are in the JFK Library or not. The program for that evening in Austin, I designed it, we wrote it and it was already to go...

[-11-]

STERN: I can check on it if you like.

VALENTI: I sure would, I've never been able to find a copy. At any rate, the president and vice president said to me "Come with me, instead of you going on to Austin. We can talk politics, spend the night with me in Fort Worth, and then we'll go on to Dallas the next day. And then on to Austin for the big fundraiser in Austin. And so I had one night's clothes in a bag, two night's clothes really, kissed my wife and my little month old child and got on an airplane and never returned home. I was there, I was in the motorcade as well you know. I was summoned aboard Air Force One, and hired that very instant by the new president to join his staff. So I was there.

STERN: What was your assessment of all the claims, that were later made, about all the tension on the plane coming back?

VALENTI: I never saw it. Maybe its because this was the first time that I'd really met Larry O'Brien, first time I'd met Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], first time I'd met General McHugh [Godfrey T. McHugh] and Malcolm Kilduff [Malcolm M. Kilduff] and all these people who later I got to know intimately. I never saw any hostility. Anxiety, yes. Stunning grief, yes. Traumatized human beings, yes. Disbelief, grief beyond all measure, I saw all of that, but I didn't see any hostility. I would not have been surprised if I did see it though. Because I could put myself in their shoes, here you are at the very summit of power. You're following your leader and you're celebrated and you've got maybe six more years in power, and then suddenly some stupid nut on the third floor of a dingy building ends it all for you. Your life is shattered, and it's in ruins. You would have every right to resent this alien cowboy who's now taken over where your god once resided. I wouldn't. I would have felt that way. But, I didn't see it. The Kennedy people secreted themselves in the after part of the airplane. Mrs. Kennedy came out for the swearing in, there's that famous photograph over there, the only one extant. And ah, I saw McHugh a couple of times running rather hysterically up and down the airplane. Trying to take charge. The new president gave orders that he was going to wait for the body of the late president, of which McHugh was furious about. But, you know, the command had changed from one hand to another. And there may have been some resentment, but I did not see it. And I so told Bill Manchester [William Manchester] and others that I talked to. I didn't see any hostility. I saw,

I saw a group of people shattered beyond any human imagination. In a state of grief so deep that you could not put a gauge to it. But that's all I saw.

[-12-]

STERN: I came across once--I was doing--when I did an interview with Godfrey McHugh, I was looking at his file, which we held at the library, and came across the rosters for the airplane. And you had Air Force One with JFK, Mrs. Kennedy and all the other JFK people and staff. And then there was Air Force Two with Vice President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson and all the other people on the Johnson staff. And then suddenly coming back, someone had very obviously, very hastily, typed a new sheet which had in space number one Mrs. Kennedy and in space number two President Johnson, space number three Mrs. Johnson. And JFK was listed on the top but he had no number, obviously because he was not occupying a seat. And then of course as you looked at the numbers, you saw all the names mixed up together, Kennedy names and Johnson names. It was visually a very shocking example of what it must have been like. I mean all these people thrown together in this incredible situation.

VALENTI: But Mrs. Kennedy stayed in the rear of the airplane, after portion, and never came out except for the swearing in. And then of course there was that incident that I wrote about in my book, which was revelatory to me. When we landed at Andrews, and Bobby Kennedy came aboard the forward part of the ship and raced down the cabin way, in those days, on Air Force One, there was a narrow passageway between the after portion of the ship where the galley was and the presidential sort of section, and here was the new president and myself pinned against the wall and Bobby Kennedy came by without so much as a glance at either of us. And the president, the new president, expected to get off with the body of the president and Mrs. Kennedy, but the forklift took the entourage, so Johnson had to come off, you know, by himself. But his face remained passive, he never ever mentioned it, ever. I took note of it. It was an interesting thing because I really came to admire Bobby Kennedy so much. And it was only I think in the latter days of his life that I felt like we had reached some kind of a *modus vivendi*. Ah, he ah, was tough on me in the first part of the tenure. I remember he accused me of leaking stories about him one time. I didn't even know what a leak was, I was so green to Washington. The idea of me saying, trying to leak something about a man I admired so much, first his brother and then Robert Kennedy, was so alien to me that I talked to the president about it. He said, "No it's all right, don't get upset, obviously I know you're not leaking anything. Don't worry about it." And I didn't. And then, I remember when I was appointed, after I left the White House, to the board of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, and I came before the Senate for confirmation. And my certificate listed me from Texas, but there were no Texas senators there and he graciously, warmly said that since he was there for Mr. Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller], but since Mr. Valenti had no senator to introduce

[-13-]

him, he would like the honor of introducing me to the committee. And he went on at some length and it was a very warm and loving thing. And then I remember I was invited to his home for the seventy-fifth birthday of Averell Harriman. [Averell W. Harriman], so I felt like, toward the end, it fixed up. It was to me always a puzzling thing, because I had such, such great admiration for him. But it all got fixed up, thank God.

STERN: Did you feel that it was, that the RFK-LBJ relationship was just one that could never work? That the chemistry was wrong?

VALENTI: Yes. It was impossible of ever working. And I'll tell you something, another reason why, I also think there might have been a chance that these two men, who were quite alike in their goals and objectives, might have been able to get together except their staffs put poison in their ear, like Claudius in the ear of Hamlet's father. I remember I used to be at seven o'clock in the morning at the president's bedside with several of his aides. We'd all be doing business, and then one or two of the guys would say "Well, last night somebody was telling me that Bobby Kennedy said such and such and such and such". I remember one time I said to the president "Mr. President that's ridiculous, that's rumors. You don't know that Bobby Kennedy said that. Anymore than Bobby Kennedy's people are telling him the same thing." I said "This is ridiculous. And we ought not listen to these damn rumors." Charlie Bartlett [Charles L. Bartlett], who was the closest personal friend of John Kennedy and Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and I plotted several times, how we wanted to get them together, and to get it worked out, and to have these men sort of allies. But it never worked simply because there were too many people in the Johnson staff and in the Kennedy staff who fed their principals this kind of poisoning. Rumors and gossip. It just made it difficult for them to get together.

STERN: I agree with you. And I think as a result it was always surprising to me that RFK tried so hard to win--to get the approval of Johnson for the vice president in 1964. I can't imagine a more unwieldy relationship than that would have been.

VALENTI: No. And Robert Kennedy would have been the most miserable man alive to...

STERN: That's what I mean.

VALENTI: To occupy that space. That it was just destined to be miserable. And then of course Johnson threw him over the side with his "no cabinet or people who advise the cabinet," and so forth and so on. But it was a

[-14-]

relationship that I guess really is typical of what Hegel defined as tragedy. Which he said is a conflict, spiritual conflict, in which both sides lay claim to our sympathy. And that's what it was. It was a terrible tragedy, almost as if it came intact from some Greek play of Euripides. Because it was destined to be ill-fated, ill-starred. It never, never got settled.

STERN: Is there anything you'd like to add?

VALENTI: No, I think I've given you everything I know.

STERN: Okay, let me just ask you one more question. Now that, with almost twenty years since, nineteen years since, the end of the Kennedy administration, do you find as you look back, that your perspective on the Kennedy years has changed at all? In--particularly in light of subsequent events. Are there any problems--

VALENTI: I think like all administrations, by hindsight you see a lot of things. I think what Kennedy brought to the White House was a grace, and a promise, a perception of greatness that in politics is very important because perception is reality. In a strange way he may have been like Lincoln, maybe his early demise was an asset in the long-range run of history. One never knows what would have happened if Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] had finished his term a broken old man. Maybe we wouldn't call him a great president today as we did. I think that Kennedy had a lot of unsatisfactory resolutions to problems that he could have handled better. I think that the Vienna confrontation with Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] and which really sort of set the Cold War, I think getting involved in Vietnam-- But on the other hand, overall, what is left is a residue of something shining and lovely and--Maybe as Mr. Dooley said the past is more pleasant because it isn't here. Maybe we think a little better of it. But I think often times what people perceive is as important as what actually happens. And what people perceived about Kennedy was that he brought something elegant, and humane and witty and brilliant, intellectually promising to the presidency. And after that we didn't do so well. But I must say I, every time I think of John Kennedy, and I never really knew him, I never really met him, except the last night that he lived, the only time I ever had a conversation with him. So I'm like a lot of Americans. I still have warm and joyous nostalgic memories of him.

[-15-]

[END OF INTERVIEW - JFK #1, 5/25/1982]

Jack Valenti Oral History Transcript
Name List

A

Adams, John, 10
Alger, Bruce, 5
Anderson, Clinton P., 7

B

Bartlett, Charles L., 14
Bosch Gavino, Juan Emilio, 8
Bruno, Gerald J., 11

C

Carter, James E., 10
Connolly, John T., 1, 11

G

Garner, John N., 10

H

Harriman, Averell W., 14
Hayden, Carl T., 2

J

Jefferson, Thomas, 10
Johnson, Claudia Alta "Lady Bird", 5, 7, 13
Johnson, Lyndon B., 1-11, 13, 14

K

Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier, 7, 12, 13
Kennedy, John F., 1-5, 6-11, 13, 15
Kennedy, Joseph P., 1
Kennedy, Robert F., 4, 6, 9, 13, 14
Khrushchev, Nikita S., 15
Kilduff, Malcolm, 12

L

Lincoln, Abraham, 15

M

McHugh, Godfrey T., 12, 13
McNamara, Robert S., 14

Manchester, William, 12
Mondale, Walter F., 10

O

O'Brien, Lawrence F., 6, 12
O'Donnell, Kenneth P., 12

P

Pope John XXIII, 8

R

Rockefeller, Nelson A., 13
Rusk, Dean, 9
Russell, Richard B., 3

S

Stevenson, Adlai E., 3, 9

T

Thomas, Albert, 11

U

Underwood, Marty, 11

W

Webb, James E., 6

Y

Yarborough, Ralph W., 11