

Ronnie Eldridge Oral History Interview – RFK #1, 4/21/1970
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Biographical Note

Eldridge, New York City district leader for the Reform Independent Democrats (1963-1968) and vice chairperson of Citizen's Committee for Robert F. Kennedy (1968), discusses Robert F. Kennedy's (RFK) 1964 New York senatorial campaign, the 1966 New York surrogate court's race, and Frank O'Connor's 1966 gubernatorial campaign, among other issues.

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Ronnie Eldridge—RFK #1

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First of Four Oral History Interviews

with

Ronnie Eldridge

April 21, 1970
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: Well, I was going to ask you what contact you might have had with the Senator [Robert F. Kennedy] prior to the decision to run in New York. I don't know how much you knew him before that.

ELDRIDGE: None. Not at all. I didn't know him at all. I liked him, but I didn't know him. You've just heard this now so many times. Alright. No I just had no contact at all. I knew that he hung his children's pictures up in the Justice Department, so I liked him, and that was about all. It's always

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been interesting to me that I never really hated him as a result of the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] times because I come from that, you know, liberal, West Side tradition, worked at CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] during the hearings. And we were talking about that the other day, that everybody sat and watched and listened and it was the whole life. And he seemed to be able to come out of it without my having any negative feelings about him. I don't really know why. I haven't been able to figure it out. I always knew or had the feeling that I'd like him very much. It was sort of an intuitive kind of thing. And I felt he was kind of intuitive and that would be nice.

Our contact, politically—we did support him before he became a candidate. We were sort of—the West Side reformers, sort of offset the Buckley [Charles A. Buckley]-Powell [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.]-Steingut [Stanley Steingut], you know, the organization machine kind of the bosses. I can't remember the date. I think it was most likely in June of that year; I think it was then. There was some talk of his coming in, and Bill Ryan [William Fitts Ryan], who was our congressman, convened a meeting of the leaders—I was a district leader at the time—and the elected public officials, and I think the main purpose of the meeting was

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that we would support him for the Senate, Ryan. And some of us were really kind of tired of supporting Bill Ryan for things and really didn't want to. And the meeting—I didn't even go to the first meeting, but I heard it got out of control and became a thing about Robert Kennedy.

The political thing in New York was very interesting so that the Kennedy thing really became an anti-Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] thing. It was those Democrats who were opposed to Bob Wagner, who were really not part of the Wagner Administration or political caucus or what have-you, that went to Kennedy. So we announced our support quite early and urged him to run. And that was how it was.

I went through the campaign, too, without actually meeting him. We did a very good campaign on a local West Side area. I think our district went from something like 70th Street to 96th Street. It was the one campaign that I've ever worked in that you could see exactly where your district began and ended because our vote was much higher than the districts around us. We ran a very top-notch campaign. You would think that... I mean we were sort of like a national staff, had a very large speakers bureau, very active canvassing and under

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door stuff. I would go down and work in the speakers' bureau at 42nd Street for six or eight hours with—I think his name was Bill Brady—Bill Brady, who I think was the head of the speakers' bureau, in return for a speaker. And so we would arrange coffee klatches where we would have from fifty to a hundred and fifty people, two or three of them a night. And the speakers were Abe Chayes [Abram Chayes] and Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.], Dick Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] spent an awful lot of time in our area, MacGregor Burns [James MacGregor Burns], that caliber. And it was a very attractive kind of thing. It was sort of at the beginning of the refinement of techniques in Democratic politics in New York. The coffee klatches were still new; people wanted to come and hear it. We had a lot of resentment and a lot of bitterness about Kennedy.

GREENE: I was going to ask you that. [Interruption]

ELDRIDGE: The district is predominantly Jewish, very liberal—I suppose it's one of the most liberal districts in the country—very strong on that great liberal tradition of civil liberties and things. Arguments against Kennedy were not only the McCarthy things, but the Hoffa [Jimmy Hoffa] business and the whole civil

libertarian thing. And we did run into tremendous problems. The other current issue at that time was busing of kids. My own club (and it was sort of typical of the area) was very much for pairing of schools

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and busing. And he was sort of straddling it and then, later, really about came out against it. And of course, I mean, there were so many factors that went into it.

But there is a whole group of liberal people that he never did get to in the whole time he was here that, amazingly in their liberalism, were able to accept Stratton [Samuel S. Stratton] as a final resort in that senatorial race. Sarah Kovner [Sarah S. Kovner], who later headed up the McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy]—she (and Victor [Victor A. Kovner], her husband) was the campaign manager or something for Stratton in New York City, and they were big Stratton supporters. And it's incredible when you look back on it, these are the great liberals. It's the way it always fell down. It fell down to a Wagner-anti-Wagner thing, and within the anti-Wagner thing, again, somehow there is a very basic emotional difference between us, and we just never came to agreement. We're split now. We're always split. They always hated Kennedy.

GREENE: Were there people, however, who you were able to move over in the course of the campaign?

ELDRIDGE: Oh, yes. First of all, we were able to convince some people, and some of them, the more active club members, and then surprisingly a lot of people were also attracted by it. The political scene in New York was so dismal, it really was. Wagner

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was there as mayor, controlled the Democratic Party, and that was really a colorless kind of party where younger people, energetic, any kind of challenge to him, were just never allowed to develop. And I think we're still suffering from it because we've never had any, you know, decent candidates, and we've never developed anything. So it was a great frustration and a lot of it was just aimed at shaking it up, and we thought he would do it.

We had a meeting of the delegates. At that time you still nominated at the convention. The night before the convention he came and met with the reform delegates to that state convention. And that was at Bob Wechsler's who was my co-leader at the time, his father's house. His father is President of the Wechsler Coffee Company and they own Restaurant Associates, and it was on 81st and Central Park, and it was a very large scene of people coming. And they had a tremendous portrait of Jack Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]—I don't remember whose it was—right at the front door. Life-size almost. And everybody was sitting there waiting for this ruthless, aggressive man to come in, and they were filled with resentment. And really, the number of reformers that were supporting him were not very many. And the doorbell rang, and I don't remember who the entourage was, but I'll never forget, I mean, this scared little guy came

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in. And he, really, just looked so out of it all, and he looked slightly schizophrenic, I mean he was just not with it; very shy, his eyes down on the floor all the time, and it just took everybody by such surprise because they were really there to eat him up, and there really wasn't anything, you know, to eat up. And it was very sad. Anyway, he got through the meeting. A friend of Bob's father attacked him terribly as far as Hoffa and some of the other things, and the guy was a little drunk, and somebody, Mr. Wechsler, took care of him. Generally though, people came out of it surprised that he wasn't as ruthless as they thought he was, or at least not obviously. But they never believed that, you know; they were sure he was. And I was—I guess some of us were most impressed at the fact that he was so little and slight and really....

GREENE: Vulnerable.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah, terribly vulnerable. Then we went to the convention the next day, which was an ordinary kind of thing. I remember vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel], the walkie-talkies and everything, and there was a slight fight because they had Carolyn Gould give a seconding speech. Of course, the West Siders were angry that they hadn't asked me, if they were going to have a woman. And we always got into a

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West Side-East Side fight. She was from the Lenox Hill Club. And then afterwards, they had a reception or something at the McAlpin—which I heard later they had nobody there. They had to go invite people off the street. But it was our first kind of coming up against the Kennedy organization. The McAlpin Hotel is kind of a hotel on its way down on 34th Street. I remember you walked in and there were a lot of all lovely looking young ladies with long hair. They all had black dresses and pearls and white gloves on. I don't know who put it together—I remember Jean vanden Heuvel [Jean Stein] was one of them—but it just gave everybody the impression that they were so well organized and the whole thing. And it sort of set in and we lived with that reputation even when it wasn't true for the rest of the time. The first time I'd met Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] was at that reception. [Interruption.]

GREENE: Who, besides yourself, were the leading reformers that you were working with?

ELDRIDGE: Well, it's always the same trio that gets to be.... Al Blumenthal [Albert H. Blumenthal], Kretchmer [Jerome Kretchmer], Ohrenstein [Manfred Ohrenstein]. Really, basically, that's what it was. And some of the leaders.

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GREENE: Did you work with Feldman [Justin Newton Feldman]?

ELDRIDGE: Justin, yeah. Justin. You see, I got to know Justin really through the Kennedy campaign. Justin was sort of an old pro before that. He was close to Ed Costikyan [Edward N. Costikyan] and was the law chairman of the county committee. People like Al and Jerry hated him because he would—I don't know, he was involved in some of the primary races and things and Bill Haddad's [William F. Haddad] campaign. We were also close to Bill. Haddad had just run for Congress that June and lost, and Justin had been the law chairman for Costikyan and was fighting Haddad. So we really didn't know Justin. I really didn't get to meet him until that campaign. We've since become very friendly. But it was very interesting because he was sort of a professional, more regular orientation. And he came in and did the scheduling. I remember meeting him at some reception. He also happened to be an old friend of an old friend of mine from college, so I had always heard about Justin, but I had only met him very casually.

GREENE: Did his relationship improve with Blumenthal and Kretchmer?

ELDRIDGE: Yes. Well, Justin became a reformer someplace around his

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life. I don't know why. I don't think any of us... But he decided to run for Congress in '66. But at that time he began to break with Eddie, and I guess the ties were close to Kennedy, and Costikyan was not a particular fan of Kennedy's. I had just become a district leader that June, and I knew Costikyan, also, from college. He was a few years ahead of me, but we had traveled in similar things. So when I went to some of those executive meetings, that was my first county campaign, that Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]-Kennedy campaign then. It was pretty wild. They did not particularly like the Kennedy organization, and I remember leaders would go to the county headquarters and expect to get Kennedy literature, and it became apparent that you couldn't do that. I've since learned that you never do that, in any campaign. But they didn't know it then, and I guess they haven't really learned it either. And Eddie was not really particularly pro-Kennedy. Hated Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith]. He really hated Kennedy. He also was not pro-Wagner at that time so he was sort of in a separate orb.

GREENE: How much contact did you have in the course of the campaign with people like John English [John F. English], the professionals?

ELDRIDGE: None at all. Never met Jack English until a couple of

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years later. I had heard very much, a lot about him and always had looked forward to—I always thought he was supposedly one of the enlightened, young county leaders. We've since had our differences. But I did not meet him then.

I knew Haddad. I had run part of Haddad's campaign, and I knew Bill very well by that time and all his ins and outs and problems. And he moved into the 42nd Street thing, and it was just fascinating to watch him operate there. They had opened this building on 42nd Street, and Haddad moved in on a floor and announced to all his friends that this was the headquarters and he was helping to run the campaign and come down. And a lot of people who were anxious to be at a headquarters went down there. And I would watch it, and I saw, really, that Haddad had just moved in. I mean if there was a vacuum, he moved in. Finally, there was, as I understand, so much opposition from some of the regular leaders and especially on the Lower East Side because he had just finished his primary that they moved him out of the 42nd Street headquarters and moved him up to 57th Street where he had his own floor and his whole own operation. He got a Xerox machine and some kind of an offset thing, and they

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turned out their own literature. Looking at it from the outside, you would think that that was the campaign. I think they did their own research, they wrote their own pieces.

In the meantime, back at the Chaddam [Hotel], was vanden Heuvel and Edelman [Peter B. Edelman] and that group. I knew Bill vaguely, and I had been down at the Chaddam. I had met John Nolan [John E. Nolan] in that campaign, not very well. But we had a tremendous ego problem and always with Bill Ryan. Ryan was unhappy at our decision to go with Kennedy, although there was no other place to go, and then was always sort of resistant about Kennedy. And if there were every any appearances within the 20th Congressional District and Bill wasn't told about them, it was always hysterical. For some reason, I usually became the one to go down there and try and improve the relationships. And we really were pains in the neck. I mean I was embarrassed at having to do it for Bill because I'd never been a great Ryan fan. As a matter of fact, I didn't even vote for him in his first primary—which I don't think most of them know about. But he's just not my cup of tea. But it caused a lot of problems because if Bill Ryan decided he didn't want to, you know, help Kennedy, he'd slow up the

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clubs in that district. So I met Nolan that way, and then Justin was there on scheduling and they were at the Chaddam. Most of my work in that campaign—or all of it, really—was on the West Side.

The one connection I had was with a guy named Donald Reis [Donald Jeffrey Reis], who's a neurosurgeon, whom I've known since we were about six months old. He called up on the even of Rosh Hashanah during that campaign to ask me what the true meaning of Rosh Hashanah was. Being a good Reform Jew, I really could not give it to him. I had to look it up in dictionaries and books, and I never did. But he was a college roommate of Bill vanden Heuvel and was, therefore, helping Bill with his research, and that's really.... And I knew Bill through an old girlfriend of his many years back, but that was my only relationship.

GREENE: Could you get much of a feeling for the organization of the campaign—there's been so much said about it—or rather the lack of organization? Did this trickle down to you?

ELDRIDGE: Well, no. It never really did trickle down. And everyone was certain.... I mean Steve Smith was supposedly in control, and Ellen Straus [Ellen Sulzberger Straus]—who was somebody I guess you should talk to because she had some kind of a title

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job there, Mrs. Peter Straus—she was there as Steve's assistant, I guess. And a lot of us didn't particularly care about Peter [R. Peter Straus] that much. But it looked organized, and we didn't know enough about it. It looked very Irish, which everybody used to talk about. You know, you sort of realized that people from Washington close to the Jack Kennedy thing, the Justice Department—but it was understandable. I mean they had no organization, they were transplanted here.

We had a big problem. One of the conditions of Ryan's support and early endorsement was that he would be able to name the Manhattan coordinator. And that was a dispute that took us through all the months because every month there was a different Manhattan coordinator or there were rumors that somebody else was handling Manhattan. And all the time Ryan would think that he had his guy in. It turned out his guy was a guy named Mike Cohen, whom I've been very close for a long time, who's really a great guy, and who we've worked with recently in the Lindsay [John V. Lindsay] campaign. He's chairman of the subway watchdog committee, and everybody's very fond of him. He's always hated Steve Smith as a result of those three months of that campaign. It's always been very funny. We recently got the two of them together,

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and they like each other very much now. But it's still carried over from '64 because they thought they were the coordinators, and then they turn around the next day and find somebody else there. And that's a whole question of titles and things, and then I think the more you get involved in campaigns, the more you realize that they're always pretty lousy.

GREENE: Yeah. You know, I guess there was no secret about Robert Kennedy's feelings about the reform movement. Could you get much of a feeling for that campaign, too?

ELDRIDGE: Well, I think that's partially—most probably a lot of the basic resentment against Kennedy was not only the Hoffa and McCarthy stuff, but his behavior in '60 something.

GREENE: That famous thing.

ELDRIDGE: ... which I was not involved with. I became a reformer earlier than the reformers and we were always a little out of it. I belong to a club that was an insurgent club in 1951. We won the primary in 1951 and became a regular Democratic club. It was the West Side Democratic Club of 90th and Broadway. So we were there during the whole DeSapio [Carmin G. DeSapio] reign. And I was at college, and then I was a vice president when I was twenty-one and active. DeSapio was very smart and courted us a lot, but we really did stand for the same things as the reform group. So we were before the Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt]-

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Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman] tradition, which I never really got that caught up in, which these other people did. I think that was the big, you know, fight.

GREENE: Was there a problem before the campaign began, before Robert Kennedy was nominated, with people who wanted Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] to run in New York? Was there much of that in your district?

ELDRIDGE: In '60 or '64?

GREENE: '64.

ELDRIDGE: No, I don't remember that. No I mean there was a little bit, but I don't think any of us really took it that seriously.

GREENE: Because that was one of the factors.

ELDRIDGE: Right, right. None of us really—my group didn't take it that seriously. We were active for Stevenson in 1960, and we sat on the corner of Broadway with all those petitions, and we were not for Jack Kennedy, and I can't.... I've been trying to remember that, and I don't even remember it that well. We did work hard in the '60 Kennedy campaign, though, later on. No, some of them in their desperation of not wanting Kennedy, they went first to Wagner and then to Stratton. I don't remember Stevenson being too much, some of it. That's another crowd. It's Jack Shea [John Shea] and.... Is that what the group

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was, I guess?

GREENE: I don't know names. I know that Stevenson himself was very interested and approached the President, in fact, Johnson, asking for backing, and Johnson told him he was going to support Kennedy in that. I guess that was really the end of it.

ELDRIDGE: There was a very hard-core, old Stevenson group from '52, '56, even from '60 in the reform movement. They had a lot of money. They controlled a lot of the finances so that that was always there. It came up again in the McCarthy thing in '68; there was no doubt. They were interestingly enough, not part of the "Dump Johnson" movement, but they later became the Citizens for McCarthy in New York. It separates out by age and politically; I mean they're not nearly as liberal or radical.

GREENE: Could you feel the shift that supposedly took place after the first week in October where he got off the defensive and started to get more aggressive and hit Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] a lot harder? Was this effective in your area?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. I think it was. One of the most.... One of the pieces that stand out most in my mind was that everybody wanted the stories he did or the fact that he was a reporter in Israel—you remember, in Palestine.

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Oh, that's all they talked about and the fact that he liked Israel.

GREENE: In 1948?

ELDRIDGE: That's right. And some of the quotes, I'm sure, they were taken terribly out of context. God, they just swept the West Side. Somehow it was the only way to get over the Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] kind of thing. Yes, there was a swing, yet you still also had some of the really strong people really pro-Keating. I can't remember if Sarah eventually—I think she was one of the Keating things, wasn't she, with Lisa Howard?

GREENE: Yeah, right.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. And that was a very.... You know, they were there.

GREENE: They were effective in your area?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. It was effective, and it's biting, and it's the kind of thing that's really Turned—I'm trying to think of why I'm still so turned off and one of the things that had.... Just vicious, nasty kind of stuff. The debate business. But, you know, in our area people are super-critical, especially when it looks like you might win. They hate that so that they become even more so. It's always something wrong and so you don't enjoy that old ground swell and nothing ever becomes easy. We did find it with people at coffee

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klatches and things like that. It was much easier. They were also very impressed at the people who were coming down to talk for him and the fact that people really thought that, you know, in history he had a place and something to offer. It was an educational kind of process and a total introduction—really didn't know him.

Belafonte [Harry Belafonte] came to one of the coffee klatches that Arthur Schlesinger spoke at which was at Benay Venuta's apartment. Is that her name? A dancer. And Harry came—I knew him from another thing—and waited. Schlesinger was an hour late or more and finally Harry left. But I knew him a couple of years before when he was very friendly with Kennedy, and he and Julie [Julie Robinson Belafonte] used to go down and visit Hickory Hill. And he was very angry at him as a result of that meeting that he had with the blacks.

GREENE: Right.

ELDRIDGE: He was not.... I don't know if he voted for Kennedy in '64. I don't think he did, as a matter of fact. The coffee party was in his house and so he came. He was kind of bitter about him, in fact. It's interesting.

GREENE: Did you have any personal contact with the Senator during the campaign?

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ELDRIDGE: No. He started the campaign sort of in Manhattan on the West Side. We have a very favorite spot at 90th and Broadway, which was the scene of a traumatic experience in 1960 when the reform clubs on the West Side—and Mike Cohen, who was then the coordinator on the West Side, incidentally, interviewed Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] for a canvassing job. He was head of volunteers for, was it for Kennedy, I guess, in '60. And this guy walked in off the street and said, "I've been involved in politics on a very high level in California, but I really want to know how it works in the district. Therefore, I'd like to do canvassing." And Mike went through this whole interview with Pierre Salinger.

However, in '60 we had a big rally just the week, a few nights before the election, at the Coliseum. And we had our own rally scheduled for the West Side at 90th and Broadway with Jack Kennedy, had Mrs. Roosevelt, Lehman and everybody. It was a tremendous rally. We did a tremendous job. We decorated the whole place. We had Jack Kennedy posters, the smaller ones, hanging out of every single apartment house window in about four or five houses so the whole area was just covered. Mike worked very hard. We did. It started to rain, and I remember we all had to go home and collect as many umbrellas

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as we could, put our nametags on them. (I'll get back to the umbrella story later on) Anyway, we started; it was called for noon or one o'clock. And we had thousands of people there and no candidate. And then it became apparent that DeSapio had convinced him not to bother to stop at our spot because we were the reformers, and he didn't want to.... He went directly—

he was late anyway—directly to the hotel to dress for the Coliseum rally, which was the rally that they did not introduce Mrs. Roosevelt. I don't even think they had her on the platform.

Bill Ryan went down to Jack Kennedy's hotel and cried, got him while Jack Kennedy was getting dressed and stood there and cried about the fact that he had to come. So at 11 o'clock at night, after the Coliseum rally, the whole party came back up to 90th Street and Broadway to a rally that was only twelve hours late. And there were still mobs and mobs of people. He gave a very lovely speech which was later in one of the books of little speeches that Jack gave. So he started his '64 thing on the West Side at 90th Street and Broadway. And that was really about the only time that I saw him. I guess I saw him at different appearances but

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that was about it.

GREENE: Did you hear a lot about how difficult he was to work with during that period?

ELDRIDGE: No, because we really didn't know anybody who was that close to him. The umbrella story—I was later, several years later, down at the Senate office in the Post Office building to close the umbrella, I saw a little piece of masking tape with my name on it, which was from the 1960 rally, and it sort of all fit in. Here I was going, I think I was going down to see Bob Kennedy, and here I was working and talking and a friend of Robert Kennedy's, and 1960, you know, being a little kid on the West Side working for this Jack Kennedy rally So much had happened in that time, and it sort of was one of those things.

The first time I met Kennedy was after the election—I guess it was through Mike Cohen and I don't know who else—at a meeting at the Carlyle about Christmas parties. It was after he was elected Senator, and it was in November, the end of November. He decided that he wanted to have Christmas parties. Have you been through the Christmas party bit?

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GREENE: I know somewhat about it but not...

ELDRIDGE: Well, we were called up and asked to go to a meeting at room so and so at the Carlyle, and we got there, and it was really the first contact a lot of us had had with him. And it was a nice apartment and there were pictures of Jack Kennedy all over and mass cards all over, and he was still wearing a black tie, still in mourning. And there must have been about twenty-five or thirty people there, Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett], and Phil Ryan [Philip J. Ryan, Jr.], and I don't remember who else—some of the people from the campaign that we did not know very well and a group of us. He chaired the meetings about the Christmas party. We divided up into labor and food and entertainment and invitations and printing, and they were the most incredible series of

meetings I've ever attended. I mean it was just incredible. He sat there in his shirtsleeves, and he talked about what entertainment he wanted.

Mrs. Natalie Cushing would be there, and she thought that we ought to have the Christmas party in a tent. She's absolutely darling, and we all love her dearly, and she sat there.... We were talking about a public school in East Harlem or this and that, and Natalie would say, "You remember, Bobby,

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Mrs. So-and-so in Washington. She always has her lovely parties in these big tents. Why can't we get one of those tents?" And it was just the contrast of the—you know, fortunately those of us who were there, we really liked him and we were really committed and nothing was really going to turn us off so we could be amused at all of the society party kind of thing as discussed with the East Harlem thing. Anyway, we went through I don't know how many meetings, but there were a lot of meetings.

It was really the first time I talked to him. I mean we were introduced and we chatted, and he obviously knew I was a district leader. I may have been to another meeting as a district leader, but it would be one of hundreds. The first time we even really exchanged any thoughts was when the assistant superintendent of schools representing the superintendent of schools was there and we were talking about what age group of the kids could come. And he said that we'll start at second grade, second to fifth grade or second to sixth grade. Bobby said, "Well how about the first-graders?" And the guy said, "They can't come." So he said, "Well, why not? They'd enjoy it. We're going to have magicians and entertainers." He said, "Well, Senator, we've decided"—the people around him called him "General," and the other people

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called him "Senator," and some of us just never called him anything. That was from attorney general, the general. He said, "We can't have the first-graders go because they get too excited and they wet their pants." And Kennedy said, "That's absolutely ridiculous. You get"—I forget who the superintendent of schools was—"you get him on the phone. I'd like to talk to him." So the guy went inside to make a phone call and he turned to me, and he said, "Is that what the board of education is like there?" And I said, "Sort of, I think." And that was, you know.... And then he raised his eyebrows—he had very expressive eyes—and that was the beginning of a long fight. I think we did get the first-graders. I'm not sure. And the parties were horrendous. We did the one in East Harlem and it was great. Marvelous decorations. And it was two parties. It was just very well organized.

That night they invited those of us who organized them to a viewing of a movie, *The Guns of August*, I guess, at which both Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] and Bob were. The party, I guess, was on a Saturday. And Saturday afternoon they all came. Saturday afternoon Phil Ryan called Mike Cohen up and said, "Can you get back into the school because we think that the Senator—whatever he called him—left his overcoat in the school, and he's anxious to have it back." And Mike called—I guess he went up

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there. Anyway, the school was closed, and we couldn't do anything about it. That night we went to the viewing, and we sat right in front of Kennedy. And he turned over, and he said, you know, he tapped like, and he said, "I'm very anxious to get the overcoat back; it belonged to my brother." We were all very new in this whole thing, and we were really still.... We never kind of believed that we were so involved with this great Kennedy mystique. It was still shortly after '63. Everybody was really taken aback. And then the movie started, and it started with the funeral procession. God, I just, through the whole thing. And that was the first time he lost his overcoat, which he then did very frequently. And we got the overcoat back. So go on.

GREENE: If you have, well, I was going to say, if you have nothing else on the campaign....

ELDRIDGE: Right. I really don't think I do.

GREENE: I would think the next thing would be the leadership fight. Does that sound logical to you? Or anything else you think of, fine.

ELDRIDGE: Well, I could go on a little bit about the intervening times as how we got to know him and what his relationship was, which I think are more interesting and, you know, they're more personal and less people know about them. We were talking before about inviting him to

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our club dinner. The Democratic clubs always have big fund-raising dinners at which time they like to have a guest of honor. And we decided the night of the election that we'd like to have him, and everybody thought it'd be impossible, but, we sent the telegram off on the night of the election; something about "win or lose, we'd like to have you come," blah, blah. It was for February at the Tavern-on-the-Green, and we never got an answer. He won the election, and we got into the Christmas parties.

My next contact with that office, as such, was getting a letter from him thanking me. It was, "Dear Mrs. Eldridge," or "Dear Ronnie, I want to thank you very much for all your work in the campaign, and I would appreciate it"—I found this letter a few weeks ago—"if you would thank the women in your organization. Women are very important in the running of a campaign, and the work a woman does is essential, such as the licking of envelopes and everything." It was the most incredible letter. I just really laughed. I had to go down to the Statler, and they were still there. That was, Dave Hackett was there, and that was my first real contact with Dave Hackett. I walked in and I said, "Now, you really can't be serious about this letter." And so that started about the women bit.

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It was very interesting.

He always gave that speech, incidentally, about women. His mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] would help him. I mean they would sort of set up about his mother would say that women really don't fit into smoke-filled rooms and make decisions, but they're the backbone of a campaign. And he used to do that, too, periodically. He changed as he got more modern, but in the—I guess it was the O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor] campaign—some big thing at one of the hotels, the Commodore or something, they had a big tea and reception. He got up and talked about the role of women. Anyway, we then never got an answer back from the dinner business and finally sent a telegram saying that, you know, confirming the date. And that's when Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman] called, and we became quite friendly.

At the same time, the activities on the West Side, we had adopted a town in Mississippi, Starkville, Mississippi, and we were sending food and clothing down there. We raised tremendous amounts and sent many large trailer trucks. And we were constantly getting calls from the kids in SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] who were in jail in the middle of the night, you know, about getting them out or about the police harassment and that kind of stuff. I don't remember how, but I guess I got to Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan] or somebody in the office. That

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was just after the first of the year. That was really our first business contact. They were extremely helpful; they were really very good with the correct contacts. So Joe may still be over at the Justice Department, so whoever was at the Senate office....

GREENE: No, he came over with the...

ELDRIDGE: Right away?

GREENE: Yeah.

ELDRIDGE: And we did provide some additional protection in Starkville. One of the kids from Starkville, from SNCC in Starkville, came from Boston, so Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] was involved in it also. And it got to the point where they would no longer arrest the kids. I once got a phone call from the sheriff of Starkville at 3 o'clock in the morning telling me, you know, "Enough. We're not arresting anybody. We really have a very nice town. Why don't you come down and see it?" I think that our kids were better protected than anybody, and that was really through Kennedy's office. And that was very helpful.

Then, through that, I guess, I was having some contact with Guthman and that office, and I began to say that I thought he should get more involved in the political stuff on the West Side. One of them was a dinner they were having for Ted Weiss [Theodore S. Weiss], who was never

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one of my favorite reformers. He was a city councilman, not particularly helpful to Kennedy, and really a whiner and a pain in the neck. But they were having a dinner, and I said to Guthman that I thought it would be very nice, it would be exceedingly nice, if he came—he was going to be in town for some kind of dinner and if he couldn't come, at least to send a message—and that he should get involved in these kinds of things. So Ed was very nice, and we talked about it. I got over there, and it was in that crummy motel on 57th Street where we were the other night. What's the name of it?

GREENE: Holiday Inn.

ELDRIDGE: Holiday Inn. I got there a little early, and there were maybe five or six people at this dinner and, lo and behold, in walks Robert Kennedy. They usually precede the dinner with a cocktail hour. And there was the Senator, and nobody expected him—especially at Ted Weiss'. It was really beautiful. And one of the guys, the leaders or the club president, ran out to call Teddy [Ted Schlemiel] at home. Teddy as he is, was still getting dressed, and Bobby Kennedy was at his dinner and at the cocktail party. I introduced him to some people, and we did talk then.

I think that was also the beginning of it. I can't

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remember if that was before or after—it must have been after the Riverside Club. But my whole relationship with him began as a myth. It was fascinating to sit back and watch the myth develop. It basically began at the Riverside Club, which was sometime in January—that's Bill Ryan's home club—a commitment they had made to him that he would go to a cocktail party they had as a guest when he was elected. I was there early, and it was very crowded. It was up at the Riverside Museum. Then I had to leave to meet my husband [Larry Eldridge]. We were going to the theatre. And as I left, Franz Leichter [Franz S. Leichter], who was the district leader there, was walking in with Kennedy. And Franz said to the Senator, "I would like you to meet another district leader." And he was still very shy and unsure of himself and certainly aware of the hostility of most of the reformers, and I'm sure he did not know my name; it was really right after the Christmas parties. He said, "This is not another district leader; this is an old friend"—he was just so grateful to see a familiar face—and hugged me and kissed me. Well, the word went out around that whole place that Ronnie Eldridge—Robert Kennedy is very fond of Ronnie Eldridge. If you want anything from the Kennedy outfit, go to

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Ronnie. I mean it was just a growing myth.

That was followed shortly after that by the Lexington Club dinner, which was another early standing commitment from something else. Russell Hemenway, who was then the executive director of the CDV [New York Committee for Democratic Voters], an old Stevensonian Democrat, not a Kennedy supporter, took the Senator around and introduced him to all the different people at the dinner. It was a large dinner, and Bob Wechsler was

sitting next to me, and I said, “Well, you’ll really see the myth explode this time because he’ll shake hands and say, “How do you do.” All right. They got around to our table, and he saw me and he gave me another great big kiss. So by the time that was finished, I really could have just owned the world.

As we left that dinner, Guthman came over and, I guess, introduced himself to me or something, and he told me that they would be at our club dinner. And I think that was really the first positive word of it. Well, everybody was very excited. We had gotten permission to use his name on the invitation, finally, and everybody was very excited. It was a big thing. The dinner was the end of February, I guess. It was the night that Johnson called a special session of Congress to give his speech on his civil rights legislation. And Bob Wechsler, who was a very nervous Nellie

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anyway, calls me that morning at 8 o’clock and said, “I told you the Senator was never going to come.” And I said, “What do you mean? Did they call you?” He said, “No, but the President’s giving a speech.” And I said, “Well, let’s wait until he calls.” By this time, there must have been other things because Blumenthal knew Kennedy, and we were all involved. Anyway, he came to that dinner. He did not go to the President’s address—mostly I’m sure because he didn’t want to go. But just the fact that he didn’t want to go, you know, that he wasn’t in Washington, he was at our club dinner, that was the final making of our trio, really, of Blumenthal and Eldridge at least, as far as our relationship with the Senator goes. So that’s really all of that part of it.

GREENE: You didn’t mention on tape, what you told me about how you finagled the....

ELDRIDGE: Oh, well, we had sent the telegram and really never got a response. We kept waiting and kept calling and sending more letters, and so finally I suggested that we just send a telegram saying, “This is just to confirm your appearance at such-and-such club dinner at such-and-such.” And the next morning Ed Guthman called and said, you know, “What is all this about?” So we went into it from there.

GREENE: They weren’t as disorganized as you thought.

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ELDRIDGE: Right. So that was in the beginning of ’65.

GREENE: Yeah, right.

ELDRIDGE: By that time I was evidently quite involved, I think, in working in the Senate office and just helping out. I don’t remember what the early projects were

because by the time the spring came, it was the mayoralty campaign. I knew very early—and nobody believed me—that Wagner was not going to run. We would sit around that Senate office building and...

GREENE: Now, you mean the New York Senate office, is that right?

ELDRIDGE: Right. In the Post Office. I never visited the Washington office. I never got to Washington. I just never felt anything, and I thought I'd take the kids but they were kind of young and so never got there.

Polly Feingold [Pauline Feingold] was on the staff by that time, and that's, I think, also what helped my getting involved because we had been friendly. I had met her during the Haddad campaign. We had a—it was sort of the break up of our friendship, and it was an interesting kind of thing. She was very committed to liberal causes and a very hard worker. She increasingly became much more interested in the causes than in the Senator as a person. It became more difficult from the staff point of view because really, if you're working on a staff, your main concern has to be

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the person you're working for, and it served to pull apart a lot of times.

GREENE: How did you get involved in working in the Senator's office? Was it a voluntary thing? Were you asked to come on?

ELDRIDGE: I would just come down there and do different projects. I'm trying to think. We did the Christmas parties. The World's Fair. I guess that was what Started.... That was July. In June.... And I rode with.... I guess when it came time for politics, I would want to talk to him about different things that were happening or he would want to talk to me, and I would meet him at different places or ride in the car with him. And if he went to places that we were involved in, we would go in the car. I can't really remember all the details.

I loved the World's Fair. I don't know why. I guess the kinds and everything. It was just a fascinating place. And I really thought he ought to do something with some kids at the fair. So I decided that we would try to take a bunch of kids out, and he agreed to that and worked with the board of education and found that they all had their own programs and nobody was particularly interested in sending a group of kids to the World's Fair with the Senator from New York State, which I could never really understand. We did, after

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some searching, find a very good training program for school dropouts, and we arranged a day at the fair for five hundred kids. All the advance guys came, and its really when I began to know the advance guys. Phil Ryan was still a staff assistant in the office, and Polly and the Hanons came in and McGrath [Chris McGrath] and Bernie Jackson and...

GREENE: Jim Tolan [James E. Tolan].

ELDRIDGE: Tolan. All these people came in, and we worked out a day at the fair which was really an incredible day. We had two schools, and we got somebody to donate the buses. Well, I guess American Express gave us the money. We raised money so we came out of the day with a profit. And that was the beginning of the Children's Holiday Parties Foundation, Inc., or whatever—it was later called that—with the combination of the Christmas parties and that activity. IBM [International Business Machines Corporation], NCR [National Cash Register], American Express and some of the other places all donated money. We had the buses pick up these kids at their schools in Brooklyn, and they arrived at the fair at, I guess, around 9 o'clock.

We started the day off at the Johnson's Wax Pavilion seeing that film that later won all those prizes. The Senator greeted them all and talked to them about school and training and all of that business. They saw the film, and then they broke up into the different

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fields in which they were training. The kids who were training in restaurant services went on a tour Restaurant Associates provided for us of all the way the service the restaurants and ran them. The kids in the office techniques and stuff went through NCR and IBM. Those in hospital work went to the World's Fair hospital and were shown how that worked. Anyway, that's the way we did it. It was really very well organized in the morning. And then we met back at the Federal Pavilion for lunch. And all of the talent people from the different pavilions and different shows all came and they entertained for about two hours; the African dancers and the this-that group and the Mexican band and the—but all of the outstanding talent groups. And he came back. He was giving a speech out at Long Island University, and he came back for lunch and enjoyed it. Then they all broke up and went into other activities and then left at 3 or 3:30. That was, I guess, one of the major things I did in June. I don't remember, but it was a great day.

It was at that time that we were discussing who was going to run against Lindsay. That really bugged him. He really wanted to find somebody.

GREENE: Because it was Lindsay?

ELDRIDGE: I think to a great degree, yeah.

GREENE: How do you interpret his hostility at that point? Was

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it from the administration period?

ELDRIDGE: Oh, no, I don't really think so. I think it was just another guy, sort of his own age, attractive and charismatic and also a Republican. He was a very

good Democrat. He really wanted the Democratic party to, you know, win and there be a Democratic mayor and, you know, give some meaning to it. He once, during that Beame [Abraham D. Beame] campaign—that was that famous remark about when he wanted to know what did you think the definition of charisma was and did I think that anybody other than John Lindsay had charisma.

GREENE: In the whole world or in the campaign?

ELDRIDGE: Generally in the political scene at the time. And that was Bob Kennedy asking you what do you think charisma means and do you know anybody else who has charisma. I think it was really a very personal kind of thing for him. It was really.... And then when he had to get stuck with Abe Beame as a candidate, it was really, you know, it was just not the kind of thing he was interested in.

GREENE: Well, who was he interested in?

ELDRIDGE: Well, he wasn't interested in....It was very hard; there was just nobody you could find. He was interested in

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Watson [Thomas J. Watson, Jr.], I mean guys like that. It turned out he didn't live in New York and all that. We just went through lists, we kept making up lists. It was very difficult.

GREENE: He had no interest in Ryan or O'Dwyer [Paul O'Dwyer]?

ELDRIDGE: No, he always thought Ryan was a pain in the neck—which he was. And especially the '64 experience would just reinforce it. We did go to work for Ryan. I guess most of us had to. I lasted for a month, and then my father got sick and I also hated it and just left. And O'Dwyer not really either. And Screvane [Paul R. Screvane], I don't really know what his input into that campaign was.

GREENE: How did his so-called neutrality or befuddlement, I guess, indecision, affect the reformers' opinion of him? Did they put a lot of pressure on him to come out for somebody else?

ELDRIDGE: Well, the reformers were split anyway, I think, with Ryan and Lindsay. A lot of them were for Lindsay, so you didn't find a concerted effort there. Some of us tried very hard to involve him more in party politics. I remember having a meeting with him while he was still living at the Carlyle, Kretchmer and Al and I. And I don't remember what it was about, what the purpose of

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the meeting was; but he said at that point that he found it so difficult to work with New York politicians. He wasn't talking only about reformers, just New York politicians. He said, "They may steal in Massachusetts, but they don't lie, and in New York they all lie, and you never know what they're going to do." It was at that same meeting when somebody said, "Where are you going for the weekend?" And he said he has a summerhouse on the northeastern part of New York State in Hyannis Port, New York. [laughter]

We tried very hard to get him very involved. I suppose a lot of it was the leadership fight, the mayoralty. We really wanted him to get involved in the mayoralty, to come up with a candidate. We wanted him to solve all our problems. Looking back on it, I think he had a very good appreciation of the stages you go through in political maneuvering. And I think I learned a lot from him in that. It came out later in '66 in the O'Connor campaign. We can talk about that later. But we really felt that he (a) was able to attract and talk to people that we were not as reformers; (b) the party really stank. And I don't think he really realized what we were talking about about the party until a little later. And he felt it was more or less similar to the regular party

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in Boston which he had sort of been able to work alongside of, never really with, but that he could live working alongside. And I think he came to see alter that he really couldn't even survive, I don't think.

GREENE: Do you think that one of the reasons he was less forceful in trying to find an alternative than he might have been was because he felt that if Screvane got in, he'd have Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan]; and if Beame got in, he could work through his regular associates?

ELDRIDGE: Right, yeah. I don't think he really had reached that point yet where, you know.... And also I think that he really didn't believe in doing something unless he could really win it. He liked to win very much. That's another thing we had very much in common. I also like to win. I'm a terrible loser, and I've always...

GREENE: That's not good for a reformer.

ELDRIDGE: That's right. It's always been one of the very hard problems in the Reform movement. I forget what the other thing was that I was going to say. But anyway, we'll get back to it.

GREENE: Did you see much of him during the campaign?

ELDRIDGE: Well, I was not very involved. We saw each other about other things. He wasn't that much involved

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either. I do remember we had a rally on the West Side for Beame. I had made a commitment to somebody that I would try to see if it was all right, and Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was coming and Beame and Kennedy. I had to go over to the Beame headquarters at the Summit Hotel, which was so awful. I was walking down this dark hall with all these women with their high pompadours and just so ugly. And I saw Tim Hannon at the end of the hall. We had met each other and worked with each other a little bit in parties and were never friendly. We saw each other in that Beame headquarters, and we just hugged each other, just so glad to see. And sort of in a way it was the beginning of setting a kind of style. The people around Kennedy had a style. There was no doubt about it. And some of us who then gravitated also had a sense of style and power—that was the other thing about it, an understanding of the power of politics. I really think that if you're going to go into it, you go into it for different reasons. He had an understanding of it, although he really didn't want to use it sometimes.

So Tim and I went up and advanced this Beame rally. We had a good rally. I don't think there was one person in that crowd who voted for him, but they were very nice about Kennedy. It was interesting. They

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liked him. He was not really—it was not his fault that Abe Beame was a candidate, interestingly enough. I don't know why not because I think partly it was.

GREENE: Once the campaign got under way and he saw the kind of candidate that Beame was, how did he feel about Lindsay? Do you think secretly he might have been hoping he'd win?

ELDRIDGE: Well, we're not quite sure who he voted for—I mean if you pieced all these stories together. Have you? Justin Feldman has a story because Kennedy's eligibility was challenged that day.

GREENE: He had to go down there, right.

ELDRIDGE: And walking down the street, Justin told the story that nobody knew. And who else was it? Was it Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston, Jr.] or somebody who was traveling with him that day? I'm really not quite sure. I think Adam [Adam Walinsky] told me. I think Adam and I are the only two who voted for Beame. And I think most likely that Kennedy either—I don't know what he did. Nobody's quite sure how he voted. After the primary was over.... He felt that the reformers should go in and support Ryan, it didn't bother him. After the primary was over, he felt that we should support Beame. And there was a move on that we shouldn't.

I remember meeting with him at the hotel at 56th and Sixth Avenue, Seventh Avenue. It was at the Sheraton

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Park or something. He was at some kind of a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] conference, and Tom Johnston had called and said, "Let's meet at the bar downstairs." And I never got over that kind of excitement of walking into the bar in this middle kind of commercial hotel and saying, "Is Senator Kennedy here?" And he'd hear me, and the maitre d' at the bar said, "Senator Kennedy. Is he coming?" And I said, "Yes, he's coming." Well, they fussed and they got some tables together in a corner, you know. It was just always a very exciting thing to be with him. He was a legend, and everybody would sort of look up.

And we had a meeting. It was right after the Pope [Pope Paul VI] had been here. It was with Ohrenstein, Kretchmer, Blumenthal and me, I think. It was the night they call Erev Yom Kippur. Freddie was in a rush to go home for Yom Kippur. He was talking about the crowd of people or something, and Freddie said, "Well, yesterday wasn't Yom Kippur." And he said, "Yesterday was the Pope. The whole world isn't Jewish," or some such thing. It was really just a peculiar way, you know, Ohrenstein's whole thing was Erev Yom Kippur and Kennedy was the Pope, and it was a kind of interesting thing.

At that meeting he wanted to broker our position with the

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Beame thing. He felt that we, Blumenthal and Kretchmer and Ohrenstein, they were interested in the leadership fight in the legislature at that time, that early. They wanted certain commitments, and they also wanted him to play a prominent role in the campaign. This was before anyone realized how lousy the campaign was going to be. Kennedy said, "If you'll just let me, I'll broker your role there." He sort of was taking care of everybody like a father. It's very hard to broker, and when it, you know, lasted for a week and everybody realized that they really didn't want to do anything about it, I do think.... I don't know if you've spoken to Blumenthal, but that most likely was the beginning of the discussions on the leadership and that you should go through because Podell [Bertram L. Podell], who was one of Beame's operators—he wasn't a campaign manager, but whatever he was—out of the Steingut orbit. I think that had something to do with the decision to support Steingut. I've never been quite sure.

GREENE: Yeah. I was going to ask you about that. Did you get involved much in the leadership fight?

ELDRIDGE: Well, we did, and that's one of the things I was calling Tom.... I don't really remember it. And the other thing is nobody's really sure. Life with Kennedy was very

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hard, and when you read these books you realize really how difficult it was because there were so many different kinds of people enjoying different kinds of relationships and it didn't necessarily span from one group to another. So what we would discuss with him and what we thought we had was not necessarily what somebody else would think. Blumenthal and Kretchmer supported Steingut early. They had had quite another leadership thing in '63, I

guess; I don't remember. They were not Travia [Anthony J. Travia] people. I do think Kennedy was really for Steingut. I really do. It was also an anti-Wagner thing. We were also interested in stopping Wagner. And the Jones [J. Raymond Jones]-Travia thing was out of the Wagner orbit. I just really don't know enough about it. There was a time when Kennedy thought and Steingut had said that Al would be the whip. I don't think it was.... I mean Stanley was speaker and then there was majority leader or something. But Al...

GREENE: Well, it was the majority leader that was sort of up for grabs and they came up with a series of—first this guy Erway [Julian B. Erway] who turned out to be...

ELDRIDGE: No, he's in the Senate. Erway was the leader of the Senate. I'm talking about the second in command in the Assembly.

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GREENE: Oh, oh. I thought you were talking about the majority leader.

ELDRIDGE: Right. Erway was first and Bronston [Jack E. Bronston] was in there at some time.

GREENE: They discarded Erway, and then they came up with Bronston, and they really liked Bronston. And they tried to go all the way with him, and, of course, he was—although I had heard it was never over the majority leader that the problem arose. The problem arose because Wagner would make any compromise but he would never accept Steingut.

ELDRIDGE: Steingut. Right. Now, the majority...

GREENE: Is that your understanding?

ELDRIDGE: What we're talking about are two separate things, speaker of the assembly and—what do you call them, is it the majority leader of the State Senate? Now, under the speaker of the assembly went some other positions.

GREENE: That's what you meant.

ELDRIDGE: Right. That's right. And that's the whip, I guess. It's when it's minority leader, which Stanley is now up in the Assembly, if you're not the party in power. And that was what we thought that Al was going to be, the whip.

There

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was some kind of thing there. I think that Kennedy was supporting that. And there was a time when, really, he had been told that he had it; had Stanley gotten it he most certainly would have gotten it.

Then there was the trip to South America which is what I was trying to find out from Tom. They left the night of the blackout, because I was at the Senate office that night working on the Christmas party. This is the following year.

GREENE: In '66, right?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. That was an interesting night because we were really in control of the state, I guess, that night. Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] was away it turned out. So was Malcolm Wilson. Travia was out in Brooklyn and he had no phones, couldn't travel. And there we were in the Senate office. The White House started to call, and it was really kind of wild. I couldn't go home because there was nothing to do, and I was having a meeting which was then.... We had had it, and the light went out during it, and a lot of those people left. Then the Post Office, you know, they were very anxious about protecting it and they had guards out with guns during that. It was a fun night. I sat down with the Yellow Pages of the "redbook," and I called nursing homes

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in New York—you read it with a string; we were burning string—said that Senator Kennedy asked me to call, that we were concerned, did they need anything and, were they all right in the blackout.

GREENE: But this was of your own....

ELDRIDGE: Right. They were just.... I always enjoyed his name. It was always fun for me, and I enjoyed it. You could make somebody's life very happy by saying you were calling for Senator Kennedy or Senator Kennedy wanted to.... And it was something that we really should have done more of because it gave so many people so much pleasure. So the nursing homes, really, they got very excited. One of them called back the next day, and we did have—we got them a battery, which was very hard to get. But that was fun.

Anyway on that trip there was a front-page *New York Times* story saying something to the effect that Kennedy was supporting Blumenthal, which he was very upset about. I think it was Marty Arnold [Martin Arnold] who wrote the story, but I'm not sure and you might want to look. It had something to do with the issue.

GREENE: Was he upset because it had gotten into the papers, or was he upset because it wasn't his position?

ELDRIDGE: Evidently it was not that much his position and it had

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gotten in the paper. But I don't think he ever had the guts to tell Al that it was not his position, though I think he was supporting Al for whip, for the second position.

I remember also that Christmas calling him—they were skiing; I don't remember where—calling him because Jerry Kretchmer and Blumenthal were having a fight. They were both candidates for the whip. I mean that was so typically.... I was always sort of the den mother, God, and he was the father, and I always had to be the contact. Taking care of these legislators got to be a terrible bore after a while. But I called him to see if couldn't he talk to Kretchmer and tell him not to run. I remember we had a very nice discussion, and he did call back, so he was involved in it. I don't remember what it was. Either Jerry or Al will most likely.... Jerry's most likely to have forgotten it. I'm sure he's wanted to block it out.

GREENE: This is interesting because I never heard this aspect of it at all.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. He was very much more involved in this with us as reformers than other people know. I don't think he was playing games with us. I think it's partly his ambivalence. But he really, genuinely, I think, liked working with us more than he liked working with the rest

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of the Democrats. I mean we were much more interesting people. Also it gave him a lot of trouble. We used to kid each other about it. But we were very loyal. We were always there when he needed us. And we really didn't cop out on a few things some of them did. And we were something he had to put up with.

GREENE: Right.

ELDRIDGE: So Blumenthal, much higher caliber. There's no doubt about it. If you really want to change the Democratic party and you wanted better legislation coming out, it's much to your benefit to have somebody like Blumenthal there. But I think in a way it also embarrassed him with some of his other, you know, contacts and friends. It's interesting. It's changed tremendously since then, which we can talk about a little later. Do you want me to go on?

GREENE: If you have reflections about that now, go ahead.

ELDRIDGE: Well, we were talking about this other leadership thing. We once were at a dinner party at Carter Burden's. Larry—my husband, and I, would go to more cocktail parties and dinner parties, socially, and have more arguments and fights about Robert Kennedy, I mean, just than anything. I always kidded him about that in response to him kidding me about

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reformers. I remember so well at Carter's—it must have been late '67—we were talking about the presidency and everything else. He was standing under the chandelier in this lovely foyer, beautiful staircase, puffing on a cigar (and they always make people more aggressive), and he said, "You know, I was thinking about you the other day. I've spent more time with you and your reformers and with your reform problems than anything else in this state. And what do I have to show for it? Nothing!" And so it was the bantering back. He obviously thought about it a lot, and it was very difficult for him because he could never really, you know, get it out to a lot of other people. As time was going on, we were the people most involved, I think, understanding closest to him as far as the New York political people go, in the whole '68 thing.

And it increasingly gets that Steve Smith also is much closer to us than to a lot of other.... And Steve's another one who can enjoy all kinds of things with him. But I think that I understand him or get along with him better and am basically closer to him than the other political cronies. It's that special thing about them. I mean he's a very good guy. They're not only good professional politicians—you know, and Bobby was the same—but they

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really did have a basic understanding of what made everything go and at a point really had enough of it, I think, within the system and didn't really know how to, you know, get out of it. The New York thing, the thing was just a big mess. [Interruption]

GREENE: I wanted to ask you how free you felt to go to him with ideas or to press him on issues that you felt he should be taking a stronger stand.

ELDRIDGE: Oh, very. Yeah. I never had any problem about that at all, and it was always just very, you know, welcome. And if he didn't like it, he'd say so. I'd call up—and I never had any trouble seeing him or anything like that. He used to say, "Why don't you call more often?" We never could get over that initial thing—it was interesting—first because I really didn't know how to call him in Washington and at home. I always hated to get into that. Every once in a while I'd get a message when I got home that Senator Kennedy called, and the babysitter or the maid or the housekeeper would write it down, and they'd be

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very excited, and I wouldn't have the faintest idea about how to go about doing it. The first time I really met Angie Novello [Angela M. Novello] was at the funeral. When we were introduced, she said, "Oh my, every time you called my stomach would churn because I knew it meant trouble." [Laughter] So I had a few problems with Angie every once in a while, but, really, the New York office was marvelous and Peter and Adam and Joe Dolan and everybody was lovely. I never had any problems at all about getting to him. Sometimes he'd, you know, look at us.... In '66, in January or something, Blumenthal called and said, "We've just got to see him and talk about the gubernatorial campaign. My idea is that we

run” or maybe it was John Hyman. “My idea is that we run”—here’s another place where we look for a candidate and there weren’t any candidates—“Arthur Levitt as governor and the rest of the ticket be very young.” I was busy working for Lowenstein [Allard K. Lowenstein] at that time. I guess it was February of ’66. I called him, and he was getting dressed for dinner, and he said, “Well, let’s meet for dinner on my way up to the Bronx.” I didn’t know where to meet, and we met at some bar on Third Avenue. In the car going up to the Bronx we talked about Levitt, and that’s when he turned around and he said, “Is that what

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the New Frontier means to you? Does Arthur Levitt”—Newfield [Jack Newfield] wrote it in the book and all the people got angry. He said, “Arthur Levitt is an accountant,” which some very sensitive Jews would take as an anti-Semitic comment, which is the kind of thing you would deal with in this instance. And he said, “Furthermore, he’s constipated.” He said, “Have you ever listened to him speak?” And I said, “No.” Then he turned out and said, “Is that what the New Frontier looks like to you?” So that sort of, you know, that....

GREENE: That took care of Arthur Levitt.

ELDRIDGE: We discussed the Senate race in ’68 and the presidency, the whole presidency. But before we get to that, the surrogate race, for instance. We started talking about the surrogate race in December of—when was the surrogate race?

GREENE: ’66.

ELDRIDGE: So in December of ’65, Christmas party time, I was reminiscing with Mildred Jeffrey, who you really ought to speak with. Do you know her? She’s the National Committeewoman from Michigan.

GREENE: I know the name, and she’s been interviewed for the other project.

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ELDRIDGE: She met us at a party, and we were driving down to another party. We had twenty-something, like twenty-seven parties that year. Oh, it was so horrendous. We were together for four solid days, and when we said good-bye I said if I never saw him again—and I know he felt that way about me—I couldn’t care less. It was unbelievable it was so awful. But the parties were lovely, and he was great and the kids were marvelous. It was just a very busy schedule. But riding on the East Side Highway we were talking about he surrogate race, and I said, “If you really want to get Ray Jones and you really want to stop the whole thing and begin to change it, the surrogate race would be a great place to do it because it’s the whole realm of patronage, et cetera.”

GREENE: This was after Alex Rose’s initial suggestion?

ELDRIDGE: No, this was way before. This was December, and I don't think Rose's suggestion was till the spring.

GREENE: So that didn't come as.... It's always been written that that was the first....

ELDRIDGE: Vanden Heuvel's version is Alex Rose. Right. No, it wasn't. It's undoubtedly Alex Rose that made it more of, you know, a thing. But the reformers also went on day in and day out talking about the surrogate in

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the usual old fashion. Could never get a candidate. They were pushing. The part with the reformers, it was very interesting. They didn't like Robert Kennedy, a lot of them. They didn't really want him. But then when he was here they needed him desperately. They always wanted him to take the initial lead. They were never willing to set the stage so that he could then come in. It was really there that you saw, and you still see, their total lack of understanding of the political process. And '66 convention, I think, was really the best part of it. You had Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson], O'Connor, Samuels [Howard J. Samuels], and—who else?

GREENE: Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.]

ELDRIDGE: Roosevelt. And Nickerson with Jack English and everybody saying this is really Kennedy's favorite. But then it obviously—Nickerson not taking off and obviously Kennedy not being that sure that he could really take off and be an exciting candidate. And so at the same time he's looking for other candidates. Freddie Ohrenstein wanted very much to get on that ticket as attorney general. So he cornered part of the reformers and he said, you know, "Don't make a commitment to any candidate. Follow me." So that

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took care of part of the reformers. Some of the reformers went to Nickerson and some of them went to Samuels. It's always interesting—Sarah Kovner's a big Nickerson person. Always has been. Very close to Jack English. I don't know why but just always personally very close. Finally, it reached a point where Blumenthal and I talked about it, and I said that I thought we really had to come out for Nickerson, that obviously he was a clear choice and O'Connor really was, I thought, a disaster. In addition to the kind of politics he meant, I also thought it was a victory for the Humphrey wing of the party, and I really didn't want it.

So the reform delegates to the convention met in the usual number of meetings. We tried to move them first to make a choice, and they wouldn't do that. Then we tried to move them not go to O'Connor, and they wouldn't do that because everybody had something different going. And I remember Russell Hemenway telling me that he was calling Steve

Smith up to get a letter written to me by Steve Smith to say that the Senator did not want us to do anything, because their way of operating would be to call Robert Kennedy up and

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say, “Is Gene Nickerson your candidate?” If he would say, “No,” or “everybody’s my candidate” or be evasive, they would come back and say this is the way it is. My feeling was that the papers at the time, the *Times* and the *Post* [*New York Post*] were really for Nickerson; they were certainly against O’Connor. They were running editorials daily, in fact, that if the reform caucus, even though it had only something like ninety-five votes, en masse came out for Nickerson, or opposed O’Connor, that we would then force Kennedy into a position. And the part was he didn’t mind being forced into a position. And there were times, really, he would almost want to be forced but he wasn’t going to take the initial leadership. This was the kind of thing we could never get over to the other reformers. I asked him one day following that—oh, it was way after that; it was during the Manchester [William Manchester] thing when we had gone out to St. Albans Naval Hospital to visit some of the Vietnam wounded. Going out there I said, you know, “Let’s.... We were talking about something else, and I was saying, “Let’s take it into the context”—I guess we were talking about the county leadership. (At which point, I had

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no idea of running.) I said “If the reformers had all ninety some odd votes come out for Nickerson, you would have come out for Nickerson, wouldn’t you?” He thought about it for a long time, and he said yes, he would have. In a way—I mean that was the way you’d build up something. And Nickerson most likely would have won the convention. Instead it worked the other way; nobody would move. He didn’t really move, and Nickerson’s candidacy fell.

GREENE: Do you think that was a desire to avoid the bossism and labels, that he was afraid that if he moved with the idea of taking everyone with him that he would never escape that?

ELDRIDGE: No, I don’t think so because he would only have taken the reformers with him. I think it was a desire on the part of some people like vanden Heuvel and others, who traditionally played a much more conservative role.... I think Bill’s understanding of politics is very bad. It’s very unintuitive, and he really doesn’t understand what goes on. And you see it here, too, with Lindsay sometimes. People on staff and people around tend to be more conservative and are looking at you more as an individual than as what you’re standing for and become overprotective and their judgment becomes very bad.

It takes you also back to the presidency. I

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could never understand this whole thing about Robert Kennedy running for president in '68. It was crazy to me. This was early. I spent a lot of time in '64, '65, '66. We always got a lot of gossip down at the office from people like vanden Heuvel, who, I think, never gave up the dream of returning a Kennedy to the White House, that maybe chances are the Democratic Party will turn to Robert Kennedy in '68 and he'd become a candidate. So a lot of their actions were really protective, that part, and they didn't want to rock the boat. They still felt that the regular Democratic Party was very important, and they didn't want to take sides and fight it. I felt at that time that it wasn't and that furthermore it was never going to be Robert Kennedy's support. He really had to try to make the Party over, and I think he could have done it had he really gotten into it. I remember in '66 Lehman [Orin Lehman] was running in a special election, and he asked some of us to go and do what we could. I spent about two days there. They put me in charge of women's activities, and I hated it, just hated it. I left there in tears and I went back to the Senate office. He happened to be there, and we talked about the Lehman campaign and this and that. Then I started

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gossiping a little bit with him. He was very generous. I mean I—that's another thing I always thought about. People always say he's very ruthless, you know, and this and that. He was exceedingly generous about gossip, although he managed to gossip frequently. If other people gossiped, he always somehow—he was above it all. He'd sort of, you know, always say, "Well, I don't think it's that serious," or "How can they tell?" And that gossip was about the ADA [Americans for Democratic Action] dinner that February. He was the speaker at the ADA dinner. Humphrey was going out to a dinner for Carey [Hugh Leo Carey], some archdiocese dinner for Carey. And the ADA liberals were just horrified that their hero, Hubert Humphrey, was speaking at a Hugh Carey dinner and that they were going to have Robert Kennedy at their dinner. He said, his response was, "Aren't they silly? How do they know what's going to happen in '68 or in the future?" I said, "They're so afraid of your running against Humphrey." At that time I had no idea that I would ever encourage him to do so. He said, "How do they know what's going to happen in the future?" He was always very fatalistic, especially at that time. He said, "Anyway, they've got me coming in '66 so they

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can have Hubert closer to the election."

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

ELDRIDGE: ...Carey reception. He said, "I should go out there. Poor Hubert shouldn't be so unhappy. I should go out with him." And he did go out for cocktails or something. It's very interesting. That ADA dinner was the first time that he met Lowenstein, also. That night I went to a thing for Al and then decided I'd help him, and I ran his campaign for his congressional pre-primary thing. Then, after the dinner—it was another part of the myth. An old friend of mine, who was my district leader when I was a kid, called me up the next day and said, "Oh, Bentley Kassal, who was standing there, was he

impressed. He saw you go over to the Senator, and the Senator kissed you and wanted to know everything about.... So the word's going out. Anyway, that's when Bobby said, "How's your candidate doing?" And I said, "Oh, I'm not working for Lehman any more." He said, "I know. I

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meant Al Lowenstein." And I said, "He's fine." He had heard—I had talked to him about it. And he said, "I'd like to meet him. Is he here?" That was all that was.

The Constitutional Convention. You see, a great part of this—I really do think that vanden Heuvel has to assume an awful large portion of responsibility for a lot of things that went wrong. Blumenthal and Kretchmer really disliked him intensely. I've always said that the proof that Bill is charming is that I still am very fond of him, because we've never agreed on anything politically. I really think he had come in and screwed up a lot of things. But he is charming, he's good company, he's bright.

GREENE: Why do you think Kennedy listened to him so much?

ELDRIDGE: I have no idea. I just do not know. I think he thought he was very bright and I think he thought he was most likely more dispassionate about things than we were, that he wasn't involved in the fray and so, therefore, could look at it more objectively. I don't think he was. He was quite nonobjective in his desire not to rock the boat and be accepted by the Establishment kind of thing.

I don't think it was till the Constitutional Convention that Kennedy really began to get

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upset about him. We had a tremendous thing about that, Blumenthal and Kretchmer. We had that in '66 at the Convention. There was a point also when Al was one of the delegates-at-large to the Constitutional Convention. At the last minutes after Bobby had left the Convention, they knocked him off to put somebody else on. Remember?

GREENE: Right.

ELDRIDGE: But that was as a result of Kennedy because we went to see him that night up in Buffalo at the hotel in his suite and had a great time. We were talking then about the lieutenant governor. [Interruption] I remember Al complaining bitterly about vanden Heuvel. And that also went back to the plank on Vietnam and we had a big thing up in Buffalo about including a plank on the war. vanden Heuvel was chairman of the Platform Committee and didn't want to have anything to do with it. I found that with, you know, the people I was working with, there weren't any anti-war people, et cetera, that Kennedy was assuming the blame for something that I don't really think every got up to him. I really think Bill took that responsibility and screwed it up. We had to go back and explain

and all that kind of stuff. We won eventually and Bill didn't. But Al's name was on the constitutional thing and it came off, you know, at the last minute. I was there. That was

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a very interesting night. Have you spoken to Mankiewicz [Frank F. Mankiewicz] about it? They all left the convention after O'Connor was nominated and couldn't come to any agreement on the ticket and then the Weinstein [Jack B. Weinstein] thing, and it was such a disaster. I got back...

GREENE: Were you involved in those negotiations for lieutenant governor?

ELDRIDGE: Just a little bit. No, not really. No. Sort of in between. I was sitting in the room with Bobby, who was saying he wanted to go to sleep, and somebody said, "You can't go to sleep until they tell you what they're going to do." And he kept saying, "I'm the big boss. I'm supposed to be the boss. I'm tired, I can't go to sleep, and I don't know what they're doing."

GREENE: Do you think that he should have done more for Weinstein?

ELDRIDGE: I think Burns [John J. Burns] also most likely screwed it up a little bit, too.

GREENE: Who?

ELDRIDGE: John. I really do. I don't think he was firm enough. And I think the way that it came out about their being anti-Samuels was very harmful to him. And I don't think, if it had been more skillfully handled, it had to be that way.

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GREENE: But was that true? Kennedy wasn't really responsible for keeping Samuels off.

ELDRIDGE: Right. But it was said that he was.

GREENE: That was the rumor.

ELDRIDGE: So it was very hard.

GREENE: Could he have done more, do you think, to put Weinstein on the ticket?

ELDRIDGE: I don't know. By the time it reached that point, I really don't know. I think by that time he had sort of worn off. I got over to the convention hall, though, for the vote on the Lieutenant Governor, and I just saw everything was all crazy. That night they got one rumor after another. I knew that Kennedy had left, but

I went to the phone booth and I called Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno], and I said, “They think Orin Lehman is Kennedy’s choice, and it’s going to be over their dead bodies that he gets nominated. They’re going to nominate Howard Samuels.” Jerry said, “Oh, you’re crazy. Find Jack English and have him call me.” Well, Jack English, I think, was a little involved in this. I think by this time he was bitter about Weinstein; he was certainly bitter about the Nickerson thing. Nobody, Luddy [William F. Luddy], nobody, I could get nobody to call up Bruno. So when I spoke to Jerry later he said, “Well,

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Frank Mankiewicz is coming over. The two of you work on it.” Well, it was Mankiewicz’s first week on the job. I’d never met him. I met Frank Mankiewicz and we sat in this room underneath the platform with Larry Piercz [Lawrence Piercz], who was O’Connor’s campaign chairman. English in and out. Mankiewicz comes in and we’re talking, and Mankiewicz said—oh, I said something about Orin Lehman, and he said, “Oh, I think I just passed Orin Lehman in the back. What does he look like?” I said, “You obviously didn’t pass Orin Lehman if you have to ask what he looks like.” I mean if that wasn’t such a beautiful statement. It was so wild. And you know, there we were, Mankiewicz not knowing anything and I really didn’t know that much or really, you know, care that much, actually, except that people like Ray Jones, who really took terrible advantage, and I thought that Kennedy was coming out of it very badly and being had.

GREENE: Do you think he just didn’t care at that point? That he felt they were all losers and the ticket wasn’t even going to stand a chance anyway.

ELDRIDGE: I think basically. I think that was part of it. And there was really nothing he could do with that crew.

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GREENE: Was he interested, as far as you know, in the early stages in getting an outsider for the gubernatorial race?

ELDRIDGE: Oh, I think we went through that same thing similar to....

GREENE: Was this vanden Heuvel? I had heard that he was one.

ELDRIDGE: Yes, I would think a large—the one guy.... What was his name? What’s his name? Something Witz.

GREENE: You don’t mean Perkins [James Alfred Perkins]? Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel]?

ELDRIDGE: No. Linowitz [Sol M. Linowitz].

GREENE: Linowitz. There were three of them, at least three of them, then, at least three of that were interested in that.

ELDRIDGE: Interested. Perkins and Linowitz, I think, are obviously vanden Heuvel guys.

GREENE: And then there was Gardner [John W. Gardner] and Kheel. Kheel, his name always comes up.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. It always does still come up. Yeah. No, I think he would have liked to have gotten somebody that he thought was a sure winner and able, again, to go over the fray. Because if you get somebody like Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg]—it's sort of similar to Steve's thinking now. Goldberg is really much more known and considered more prestigiously. And I guess then you can avoid the fight within the party and be more sure of the outcome if you get somebody sufficiently above the whole thing. So I suppose that was part of it.

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GREENE: Did he ever consult you on the open forums idea?

ELDRIDGE: Not really. He talked.... No, I thought it was kind of.... You know, we talked about it generally. I didn't pay much attention to it because I didn't really think it would happen, you know.

GREENE: Was that sort of a token effort from the first then?

ELDRIDGE: I think so, yeah. Well, I think—yeah. That kind of stuff really didn't, you know, ever interest me. The mayor does the same kind of thing with things. I don't pay much attention. You know, window dressing.

GREENE: What about FDR, Jr.? Did you ever discuss with him the Senator, both before and after the deal?

ELDRIDGE: No, we never really talked about him much. As a matter of fact, thinking back about it, I think he was pretty generous about Junior. I mean he felt a commitment to him from, I guess, '60.

GREENE: Yeah, that's my understanding.

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. What I started to say was that when you'd go and gossip with him, he would always be kind of gentle about people. I mean he really.... It's interesting because he was quite opinionated about some people and harsh and everything, but he still was more judicious than I think he's given credit for about it. I bet

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you it was wild, I mean, with Eugene McCarthy. He'd say, "Don't they know? He's a crook. He's going to be indicted." Douglas Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon] used to tell him that, you know, the whole Senate Finance Committee was going to be indicted and that McCarthy was, ugh, into so much. He'd say, "Don't they know he's a crook?" and that always astounded me. And I always thought, "Well, when he really gets into something and he really doesn't like it, then one thing".... It was very interesting.

The Constitutional Convention, though, we really had a lot of trouble. I remember another meeting—that was the meeting the night of the riots in East Harlem that summer—over at his place, and Burns came and vanden Heuvel. I remember it was really called by Ohrenstein and Blumenthal and Kretchmer. In the middle of that meeting I just got up, I was so disgusted, and I said, "I don't want to be their mother any more. You take care of them. I'm tired of mothering them." Bobby kept saying, "Well, what do you want?" He'd kept saying that, "What do you want?" And they did—they always whined. And he got to whine in return to them. He'd say, "You come and complain all the time. Tell me some specifics

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that I can do for you." And they were talking about different legislation. They were angry that Bill was there. Bill had heard about the meeting and insisted upon coming. That was the time when Carter was working in the office and you know, Bill would hear about a lot of things from Carter. Then they felt very strongly about the Blaine [James G. Blaine] Amendment and other things. Again, I didn't really feel—I had never been that caught upon the Blaine Amendment. I really didn't. And I didn't care that much about the constitutional legal thing. I thought it was important to do something that there were some good things in it and so I wasn't that opposed to it. And also he was out on a limb, and I felt kind of badly about it. It became a matter of principle because I sort of became pleased with myself that I don't get hung up in a lot of what I call the "liberal hang-ups." So when my little local club voted on the constitution, it was something like sixty-five against it, one for it, and one abstention. I abstained. And Dall Forsythe [Dall W. Forsythe], from his office, is a member of our club, and he obviously must have told him because one night shortly after that, Newfield and I picked him up at the airport and drove him in.

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And he saw me, and he gave me such a kiss and welcome. And he said, "That was such a lovely thing you did for me." And it was with the constitution. He just was so touched by that and felt that I had really done.... And I really had; I would have done almost anything.

[Interruption]

GREENE: Did you discuss with him, either in advance of the constitutional convention or in the course of it, what he hoped to get out of it, what his major interests were?

ELDRIDGE: No, not really. I mean I guess we did, but I really didn't pay much attention to what we were doing.

GREENE: Did he feel that because he'd put his own people in power and had a big stake in it that he had to go along with it, or do you think he was actually committed to what they were doing?

ELDRIDGE: No, I think that.... First of all, I think that he got conned a little about the people he put into it. I really do. He had other people that he would have preferred first rein. Then he came down to a second thing.

GREENE: Anybody specific?

ELDRIDGE: Not that I can remember. And then it became a very political thing. That's basically what it was. He got very angry with the *New York Times* and all that, you know, and a lot of it. I just did not follow it that

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closely.

GREENE: You never discussed his own attitude toward the Blaine amendment?

ELDRIDGE: No.

GREENE: Or towards the idea of submitting it as a whole package or several packages?

ELDRIDGE: Well, we did discuss it. I don't remember any of it. I was trying to think about it, and I.... I should have called Al and talked to him about it earlier. Have you spoken to him?

GREENE: No.

ELDRIDGE: You'll talk to him sometime so you'll get it. But they were in session, and I felt a little, you know, guilty about calling him when he was up all night, so I didn't go into it. The constitution really—you know, I am, I guess, as much as I hate to admit it, I'm not that intellectual. I think that's terrible but that's part of it.

GREENE: Yeah.

[Interruption]

GREENE: I wanted to ask you if you had any specific recollections of the gubernatorial race once it became apparent that it

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was O'Connor and then into the campaign itself. I think you were asked by them to work?

ELDRIDGE: Yeah. I didn't work on the O'Connor campaign. Steve was doing it, and he was very good. But I did work.... We set up a committee, something for the constitutional convention delegates, and I guess I was the treasurer and ran it. It was at the Commodore, so you could see the headquarters, but I really didn't.... I voted for Rockefeller, as a matter of fact; I didn't even vote for O'Connor. I spent one long day with Kennedy. We went up to Syracuse where he gave a speech on the constitutional convention to undergraduates. I hate to fly, and I wasn't planning to go. Jerry Bruno really made me go. I certainly didn't want to go on the *Caroline*. I was really terrified. But Howard Samuels had insisted upon going, and Bruno wanted somebody to go to be between Samuels and Kennedy. So I was elected, and Blumenthal went. There was a lady there from *Woman's Wear Daily* covering it, a very, you know, fashionable young lady who later died. I don't remember what her name was, a reporter. They had a reporter, I think, from the *Boston Globe*. And I'll never forget, we got on the

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plane, and first of all, the pilot of the plane was the manager of the Silverman [Samuel J. Silverman] campaign headquarters. I can't remember his name, Bob somebody. And he was outside to greet everybody as they get on the plane. And I'm nervous enough about getting on this little plane, and there's the manager of the Silverman headquarters, who used to hand out the paper clips, flying it. Well, it was wild. We got on, and this lady reporter, who was sort of obviously flirting with him and very happy about being there, said to him, "I have"—it was just after the judicial nomination, remember the judge from Massachusetts? What was his name?

GREENE: Morrissey [Francis X. Morrissey]?

ELDRIDGE: Morrissey. It was just after that whole fiasco. And she gets on and in front of the reporter from the *Boston Globe* says, "Senator, I have regards to you from Jerry Finkelstein and Judge Morrissey." I thought he would just die. Jerry Finkelstein being the big money man in New York that everybody is sort of never, you know, either with or without. And Judge Morrissey.... He was so embarrassed. But it was a nice gesture.

GREENE: Is it Morrissey?

ELDRIDGE: I don't know what it is. I don't know what's the name.

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Something like that. It's not Hennessy. I don't know. And the trip was nice. It was at the beginning.... He was getting into the Vietnam—I mean he was well into the Vietnam thing. He had just come back, I think, from going across country. He had these set questions with the kids about the war and about the draft. They really turned him on. You know, he really.... There was just no doubt about it. He gave the speech on the constitution, which was kind of dull, which we both agreed on going up there. We both talked about it. But when he got into the whole thing about the war and he asked the questions, and “how many of you are deferred” and how many this and that. That really got him very nudgy.

I guess I was well in by that time. When was that? That was '66, I guess. No, I really wasn't. We were, you know, fooling around with planks and platforms and that stuff. But this was October. Yeah, it was a burning issue, but politically we hadn't yet talked about his running for president, though I think, you know, it was taking that direction. And that was the only day that I spent with him. It was a nice day. Samuels was incredible and eventually got my seat on the plane so he did sit next to him for a while.

GREENE: Did you get...

ELDRIDGE: Poor Howard always got so nervous when he got near him that he'd just

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make such a fool of himself. Oh, I'm sorry. Did I what?

GREENE: Did Kennedy dislike Samuels as much as he was supposed to?

ELDRIDGE: I don't think that much. I don't really think that much. And I think it was very controlled. Howard, though, when he's nervous, is a compulsive talker.

I think Howard began to believe it. And I'm sure that there were.... I hear that a lot of it stemmed from an earlier meeting that Ben Altman had set up between Howard Samuels and Kennedy. And when Howard's nervous, he talks a lot and he lectures. It's as if you don't know anything and he knows everything. And it would just turn Bobby off. I mean he'd really get more and more....

We were talking—it was very interesting. I thought about that later. We were talking about campaigning techniques, and I was saying that I always wonder why we don't go back to the old train type of campaigning, and remember Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] in the back of the train, and that this was so effective, and the tracks all over the place were right there. And we later talked about it with the *Wabash* [*Cannonball*] in Indiana in that campaign. And Howard Samuels said, “Nobody takes the train anymore. Everybody rides on the thruway.” And Bobby said, “But the

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tracks are still there.” He said, “But nobody congregates around a track.” So then Bobby said, “Well, I mean, can’t you just see a good campaign sixty miles an hour on the thruway.” It was that kind of thing. You know, Howard was always very tense, and he just couldn’t relax.

GREENE: Were you aware of complaints from within the O’Connor campaign that Kennedy hadn’t done enough and, furthermore, made O’Connor somewhat schizoid by trying to make him into the type of candidate which he wasn’t.

ELDRIDGE: And tremendous camp come, and jealousy and lack of communication and talking and old methods versus new methods. Poor John Burns saying, I don’t know, he couldn’t really handle it. And Steve really couldn’t have given a damn, I don’t think, and Pierez running around with his group and he really scared everybody, and then Howard running his separate operation. The place was like—it was just awful. No volunteers. Nobody really interested. That was a very boring kind of campaign. The interesting thing about it was, of course, everything had stature, and there was an 8 o’clock campaign meeting—I forget what they called it. Every morning at 8 o’clock or three mornings a week they’d all sit together and talk. And that’s such an outmoded

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kind of campaign. And the fact that you really think you can get a consensus from a group of people and, therefore, mold a campaign.... And we went through that with the Democrats in the Lindsay campaign. I used to think back, and some of the Democrats who had supported O’Connor, went through the O’Connor campaign, the Humphrey campaign, one losing campaign after another, always had these demands on the, you know.... It’s ego, I mean; it’s that people want to be involved. It isn’t necessarily that it’s useful. We never had that kind of thing in the Kennedy....

GREENE: How would Robert Kennedy’s position in this kind of thing, where perhaps his hesitation resulted in a nominee that was unpopular with a lot of groups that he depended on for support and where his contribution to the campaign was questioned by the candidate for its sincerity—how did this leave him at the end? You know, did it undermine some of his support?

ELDRIDGE: I think it most likely reinforced the Humphrey people’s dislike and resentment of him and beyond that, not much more. The reformers got involved, and some reformers got involved more than others. Freddie Ohrenstein, for some reason, decided to take a very active role. Kretchmer did, too, but that was for Steve really. Steve asked him

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to work. Kretchmer likes to think he did, and he loved Steve.

Ohrenstein, I don’t know why he got involved. When we ran it up—I guess there was an ad in the paper supporting O’Connor or something. And Jimmy Wechsler [James A.

Wechsler] slammed us. Of course, Wechsler's a liberal, and he was for Roosevelt, but he still slammed us. And rightfully so, I think. I don't think we should have been supporting O'Connor. I got in the office one day and somebody said, "Well, they're going to take out an ad, the reformers, answering Jimmy Wechsler." And I said, "I'm not going to do that. They can't put my name in an ad." And "Oh, Steve wants it, and we're going to have to do it, and Haddad's organizing it." So I went down to Haddad and he said, "Steve wants to do it." So I went down to Steve and said, "I don't want to do it. And I think we've done enough." And he said—he didn't even say anything. He smiled and he said, "Tell Haddad there's no money; the plans are cancelled." That was the end of it. It was so easy and in the end they don't really care. Freddie Ohrenstein was hysterical. I guess he wanted.... I don't know what he wanted, you know. But it was a devastating campaign. It was not all Kennedy's fault by any means. Humphrey, I think, had a tremendous responsibility in there.

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GREENE: Do you think.... There are those who say that Robert Kennedy really never wanted another Democrat in the state, that he didn't want the competition. Well, first of all what kind of reaction does that....

ELDRIDGE: I don't think it's true, necessarily, but I think he would have liked some good Democrats. I don't really think that's true, no.

GREENE: But do you feel that maybe he already sensed that O'Connor, even if he got in, would not be one of his people and that he'd be....

ELDRIDGE: Oh, I think he was sort of at ease with O'Connor because he felt—I can't really remember. I don't think he was disappointed that O'Connor lost. No. In the same way that I don't think he was that disappointed that Beame lost.

GREENE: For the reasons that have been stated: that Humphrey was already so closely aligned with them that it seemed like a rivalry?

ELDRIDGE: That it would most likely strengthen that part of the party that he wasn't that interested in strengthening. I don't think, though, that that was basic in his not finding a candidate earlier. I mean, had he been able to, he would have liked to have put his kind of person in.

GREENE: Right.

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ELDRIDGE: I think he could work well with his people as was most likely with other people.

GREENE: Well, let me go back to the Silverman campaign, unless you have something

else on the '66 governorship?

ELDRIDGE: No, can't really think about it. I'll have to think about it.

GREENE: You mentioned this discussion you had with him fairly early about the possibility of him supporting someone for the surrogate. What kind of reaction did that elicit? Was he anxious to get into that kind of horrible battle?

ELDRIDGE: No, I think.... No, he was never anxious to get in any of it, you know. He was interested. It sounded interesting to him. And then he forgot about it. We talked about it a lot. Vanden Heuvel sort of—you get the wrong impression because it was talked about a great length by the reform caucus, by other people, you know, at different times. That was '65?

GREENE: Right. Summer of '65. Excuse me, summer of '66.

ELDRIDGE: '66, right. I was going to say, that's very early. By this time, I think it was clear where Ray Jones stood. And he didn't like Ray Jones. And if he could stop some of this, why not? I think it was, again, looked to as breaking up that kind of organization. Also, I mean it

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had the great benefit that he was really on the side of the good, you know, and the boss thing and everything else really was not there. It would have been impossible to do without him. We could not have gotten a candidate; we tried desperately. And I think most likely it was Alex Rose's final thing that made it a possibility—probability. I don't think he would have—chances are that he wouldn't. He most likely could have been made to support the reform candidate had we, on our own, been able to get a decent candidate. But it was like a circle. I mean I don't think we could have gotten a decent candidate without him. So, it sort of was just floundering. It was very interesting. Really. I don't know if you know how Silverman's name really came up.

GREENE: Well, I've heard conflicting versions.

ELDRIDGE: Costikyan started it as far back as.... I remember having a conversation with him in the end of '65 about it and then a lot of conversation from vanden Heuvel that weekend in May or whenever it was. And we went through Greenfield [Edward J. Greenfield] and a few other names. And then I promised him I'd think about it and call him back. My family and I were driving up to the country, and we stopped off at the

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Feldmans'. I started talking to Justin, and Justin said, "Well, what about Sam Silverman?" So we called vanden Heuvel, and vanden Heuvel said, well, you know, they were thinking about it, and they had talked about it and were a little bit—but he got right on to it. And then we came up with Silverman. I got back and then called Hemenway and said we have to have a meeting because then they wanted to have a meeting. We set up this famous meeting with the reformers.

GREENE: At the Commodore. You mentioned Greenfield and Fein [Arnold L. Fein], Markewich [Arthur Markewich], which were the other considerations. Is that correct?

ELDRIDGE: Arnold Fein was. Arthur Markewich? I didn't know.... Or Jack Markewich.

GREENE: Arthur.

ELDRIDGE: Arthur. I don't think he would have ever considered it, but yeah, he's a very good guy.

GREENE: What about Fein? What happened with him?

ELDRIDGE: Well, Fein was the reformers choice.

GREENE: And Kennedy wasn't interested in having Fein?

ELDRIDGE: I don't think he was particularly interested. He has always been a reformer, you know. He was the head of the CDV, and then he became a judge. That was one of those famous comments of Margie Cox [Marjorie Cox] who

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was a black district leader from Harlem. "The man on the street doesn't know the name, doesn't know Sam Silverman, but everybody knows Arnold Fein." God, it was so wild.

GREENE: Doesn't know Silverman but she knows Arnold Fein.

ELDRIDGE: Fein came from the East Side. I mean he was not really a Kennedy person either and as nearly as prestigious as Sam Silverman, who was a judge of the Supreme Court. Fein was in the civil court at the time. Big difference.

GREENE: How much of Kennedy's interest in this or enthusiasm came from the fact that it would be a place to sort of one-up Lindsay on good government and judicial reform?

ELDRIDGE: Oh, I think that was part of it. Oh, I do. I think it was Lindsay.... Ray Jones. It was just a good fight where he really had nothing to lose. It sort of became

a challenge. I mean it was sort of like getting the reformers and I mean taking over. It was beautiful that way because it was out-reforming everybody, and it gave him something to do in a quiet year.

GREENE: What about pressure from the regular party leaders against it, who didn't feel he ought to get involved?

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ELDRIDGE: Well, I don't think they even knew about it until we just did it.

GREENE: Yeah. But afterwards, when it became obvious?

ELDRIDGE: Oh, they hated it. Ray Jones resigned because of it, was very bitter. Hulan Jack obviously got over it very quickly because, you know, it later turned out.... But a lot of them, they never trusted him. They didn't trust him before and they didn't trust him afterwards. I mean it sort of built up more. There was a lot of resentment about it.

GREENE: Was he very concerned about that? Was he considering it?

ELDRIDGE: No, I don't think so. No. Part of it also was that Fein was basically a nice guy. You know that was a little complicating. The other part was that Jones used it as being black, and he had no contact in the Harlem community at all. What's his name?

GREENE: James Farmer? Meredith [James H. Meredith]?

ELDRIDGE: No, no, no. Hatcher [Andrew T. Hatcher]. Andy Hatcher. He was our big Harlem expert. I don't know if he'd ever been to Harlem. He'd been in the White House, but I don't know if he'd been up there. And he wore his dark glasses and he was so very quiet.

GREENE: Did you have anything to do with getting Farmer and Meredith to come out after Jones' anti-black remarks? They came in to support him, remember?

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ELDRIDGE: Right. No, I don't think that was part. I was working with Steve, and I don't really know what—I don't remember what I was doing. I also got sick in the middle of it. I was in the hospital the week before Meredith got shot, and I don't remember when he came in.

GREENE: Well, it was right after that. Right after that he got shot.

ELDRIDGE: Oh, right after that, yeah. So that I don't really remember. It was a fascinating campaign. It was really very funny. It wasn't that much work. It was just a good issue. He was away for a large part of the time. And when he came back it was good. It was just a popular issue, and it was Manhattan. That was the big advantage. You didn't have to go to any other boroughs. In Manhattan you already had a big advantage of liberal, well-red constituents and this kind of thing. It caused long-term things with Jones and the county organization.

GREENE: How did he feel about Rose, both before and after this, Alex Rose? Did they have a fairly good relationship?

ELDRIDGE: Well, I just.... Alex Rose, it was always very quiet, I think. And I think they had afterwards—at that time they were obviously enjoying a rather good relationship, I think. Then, I suppose, with the Roosevelt

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thing, it broke up again. It wasn't that close a relationship, I don't think. I just don't know. The only time I do know is in '65, I guess. It was at the Carlyle when he said the day his brother died was really the last day Alex Rose paid any attention to him.

GREENE: But that didn't carry over later on, did it? I mean their relation...

ELDRIDGE: Well, they weren't that close. I don't know. Then the split in the union and Gus Tyler always landed up being, you know.... He went with Stulberg [Louis Stulberg] in the union. He worked at the office. He was on a committee of interviewing people for West Point. It was an interesting committee incidentally. Have you come across that?

GREENE: No.

ELDRIDGE: Murray Kempton, Gus Tyler, I don't remember who else. Can you imagine Murray Kempton interviewing applicants for West Point? Wild. But I was never that much upon the Liberal thing.

GREENE: Why was it necessary for English to bring in reinforcements? Was the campaign going very badly until Robert Kennedy returned from South Africa?

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ELDRIDGE: No, and I don't think it was that tremendous a thing. It's a fable in New York, you know. It's not like '52 where you had a great outpouring of volunteers. But we asked.... I think English was asked to bring in and Sam Meyers [Samuel Meyers] of the UAW [United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural

Implement Workers of America]. All groups of people were asked to provide. I don't think there was any great hidden significance. It was for primary day because we wanted to cover every poll if we could and to pull people out. It was a big operation. And that election day operation, whether it be election day or primary day, is a very important operation. So you really need to get as many people as you can.

[Interruption]

GREENE: I wanted to ask you if you remember anything specific about the meeting at the Commodore, about Robert Kennedy's handling of it.

ELDRIDGE: Oh, I remember the whole thing very well. We picked the Commodore because that's where the county headquarters was—we decided that would give a nice little twist to Ray Jones—in the Binnacle Room, which I never could understand and always hated. And all the reformers came around on Sunday night. A lot of them had been away,

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and they all came straggling in. Nobody quite knew what it was all about. Steve was there and that always landed—I mean that set up a lot of excitement. And vanden Heuvel was sitting next to Steve. That started a lot of buzzing because a lot of people resented vanden Heuvel's being there. I had called most of the people to invite them. Then Bobby got up and he started to talk about the fact that the reformers had talked about reforming the court system and the surrogate, and he had given some thought to it and blah, blah, blah, and he'd like to get involved. He had spoken to Sam Silverman who'd be interested, and we went through this whole thing. Then we got Margie Cox with Arnold Fein and this one arguing that. I don't remember the details, but they were sort of resentful—they were surprised, I mean really surprised to find Robert Kennedy leading them on their great reform fight.

Then they didn't quite know what to expect of the whole thing. They got scared. I mean, here suddenly they'd been talking about this for months, and suddenly they had a chance of really pulling it off, and what were they all going to do. So they all started arguing, and he just handled it so beautifully. We've always cited it afterwards. He said, "I had

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always been under the impression that you people really were interested in doing something. And now that I see that you're not really, I think that I have to reconsider before I ask Judge Silverman to make the commitment that he's willing to make. So I will have to think about it over the weekend, and I'll let you know." And he started to go out. With that then, it all pulled them together. It was like a parent talking to the children.

GREENE: Did Smith urge at that point that he just walk out and tell them to go to...

ELDRIDGE: I don't really know. Vanden Heuvel may say that; I just don't know.

GREENE: I think vanden Heuvel or Newfield says it.

ELDRIDGE: I don't really know. Then we started the next day at Steve's apartment. It was really my first contact with a lot of the guys. I met Jerry Bruno up at Steve's office. This little guy comes over, and he says, "What's your name?" I said, "I'm Ronnie Eldridge." And he takes out a pen and a little notebook, and he writes "Ronnie Eldridge." He says, "What are your phone numbers?" You know, I said, "What's your name?" He said, "Jerry Bruno." I just finished reading *The Making of the President*. I

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guess I had reread it. I said, "Oh, Jerry Bruno. Wisconsin." And he looked at me. I sort of psyched him out. Then I met Hatcher up at Steve's apartment. He said, "What's your name?" And he takes out a book. It was the first time that I began to see the whole Jack Kennedy, you know, the real advance thing. It was really coming. It was just fascinating to watch. Steve lived in a duplex at that time. We had set up a lot of appointments for him to see everybody. They had people coming from the upstairs, and then they'd go downstairs, you know. They do it—they are such perfectionists as far as the technique of campaigns go. I mean nobody comes near them, just nobody. And you'd have people coming in downstairs, every other appointment was upstairs, downstairs, upstairs, downstairs, you know.

GREENE: So nobody meets anybody else.

ELDRIDGE: That's right. And it was unbelievable. Really fascinating.

GREENE: How is Smith regarded by the reformers? Is he suspect as kind of a political operator?

ELDRIDGE: Well, this is a bad time to discuss it now because a lot of them hate him from the Goldberg thing. He's always

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been.... They're terrified of him. I think that became obvious to me after I watched the Lindsay campaign because they came in in the Lindsay campaign and made demands that they would have been terrified to make of anybody in the Kennedy operation, for phones and rent money and money for this and money for that. I think he's very highly respected, and I don't think they—they just don't understand or know him.

I tend, maybe, to over romanticize him. I love him very dearly, and I think he's really very good. I think he's even different from Bobby because I think he tends in his own way to be more radical in a very different kind of way. Very smart. And I don't think people have understood that. I mean I think they think he's smart, but they think he's really just an operative for somebody else.

I think he's now in a position so that they're a little—they don't really know. But they generally behave themselves with him, and they're really a little afraid. Some of them don't like him from past experiences where he's been kind of rough. But he, again, tends to be—he's gotten a little softer as time's gone by. Very professional about it.

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GREENE: Well, we can end here. The only other thing I was going to ask you was if you had any discussions with Senator Kennedy about how he felt about Silverman as a candidate. Was he satisfied with him?

ELDRIDGE: We never really.... We didn't, as a matter of fact, talk too much during that whole campaign. He was very uptight. I remember one night he came in, and I said something, and he said something, and I sort of yelled at him and that was sort of the end. I mean I just didn't want to.... The rally, I mean some of the rallies we had were marvelous, with Freddie Ohrenstein singing "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and Kennedy doing something else, and Sam Silverman really had a delightful sense of humor. No, I think he came to be very, very fond of him.

That election night was wild. Sam said, "I told Claire [Claire Gfroerer Silverman] that a Silverman never loses." And "Who was that man Sam Silverman's walking down the street with?" Very good guy. He really was. They really did not know how, I don't think.... I think Sam was a little scared of him. And Kennedy was a little put off by Sam. They didn't have that much to do with each other, you know. And Bill DeWind [Adrian W. DeWind], his campaign manager, who was from...

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GREENE: Bill DeWind?

ELDRIDGE: DeWind. You really should talk to him. He's from the firm.

GREENE: That's the fellow who was piloting the plane?

ELDRIDGE: No, no, no.

GREENE: Oh, that was heading the headquarters.

ELDRIDGE: Bill DeWind is—he really wasn't; it was an honorary campaign chairman. He's a partner in the Paul, Weiss, Rifkind which is, I guess, the firm Silverman used to be in. Eddie Costikyan really hates Steve, and part of it is, you know, his.... I think Eddie thought he was going to run that campaign, and Steve decided that Eddie Costikyan could not run the campaign, and they had a little bit of a fight. Eddie walked away and hated him. DeWind, though, is the co-chairman, and Steve will tell you that he used to wear sneakers and come in with a tennis racket. It used to drive Steve crazy because he landed up in that hotel for six weeks, and it took his whole life, and everybody

else was in and out. DeWind, it was another example of what they think the ruthless, well-organized machine is. They always thought it had a much bigger plan than it had. It just didn't have. I mean we really did it just very

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quickly, right off the cuff, and it was very informal. I have now sat through a lot of them.

The first thing we did was send out a telegram asking them to come meet Sam Silverman. It didn't put DeWind's title underneath it. Helen Keyes [Helen M. Keyes] sent the telegram out. Well, DeWind was sure that we were undercutting him because we didn't put his title on and that was an intentional thing. And what they really didn't realize was that Kennedys make mistakes, and they make a lot of them. That's something nobody's ever understood. So if a mistake is made, it's always intentional. It was just a very informal....

Steve and I would drive around the clubs at night. I remember one club we went to. He walked in, and he gets into the rhythm of saying something about it. And it's a line. It just comes out automatically. He talks a lot, and he never ends a sentence. We walked into this one reform club, the Lenox Hill Club, on the East Side, and he starts about the importance of the surrogate race. And he gets into the same tempo and style that Bobby had. And he goes on and on and on about how important this is and the club has to help and we need the people and everybody is interested in court reform and the abuses of the surrogate. And he stops, and the guy he's talking to says, "To whom am I speaking?" [Laughter] We all

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just laughed. I've never forgotten that. Alan Schlesinger. But he had great gusto. He enjoyed it. DeWind on the other hand, thought it was all very well planned and organized, and he had no place so he always felt a little left out. But I think that Sam came to realize that it wasn't. Have you spoken with him at all?

GREENE: Yes, I did the interview with him.

ELDRIDGE: He's a sweet man.

GREENE: Very sweet.

ELDRIDGE: And poor guy, he really got screwed.

GREENE: Yeah, he's really unhappy with it now.

ELDRIDGE: He acts as though he hates it.

GREENE: He almost looked...

[END OF INTERVIEW #1]

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