

**Frederick Belen, Oral History Interview – 3/2/1976**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Belen was a Counsel for the Post Office and Civil Service Committee in the House of Representatives from 1946 to 1961, Assistant Postmaster General in the Bureau of Operations from 1961 to 1964 and Deputy Postmaster General from 1964 to 1969. In this interview, he discusses the congressional retirement program, relations between the Kennedy White House and the Postal Service, and the Plymouth mail robbery, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Frederick Belen

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Frederick Belen

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Oral History Interview

with

Frederick Belen

March 2, 1976  
Washington DC

By William Hartigan

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HARTIGAN: Fred, during your employment in the House of Representatives, did you ever have the occasion to meet the late President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] while he was a member of Congress?

BELEN: Yes, I did on several occasions. But not when he was a member of the House. I first became acquainted with him and met him when he was a member of the Senate. Normally, a staff member of a committee does not have as much opportunity to meet people as one would think. I did meet a lot of congressmen because if they had matters relating to personnel and the Federal government had two and a half million employees, matters respect to Post Office. Normally, particularly in Democratic congresses, I was their consultant in these matters, and

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if it was in that case I would meet them. But, when it came to knowing the Senators from other committees, you did not very often have the same chance or opportunity that you would have knowing the Senators who were on the Post Office Civil Service Committee. The bills that were put into conference where you had this opportunity to work with the senators, normally came from the Post Office Committee. But, we did have a bill come through that had an affect on me actually. It provided that employees at the Capital or on the Hill would

receive for their first fifteen years, two and a half percent factor rather than one and a half for the first five years, one and three quarters for the next and then two percent for the next. I was called by Mr. Rees [Edward H. Rees], who was then chairman. And this would have been in 1953. He said that some of the members were in seeing him feeling that the members' retirements they would like to have, oh, sweetened up a little if you want to put it that way, but improved. He said "What can we do about it?" I said, "Well, these things are usually very controversial as I think anyone being a student of Congress recognizes today." And I said, "Well, there happens to be a bill already through the Senate to

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which a proposal would be germane. But, I said, "I've never brought it up to you because frankly it affects me. And I wouldn't recommend it on my behalf to the committee feeling that it might be controversial." Well, he said "Let me send these members over." One of them I remember was Harold Higgins. I explained to them what the bill was and what they should really be looking for in terms of their retirement. At that time the retirement was strictly a flat two-and-a-half percent per year for each year they served in Congress, having to meet certain minimum requirements. But retirement programs have changed drastically since then. They, as I predicted, they now have life insurance, they now have health insurance. They have benefits for survivors, benefits for your widows. And each and every one of these would have presented a crisis. So, I suggested to them that we draw up language which would put the congressional retirement into the same general frame as the employees, leaving them their two-and-a-half percent because they come in normally later in life. They normally don't survive as long as thirty-five, forty years, as federal employees can do. And that would be the cause for

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the two-and-a-half percent factor. But, on the others, that they should just be a part of the general retirement program and let the chips fall where they may in putting in these new plans.

This was agreed to, it passed the committee. And then it got on the floor of the House—and I never will forget—it went through with not a single word of criticism. And John McCormack [John William McCormack] who was then the majority leader looked over at me and winked very normally thinking things had gone pretty smoothly. But then we got over in the Senate. Now, mind you this was a Senate passed bill. The senators couldn't very well take issue with a bill that they had approved initially. In fact, it was their obligation in a conference to stick for the Senate provisions. It was very obvious during the conference that really the employee provisions were probably more obnoxious to the opponents than with the senators. It was a very interesting lineup of the senators. They were from the government operations committee and as I indicated in the beginning I did not know any of them too well. Mrs. Smith [Margaret Chase Smith] was the chairman of the Senate conferees. There was Everett Dirksen [Everett M. Dirksen] of Illinois, and John Butler [John Marshall Butler] of Maryland. The two senators on the Democratic side were

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Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] and Senator Kennedy. And their counsel, oddly enough, was Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]. Ted Sorensen had not been with the Senator too long. And his background had been in Social Security. So he was considered, in light of annuities and pensions and things like this, as an expert. Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy were pretty much together on the fact, well, we just simply shouldn't approve this bill in conference. Right during the heat of it, Harold Higgin, the chairman of the House Conference said, "Well, we just got word that there's a roll call in the House and Mr. Belen here will represent the House. I named the people who were there because that's pretty formidable for a staff person to take on particularly when the House members were looked like they were in kind of a losing situation. However, I bit the bullet and explained to the members why we did what we did. I said You know, Mr. Ramspeck [Robert C. Word Ramspeck], who at one time was a congressman from Atlanta and Chairman of the House Committee on Civil Service later became Chairman of the Civil Service Commission, told me that when they had the first retirement program for congressmen, it was passed in 1945 or thereabouts,

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it might have been '44. That the bundles for congress were so terrific that congressmen just the next year repealed the whole program. And Mr. Ramspeck himself almost lost his election over it. Then along came the legislative reorganization act, which had been passed in 1946 to take effect in 1947. And as part of it was the congressional retirement program. Because they recognized with all the big financial pressures coming on now that if they wanted some independence on the part of Congress there had to be some kind of retirement program. Having in mind that the real leadership in the congress were the chairmen of committees. And by the time you get to be chairman of a committee you have earned the independence that retirement would bring in case you lost your election over a major vital issue.

Looking back at it today when you see some of the issues involved in oil, involved in the many health programs, things like that, you have to really realize here is a tremendous force that mitigates against these big financial pressures that congress will be faced with. Anyway, then I went on to explain to them that here's the things that are coming down the pike.

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I said you're going to find that congress is going to within the next few years, they're going to improve benefits for survivors, they're going to improve, put in benefits for your widows. They're going to put in a life insurance program, and probably ultimately, a health insurance program all tied to the Civil Service retirement program. I said there's about two million five hundred thousand participants in this. And you add another five hundred and thirty five people it isn't really going to make any difference. Cost will be so insignificant it won't even

be mentioned. And yet if you want to get this very same benefits for your families you'll find it'll be a great controversial thing.

Whereupon, Hubert Humphrey tapped John Kennedy on the shoulder and said “Jack,” he says, “I see exactly what this young man means.” And he says, “I’m for him.” And he said then to me—and mind you I was a democratic counsel for a Republican committee, but they had no way of knowing this. They might certainly thought I was of the opposite party. He said, “What are you doing in your spare time?” He said, “I’ve got a job for you in my office.”

HARTIGAN: Now, this was Senator Kennedy said this to you?

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BELEN: No, Jack, Humphrey said it.

HARTIGAN: Senator Humphrey said it, okay.

BELEN: Later, I was asked by the...

HARTIGAN: Did Humphrey, Senator Kennedy go along finally with the...

BELEN: Yes, well that made all the votes except Kennedy's for it, you see. Then that wasn't too much later, I must have to in all honesty say that once this decision was reached, Senator Kennedy got right with it to be sure it had a good report. A good follow up, good arguments for doing what they did. And, oh, maybe two weeks later, I was called by the Burrows Club—the Burrows Club is a club on the House side of congress made up of Democratic employees of the Congress—and asked if I would come over and explain to them the new provisions which, of course, particularly would affect them. They also wanted to know, of course, what the part would affect their bosses because they would be the ones that would be asked. And I agreed to come. Well, before the time came I was called by I said, “Senator Kennedy understands you're coming to speak to Burrows Club. And he said he would like to be there and have a word to say, too. Now, Fred, if you don't want the Senator there, you just say so.” I said “Where am I as an employee of the Congress

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telling a U.S. Senator that he can't come?” I said, “I'd be delighted to share the platform.”

So, we had the luncheon and Senator Kennedy to someone who expected that he might be taking part of it was just \_\_\_\_\_. He handled everything beautifully, explained exactly what the issues were, what was decided, and it was a very successful program. I saw him several times later and thanked him.

When I was ultimately appointed Assistant Postmaster General and I'll go back a little later and cover some of the factors that involved in that and the thinking because I think these appointments—you yourself must have had quite an experience, and I did too. But in any

event, the day the cabinet was sworn in, Mr. Day [J. Edward Day] took all of his assistants over, we were all invited to see the swearing in of our to-be bosses. And Ted Sorensen was leaning up against the white mantle there in the main room of the White House and I went over to Ted and I said, "Well, Ted, I guess you know the President has appointed me to this position." I said, "I'm very grateful, but frankly, considering the big controversy that we were in, and you know when you were there," I said, "I just really didn't think he'd appoint me to anything." I said, "I

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guess he just didn't know who it was." Ted said, "Fred, let me tell you something. We knew exactly who you were." And I would interpret that to mean this: that in filling this particular job, they wanted somebody who had demonstrated that they could stand up against pressure from big congressional sources. I think that was a very important point that Ted was trying to tell me—"don't worry we knew exactly who you were."

HARTIGAN: Well, that particular position, the Assistant Postmaster General for Operations, certainly was a political hotbed. It dealt directly with all the congressmen by virtue of the fact that it did, at that time, have total responsibility for postmasters' appointments. So it would—I could appreciate why they wanted someone that could stand up under the pressures. But...

BELEN: Well, it came out in two ways, too. There was a, I was not really into the political area. My family had been, but Mr. Murray and Mr. Rees had decided that since that committee handled civil service matters that they were going to insist that their staff behave a little like they too were out of the political brush.

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And as a result I was not permitted at—I sent our contributions in—but I was not permitted to really get into the doorbell pushing, telephone calling, or advance jobs that many people from the Hill did.

HARTIGAN: Actually, that was my next question, Fred. What were your activities, if any, during—you almost partially answered the question—during the 1960 primary campaigns to start with?

BELEN: Well, I worked mostly through my family back home. My sister was a member of the Lansing City Council and my mother had been vice-chairman of the Democratic Committee. I used to write the speeches. I could do that, write speeches and so forth and send them back. But I never got out on the front line as such. And as such then the staff people, I'm talking about Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue], Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], did not know me. Now, a lot of my political activity was helping individual members of congress. And statements that they wanted to make about the area of the

committee's jurisdiction. Now that was perfectly all right as far as the chairman was concerned because that didn't get his staff out where they'd all be criticized saying, "Well, federal

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employees can't get their pay because this is the whole way it looks."

HARTIGAN: Did you have any active, did you partake in the election, the 1960 election, after the primaries are over, I'm talking about?

BELEN: No, I did not any more than what I'm saying.

HARTIGAN: Not any more than you did in the primaries?

BELEN: Right.

HARTIGAN: For the same reasons.

BELEN: For the very same reasons.

HARTIGAN: You had that position that involved civil service?

BELEN: For the very same reasons. Well, it was the instructions of the chairman. This was about the size of it. But when it came down then to getting the structure of the people in the postal service, there was one man who had been connected with National Committee in the Southwest. And as such he got to know the Speaker very well, he got to know the other officials very well, and he was a Postmaster of a small second class post office and had been an official of the Postmasters Association. And when Mr. Day was appointed—named—he and Mr. Brawley [Hiram W. Brawley] who was named the deputy, woke up to the fact that this man had all the endorsements. And they didn't really know what to do. They had to find

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[NOTE: There are two page 11s in the original transcript]

somebody, I guess, who regardless of the political situation whose qualifications might be so superior that it would go. I had, of course, in our committee we had done a lot of investigating, run man-power programs covering the whole government, in depth studies of the postal service. But, probably what was more significant, and I didn't realize it, was the fact that the Speaker had a high regard for me. And they had to find someone because the other man was the Speaker's candidate. And oddly enough, the first man when my appointment was announced was Sam Rayburn [Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn]. Now I knew none of this background going on. I was called by Bill Brawley right after the nomination and so forth several times. And I used to give him a lot of advice. But then later after the

election he said, "Fred, I wish you'd get a number of endorsements for Assistant Postmaster General for Personnel." And I said, "Gee, I'd rather stay right where I am. And certainly not to go out in that kind of a scrap with all your friends, maybe also friends of someone else." So I never really got into that. Well then when Mr. Day came to town—he'd just been announced—I got a call from Bill Brawley and said the New Postmaster General would like to meet with the chairman. I said,

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"Fine I'll set it up." So, I made the arrangements with him to have the meeting, which I also participated. During the meeting, I remember that Mr. Murray said "Well, Vaughan Gary [Julian Vaughan Gary] is chairman of your Appropriations Committee. You'd better have a talk with him, too." And I said, "Well, should I see if I can find Mr. Gary, and maybe he can come over right now." I found him playing paddle ball down in the House gym. But he did come right over. I then left the group because I thought they had enough things to talk about. But the next morning I got a call from Bill Brawley and Bill said, "Would you be interested in Director of Operations?" I said, "Well, that's something else. I think that's something more within my field and might prove to be a real challenge." "Well," he said "Mr. Day wants to see you tomorrow morning." That was a Saturday. I went to see Mr. Day, and he explained we have this problem. He said, "I just know the man can't do the job and I would like to offer it to you."

I then gave him some of my background which pleased him. And he said, "Bill, I mean Mr. Brawley, would you go and see Mr. Murray with me. Just make an appointment." And I had told him, "no point in you thinking you're going to have me a part in your staff if the chairman is upset." I said, "we have to do

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business with him every day." So, they had the meeting and then they called me in, and I remember this very much. Mr. Murray said, "Fred, Mr. Day says he's been told he can make this recommendation. He wants you." And I said it was just like taking my right arm but if you wanted to go it was all right. I said, "Mr. Murray, it isn't alright with me. I mean, they're going with your blessing or not at all." And he kind of mumbled and said, "Well, you have my blessing."

And that was the way it went until about a week and I got a call from Bill Brawley saying Dick Donahue wanted to see me. And I went out to the National Committee and saw him. My papers had been sent down but they had forgotten to have any of the backup. And he said that he had been talking with the President and when my name came up, he said, "Well, who will he please?" He said, "You don't have any endorsements?" which of course I didn't. I said, "Well, I'll be glad to get Michigan's support," which I got. They said you'd have to be born again not to get a Democratic recommendation from Michigan. And I said, "Well, how about Vaughan Gary?" And he said, "Well, the President mentioned him." He said, "What does Mr. Gary think." I said, "Well let me get him on the phone and you talk to him." I don't know what Mr. Gary said, but I do know that we

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worked very closely together and he must have said, because Dick Donahue said, "Well, I don't need any more, Mr. Gary."

So, anyway the thing moved along and I had a very wonderful, challenging period when Mr. Kennedy was the president. He let the departments have pretty much a lot to do about their jobs as long as it was successful.

HARTIGAN: That, Fred, excuse me, that was the next point I thought that we could in an organized fashion get into, because we were just discussing before this tape the Post Office being in the news so prevalently and in such a bad light today. What was the John F. Kennedy administration's attitude toward the Postal Service from your point of view?

BELEN: Well, as long as it seemed to be running along smoothly he had so many problems that he didn't really get involved with us. Dick Donahue on the staff was a staff man that was most immediately concerned. I remember Dick went with Bill Brawley to see Mr. Murray before we started the legislative program just to be sure everybody was tuned in.

HARTIGAN: Dick Donahue at that time was an assistant to Larry O'Brien, the legislative liaison man for the White House, okay.

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BELEN: That's right. Now, Larry O'Brien, as you know, had a lot to say about the staffing, and I think did a tremendous job. And had an insight that is incredible. When I had this talk with Dick Donahue he said, "Well, I'd like to have just a few names." So, I went over and saw Ed Boland [Edward P. Boland] who's a congressman from Massachusetts and who had served on the Post Office Committee and would know what I have done. You know when you work on a committee you don't do anything, the committee members do it. It's just like when you're the Assistant Postmaster General or the Deputy Postmaster General, the Postmaster General does it. The only thing is, you'd better be right. But, I went to see Mr. Boland and he said, "Heck, Fred, the big man in all this is Larry O'Brien." And he said, "You know, I—he was talking to me about you just two weeks ago." Well, this was long before I ever knew anything about it. Or before Mr. Day had ever met me. So, Larry O'Brien obviously was working on this problem. And he says, "You know, Fred," he said, "you can be sure I'll give a good recommendation. But, you know, I'm the one that introduced Larry O'Brien to then Congressman Kennedy." Which I thought was very interesting how these happen.

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HARTIGAN: Isn't it.

BELEN: The thing is, though, that during Mr. Kennedy's administration most of the new programs were developed.

HARTIGAN: Would you like to elaborate on a few of those?

BELEN: I just will because a lot of them have been in focus in the last little while. The whole zip code program was conceived and actually started into effect under President Kennedy. The, what they call the NIMS program or the Nationwide Improved Mail Service which was a program that set up mail users councils of the principle mailers in every city of the country. The idea being to get them to cooperate on every one of the programs of the mail service. And it turned out to be a very real help, not only in getting the big mailers to understand Post Office problems but to get them to mail early in the day, for example. Then there was a program having to do with the internal distribution of mail in tall buildings. Getting special mail rooms set up. Getting internal conveyors set up. And things of that sort. All of which improved the mail service and of course, designed to cut cost. The biggest single thing of course, was zip code. Zip code, a lot of people think, just is five numbers on a letter, but it isn't really.

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What zip code is is an external sign or a program whereby mailers can use their computers to sort mail. Let's take, for example, the *Reader's Digest*. That's about fifteen million copies. None of those go through the post office of mailing. They are all, all the labels are sorted, all put on the magazine in delivery sequence, which is the zip code. The first number is the area, the second number is the state, the third number is the sectional center, of which there are 552, and the last two numbers are the delivery units. Now to show you just one example of how that has worked in savings: obviously, it saves space which is an expensive thing, and almost unobtainable by the postal service. I received a call from a printer who had received one of the contracts for book-of-the-month. They're one of the monthly book clubs, they call them. A hundred thousand a day he was to produce and get into the mail. And he said, "We got to have a new post office in this particular city." And I said, "Well, we can't give you a new post office." I said what you're doing now is you're taking a hundred thousand books and sending them willy-nilly to thirty thousand delivery units, post offices. What you're going to have to do is sort them

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by zip code. Then the hundred thousand might get off on that particular day will all be going to, let's say, Michigan. And all I have is about eight stops in Michigan and they're all distributed. That's what zip code permits. And it has a lot of variations of pre-sort. We've been faced with a proposal that would have had our employees put the code on and after evaluating it we found out that it would take more of our own employees' energy than if they just put it in the right slot and mailed it. There was a separate unit which was to sort flats. Well, the biggest source of flats, of course, are magazines and catalogues. Well, with zip code they were all required to pre-sort. So, it just eliminated that.

HARTIGAN: Just a self-serving item, Fred, it also cuts in, allowed us to cut some transportation costs.

BELEN: Right, and you people did a great job, Bill, in this. It meant changing the whole transportation pattern what the bureau of transportation did.

HARTIGAN: What about the ABCD program, Fred. That's not too well known publicly but yet it did a very good job.

BELEN: Well, that was a program I announced in my home city. We had made tests and we found that with just the use of thirty minutes of one employee's time

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we could take mail out of a selected group of downtown boxes and distribute them to the business section. If they were mailed by eleven o'clock, they would be delivered by three o'clock. And then we tested a number of other places and finally was put into every city but New York. Now, whole businesses changed their programs. The airlines called us and said, "We just want to be sure it's working out because we can now handle our airline tickets and know people are going to get them." Well, I can tell you that since I've been out of office I've tried to get with a five-day lead time to get them to send me tickets and they say, "You'll have to pick them up, we just can't afford to risk your not getting them in time." But that program was started primarily when I first became assistant postmaster general.

HARTIGAN: That was still in the Kennedy administration, we're talking about now?

BELEN: Yes, oh yes. When I became assistant postmaster general I'd be on a lot of radio and television programs and invariably the question would come up "Well, Mr. Belen," they'd say, "how is it that they can get same day delivery in England when you can't get it any place in the United States?" And I decided that

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I was going to work out some procedures where we'd have more same day delivery available than any other country in the world. And that's what ABCD provided. Of course, that was the first thing that Mr. Blount [Winton M. Blount] got rid of.

HARTIGAN: What did the letters stand for, Fred?

BELEN: Accelerated Business Collection and Delivery.

HARTIGAN: You say that that is not in effect?

BELEN: It was the first thing they took out. And of course, the employees didn't particularly like it because it meant they had to meet a deadline, that was the urgency of getting this done. And it meant that we could walk into a post office after twelve o'clock when the second trip had left and say "why is this mail here?" Now, it helped not only ABCD mail, what it helped move all the other mail that was going on that second trip. It made them really effective. Now of course, at that time the second trip really only went to the business areas. But, as long as they were going we had wanted to set up a procedure that would get... [ Interruption].

HARTIGAN: Fred, I want to apologize for the interruption but we do run out of tapes and have to turn them over once in a while. The small budget at the Kennedy Library. But, you were just finishing up a statement, do you want to...

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BELEN: I was just commenting while it put a little pressure on the clerks to get those letters sorted on time, at the same time it made the second trip or the business area, it made it more effective because we got those letters out that same day. Now, if a business house was out in the suburbs, let's say, probably for less rent or parking or something like that, they could get the same service merely by having a box because all box holders got this same service, too.

HARTIGAN: Fred, one of the major functions of the Assistant Postmaster General for the Bureau of Operations at the time that you were in the Post Office was the appointment of postmasters and I suppose the administering of postmasters activities. At that time, well at the present time, you hear people referring back to the dirty politics of the appointment of postmasters and the inefficiency of postmasters appointed under the spoils system. I would like you, if you will, to just give your observations on the appointment of postmasters, which actually is the sole prerogative of the president of the United States under the Kennedy administration.

BELEN: Well, the appointment of postmasters, of course, is a very important function because that means that you're appointing some of your key managers, take like

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in New York or Chicago or Philadelphia. You're appointing someone who's going to be over from twenty to forty thousand employees. And they, like everyone else, as an appointee within the structure of the civil service, they have to pass a civil service examination. And they have to qualify under all of civil service rules and regulations. They have to be within the top three in order to be selected. They have to have passed, as I say, the examination to begin with. That has to be a good enough rating so that within the top three. They have to observe veterans preference. Veterans, if a veteran is ahead of a non-veteran, you can't get to

the non-veteran; you have to appoint the veteran. So, all these things have to be observed. And the key to it, as I see it, is to have well-qualified people. Now, the one thing that limited it and restricted it was a provision in the law—this has since been changed—a provision in the law which required that the postmaster in order to be appointed had to have lived within the delivery limits of the post office concerned for at least a year before he was qualified. And so when you do that you restrict the competition to people that are known at the local level. And in fact,

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being well known and admired and having some respect for the people of the community is one of the big factors in deciding a promotion appointment. It's true that the channel of recommendations once the register has been set up was through the congressman. He had a chance but he had to select someone that was in range based upon civil service qualifications. Now, he could, and many times they did, promote from within. In other words, if someone was the assistant postmaster and the congressman felt he had done a good job and would keep the postmaster office in, it had been a good post office because they want it good, too. They don't want to get all these complaints. He would appoint from within. Now, there had been a lot of appointing from within when the register got set up when there wasn't someone on it that they wanted particularly to have. Then they would go and appoint from within. But, I said no, indeed. Now once we have an examination, and people have taken the time to take the examination, and there's a qualified register, we're just simply going to have to appoint from the register. What I'm saying in just a little way is that you have to be the manager if you're going to run a show as big as the postal service. And you have to be capable of saying

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no if they want to appoint somebody

On the other end of the spectrum was the very difficult problem of postmasters who wanted to stay on after 70. That was a rule that we just didn't keep anybody on after 70 and yet they would then plague their congressman to have us make an exception. Now, we wouldn't make an exception and many times the congressmen even get up to the President. Well, of course, he wouldn't know what this regulation was and it would sound well, that doesn't sound to bad, then we would have a conflict on both sides. And I remember one, he was not only a member of congress and a ranking member of congress, but he was a very big power in his own state and apparently had talked to political people about it, and I said, "Well, call him." I said, "Congressman," I said, "what are you trying to do to me? This is just one thing that is a big mistake." I said, "You just kind of laugh but let me tell you something. If you get this done and I think the President might do it for you, you won't be able to walk out on the floor of that House." I said, "I want to tell you something. There's hardly an advisor that doesn't have the same thing occurring in his district. But, he has already, knowing the man is going to have to retire, made his selection for who

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he wants to be postmaster. It'd be very embarrassing to him if they say, 'Well, look it, you got it done.'" I said, "Not only that congressman," I said, "you got five like it in your district and you're not going to get more than one."

He laughed and said, "Fred, can you get the examination held at the register set up so I can make a selection in thirty days?" I said, "That's one thing I'll do for you."

HARTIGAN: Fred, you referred, you used the term advisor, what we're really talking about is the congressman in whose district the post office is in, and he was allowed the courtesy of recommending off this register, is that correct?

BELEN: Well, it was a little more complicated than that. First of all, you have postmasters with multidistricts like Chicago and New York. And normally the Senator had quite a bit to say. Or the two senators had to kind of get together. Then you had the districts that had no congressmen in the party in power. And that then went to the National Committeeman normally up to the senator who got it over. But normally that would go through National Committee channels. So, it was a political advice but you can imagine

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this, it would have been totally impractical to have an examination statewide for a post office. You'd have so many applicants that you couldn't sort them out and you'd wind up with someone that nobody in the small community would be happy with as a result. Really, the congressman and the political structure performed a very real service for us. Because we couldn't possibly have done all this recruiting ourselves without spending a lot of money. You realize that the congressman gets back and he does the sorting out pretty much of well now what does the community want, who do they want. Then he normally had a chance to name this man acting and gave you a chance to see how he would work out. It got a little difficult, of course, when there was a change of administration because the acting man was not going to be appointed because the local people said, well as long as an acting man has no status, you see, and could be removed, the pressure were on to make a change and make a change which involved a political recommendation of the congressman or whoever was concerned.

HARTIGAN: Fred, you've had experience in post office activity before you went to the post office, you've had experience in the post office activities while you were there, and you have got exposure to post office activities having—being a practicing attorney. The

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big feature in the changeover, as you will recall, was the war cry of political patronage, political interference in appointments under the old system and this will all be out of the way when we get this new[?] corporate structure, under which we're operating today. What was

the quality of the postmaster, and you were in a position to know, the postmasters appointed under the Kennedy administration versus being appointed under the so-called non-political system? First of all, what was the quality of the postmaster appointed under the Kennedy administration? Most of them still there today.

BELEN: Well, let's say this. Because of veterans preference and because of having to be within reach, the congressmen in order to have it be his man got the very best one he could. Because if he didn't, veterans, disabled veterans, three disabled veterans would hold the top three spots if they merely barely qualified. So if he really wanted to name that man without embarrassment, without having us say we just can't name him because he isn't qualified, it would be very embarrassing, so they would, they really tried to come up with people that could win the approval of the civil service commission.

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HARTIGAN: What were the results from your experience?

BELEN: Well, I think the results were good. I testified before the committee which was considering the present situation. And I said this. I said, "Let me tell you something." And I think it has proven. "You're going to find that personal patronage is a heck of a lot worse than political patronage." And you can read on the floor of the House the debate and the discussion on the part American Can has played in having two postmasters general from American Can.

HARTIGAN: Isn't the current postmaster general affiliated with...

BELEN: Yes. I'm speaking of Mr. Klassen [Elmer Theodore Klassen]...

HARTIGAN: I see.

BELEN: ...AND Mr. Bailar [ Benjamin Franklin Bailar]. The first one, Mr. Blount came from the, well his main background, he was at that time Chairman of the National Chamber of Commerce.

HARTIGAN : Fred, at one point during the early part of your post office career, while I think still an assistant postmaster general of bureau of operations, was there an evaluation done on the efficiency of postmasters in the post office at that time? Do you recall such an evaluation?

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BELEN: Well, we were constantly evaluating postmasters. We had a whole set up—as you know—through the inspection service that every post office

was totally inspected as to performance. And then we had a work measurement program which allocated the hours that each post office could have. And those allocations were made based upon volume and there might be some general differences like where *Reader's Digest* is printed. There's not as much work to getting the volume of mail out so you know that they don't need that many people. The work measurement program was right down in detail and we knew if postmasters weren't performing. And there was a lot of postmasters separated. But, I think that our program of really evaluating postmasters' performance and every \_\_\_\_\_. And I do think that Dick Murphy [Richard J. Murphy] had some people going out with some sort of civil service type of evaluation. But I've never had any problem that postmasters weren't qualified. Any of them that we had.

HARTIGAN: Well, now that the—it brings me up to the question I want to ask—and it does refresh my mind that there were measurements taking place in evaluating postmasters—now with that in mind it was easy for you and the officials of the post office at that time

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during the Kennedy administration to make an evaluation of the efficiency of the postmasters appointed from within—we'll call them career appointments—and the ones that were made from the outside. How do they measure up, the career versus the man from outside?

BELEN: Well, in the case of most of the big post offices they came from outside. But to be qualified for the postmaster let's say of Omaha or Cincinnati or a postmaster of New York, you had to have some pretty substantial experience. I think that we found some.... I'd say this, in many cases the postmaster from outside was outstanding. He loved his work. In every case where the postmaster was appointed from within he was certainly very acceptable because he had that experience. But those from outside—see lots of time a postal employee is so engrossed with Post Office that the business people don't know him, he's embarrassed to kinda really get out with them as levels. And after all the post master is at the level of almost as big a business as there is in any city you want to name. And you do have to have that kind of approach and I guess a lot of it too, Bill, is my NIMS program which insisted that they start a participation program with the mailers.

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And I insisted that it not be the head of the mailroom in a particular business but I said you've got to get up to talk to the president of that company. You got to talk to the man that calls the turns. So, that was one, and in my program at no time was it more important than during that time to have top flight businessmen and people that were community—had community interest. You know, this is a big thing.

HARTIGAN: Did you, do you recall any contact with the White House during President Kennedy's administration with regards to postal matters or problems?

BELEN: Well, I had frequent contact with Dick Donahue. Mr. Brawley was primarily the White House contact at that time and that created some conflict actually between him and Mr. Day. There was then a change made and the Deputy was left open. There, it was not filled for about a year and I and the federal register was given all the authority of the postmaster general. So, really I had the authority of the postmaster general as well as director of operations. But, as part of that, I'm answering this so you'll wonder why I didn't have this much contact with the White House. As part of that problem Mr. Day called me in and said, "Now, Fred, you're gonna run to postal service. I don't want you in any way

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[NOTE: There are two page 31s in the original transcript]

contacting the White House or the National Committee." He said, "I'm going to name our confidential assistant who is not the assistant postmaster general for facilities to have that responsibility." It worked out rather difficult in that when Mr. Day decided he had to leave for business reasons, the man who had been the liaison and whom the White House staff knew was the one who was nominated for Deputy. And I was then called by Kenny O'Donnell over and Mr. Day had explained really I'd been doing the operating of the postal service and Kenny said that the President wanted to see me. And I went over and he said, "Now, Fred, the President will see you." But he said, "I want to tell you he's very busy today but he just wants you to know that he doesn't want you to leave." And so I agreed to stay. And then subsequently later I was, it was after the President's assassination that I was named the deputy. It was not long after.

Actually when we were speaking about Deputies so many years I had that extra year in there in which had the two jobs. But that's the reason why I can't say I was at the White House all the time. I went to several cabinet meetings. There's the one over there, that's rather interesting. To see Charlie Murphy [Charles S. Murphy], who's office is next there, he was there as undersecretary of agriculture.

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I represented the postal service, there was President Kennedy and his brother Robert [Robert F. Kennedy], Mr. Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], Stu Udall [Stewart L. Udall], Collins [LeRoy Collins] is the former governor of Florida who was secretary of commerce, and the secretary of HEW [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff] is now a senator from Connecticut. And that was a rather interesting thing that. We got in you know, a new administration. There's a lot of people down the line that will trap you. And I think this is one of the things that happened to Mr. Blount. First thing he did was decide that they'd send all mail to one place in each state. And that created so much back haul[?] delay they had to change it. But there was a man over there that was constantly on my back trying to get me do it. He stayed on with the new administration. I know exactly the source of that mistake was. There was a case of letter carriers in Savannah, Georgia that had not reported himself properly, and the congressman from there was on our back all the time to remove him. And really, he shouldn't have been

kept on. But, anyway, we started this process. Well, then it turns out that he was on the national board of the NAACP[?] [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and they were going, to fight this thing, voted the funds[?] all the way to the Supreme Court.

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And Mr. Day called me in and he said, "Well, Fred," he said, "I know the courts. They can't understand these things." And he said, "I'm just gonna call this thing off and I'm going to issue this statement." And he had \_\_\_\_ from public relations. I see he had it written out in hand. He said, "I want you to read it," but he says, "I'm not going to change one word." Well, that turned out to be a real backfire because it had one sentence in it that said "I'm going to keep him on but I wouldn't want him to be my letter carrier."

Well, as a result of that \_\_\_\_ went up and he called me and said the deputy was out in Denver at the postmasters convention and he was joining him out there. He said, "they got a cabinet meeting out there tomorrow, could you go?" That's how I happened to be at that one important cabinet which discussed the whole budget. And I can tell you that President Kennedy was a working president.

HARTIGAN: Fred, an historical event took place while you were in the post office as assistant postmaster general for the bureau of operations. And it did not affect your bureau directly but it certainly indirectly in many aspects did. And that was the great Plymouth Mail Robbery. Would you care to comment, make some

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observations on that historical event?

BELEN: Yes, yes, that created a great deal of concern, particularly in Massachusetts. It was money coming from banks out on the Cape.

HARTIGAN: Of course, particularly in view of the fact that the Speaker of the House came from Massachusetts at that time, John McCormack. The President of the United States came from the state of Massachusetts at that time. And this is why I think it's an interesting point to bring up.

BELEN: Also the good friend that I mentioned, Eddie Boland, was on the committee that decided to investigate it. That was a government operations committee. Oddly enough, among my experience I had considerable experience in security work. I was a first security officer for the Pentagon. This was during World War II. And I was in charge of security for all the ports of \_\_\_\_\_. At the end of the war, my job was to cut back on security. So, I became very familiar with the cost of security. And the cost where a, someone wants to be over secure, vis-à-vis the potential of losses. So, Mr. Day was called to go before a government operations committee and to

answer for the loss of the two million dollars. I think frankly, I think the inspection service could

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have done a little better job about the investigation of this thing. But the actual loss of that money wasn't ours. See, we don't insure money over a certain amount. Seems to me it's ten thousand dollars. The rest of the money goes through the mail is insured by private concerns. And so then we had lost.... I had done a little study getting ready for Mr. Day 's testimony, preparing the testimony, pointing out that we had lost in the past number of years only a hundred thousand dollars. Now we lost more money but the actual loss to the postal service because, as I say, we don't insure the whole amount, about a hundred thousand dollars. But, had we provided on our transportation service the amount of guards—there were two on this truck, that was on that truck—it would cost us fifty-five million dollars a year or five hundred and fifty million dollars over the ten years in which we had only lost a hundred thousand. So, you can see when you take your possibilities, you find that you really can't afford security that way. And now we're only talking about the same security that Plymouth had. You really can't afford that. As a result of that though, a lot of the things that we carried, particularly

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currency from the treasury, were discontinued and they were shifted over to the armored car type of vehicle. I know that during that time I was visited by the head of one of the armored car services. And he said that he thought we were on the right track in that they ought to have the treasury business going through these private companies. And at that time I said, "Well," I said, "you know, that you've got somebody in your name on your payroll who is going around trying to get us to permit you as a contractor to carry first class mail between the banks and stores that you serve." And I said, "That's so serious that it directed right at the whole postal service." I said, "We're going to do this other but I'd like to have you get off our back on trying to destroy the first class mail monopoly." He called me back that afternoon and he said, "You'll hear no more of it." So, that is all part of the Plymouth robbery, or otherwise the first class mail monopoly would have been very seriously hurt.

Now, there's a lot of talk about it now, getting rid of the first class mail monopoly. And the President Ford [Gerald R. Ford] council of advisors have recommended it. But the reason for that is the poor service. We couldn't afford to maintain a monopoly

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and not give good service. And give better service as a result of the monopoly than anybody could furnish outside. And this is where the ball park is a little different. You don't know what the final decisions are going to be.

HARTIGAN: Fred, back to the Plymouth robbery, there has been remarks made—I don't call them charges because I don't think they were ever officially made—

but through newspaper reports and observations from people involved that the post office really was responsible for the Plymouth robbery in the light that they permitted all this money to be transported on the one vehicle and that this was a change that was made not too long before the robbery. Now, I was not in the post office at the time, as you recall. I was up in Massachusetts with Senator Ted Kennedy's [Edward Moore Kennedy] campaign at the time, so I'm not first-hand, I'm not speaking first-hand knowledge. Was there a change from the mixing of this money in trailer trucks with all the love letters and what not in first class mail and then at a period of time shortly before the robbery this money was taken and put into special vehicles with the guards? Was that, do you recall that?

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BELEN: I don't recall. Of course, we're talking now about fourteen years ago. I do know that it probably would have had to been done with it because that would have been a star route would have come up to Washington to your bureau at that time but it wasn't a star route. It was manned by two of our own postal employees.

HARTIGAN: Well, the reason that the question is in my mind is that normally at the time I was there, before resigning, that was transported on star route, that money. And for some unknown reason—as I said I was not there at that time—the money was transferred to a postal vehicle rather than a star route with two armed guards and at that point the truck was held up.

BELEN: Well, I wish that I could answer that. It does point to something I've always thought, that the information about it had to come from inside. Now, the people that did it, at least at the inspection service felt that were never as they had trial but they got off, they didn't have enough facts on them, and the money was never found, as far as I know. I think they took it to Canada.

HARTIGAN: Well, of course, the theory in the post office, the reason that their losses were so low was the fact that in there's

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safety in numbers. If you've got a thousand sacks of money mail in ten thousand sacks of mail on a trailer truck there's nobody going to be sitting going through nine thousand sack of love letters looking for the sacks of money. But, when this was changed, it highlighted the money shipment. But, you're not aware....

BELEN: I am aware that they felt the mixing of it was a big security factor, that you couldn't just sort out which was which although the registered material has a special lock on it. I don't know.

HARTIGAN: Are there any other...

BELEN: \_\_\_\_\_ nothing succeeds like success. Up to that time....

HARTIGAN: You had very few losses.

BELEN: No, but they sure did a real evaluation of the security measures as a result of that.

HARTIGAN: I believe they went back to the co-mingling of all the mail again.

BELEN: Right.

HARTIGAN: Fred, before we close off this conversation—which is delightful for me because it's reminiscing from my personal point of view—but, are there any other points you'd like to make? Bear in mind that this

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history is for students who are going to be studying all agencies of the government, all phases of it and whatever material you put into it sort of clarifies activities that took place under John F. Kennedy's administration.

BELEN: Well, I realize this a little bit that a lot of my friends have twenty-twenty hind sight and I don't want to make it seem like mine was just hind sight knowing what I know now. In fact, this is a little different for me to be talking today and you put the date on it in the beginning. About something in the past. My wife would say, "You just can't live in the past, you got to look ahead." But, nonetheless, we all ought to take lessons from the past and this is why we're taking this time today is to give that benchmark or that frame of reference to students when they are evaluating what's happening today. Now, let's say one of the things that I was tremendously interested in was security demands. And we never let anybody who had their hand in the till, if you want to put it that way, keep their job. And was turned immediately over to the district attorney. Just sort of typifying this kind of a thing, I got a call from a senator from North Carolina. He says

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"Fred, I have a problem down in my state." He says, "The postmaster took a little bit. Can't we kind of smooth it over?" He says, "It's four dollars seventy-five cents, something like that." I said "Well, senator, let me tell you another case that involved your brother's mill when the post office was in the mill. And I was called by people down to see what I might do. And I had to simply say, 'All I can tell you is get a good attorney.'" But I said, "that lady postmaster was my son's babysitter. And that hurt." I said now, today when you take a look at what you and I are looking at, Bill, managers getting as much as thirty-five thousand deliberately destroying mail. Destroying mail because they don't know what to do with all the damaged pieces. Now they should have solved what to do with the damaged pieces and what

to keep from damaging them instead of taking other people's mail and burning it, tearing it apart. And this is just a security of the mail and the days gone by. And looking after the sanctity of it and looking after what's happened now with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and all that.

HARTIGAN: Well, maybe some young student will take advantage of this tape, Fred, and when he becomes mature and holding

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office will get some benefit and some wisdom from these tapes.

BELEN: I hope so. And I'll tell you what if we have just a minute. One of the greatest things that President Kennedy did... [Interruption]

[BEGIN SIDE I, TAPE II]

HARTIGAN: We have to change tapes as I mentioned earlier. The last thing you were talking about or started to talk about was the youth program. Would you continue please.

BELEN: Well, I wanted to differentiate between the one I want to talk about which was primarily the students going to college and then the youth program that was to take youths off the streets in the hot months of the summer.

Both, I think, have important parts in the government. But the first one I want to talk about is the young people who came and had their first real job. I'm not talking about picking up papers, cleaning the grounds, painting walls, putting in light bulbs, I'm talking about actually holding down a job that is normally held by regular employees. I have to express a little admiration for Dick

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Murphy who handled it in our department. Dick, I don't know if you remember, was one of the whiz kids. And he has always been very enthusiastic, really a \_\_\_\_ and wanting to do a good job. And I myself used to like to give them a lecture about the importance of what they're doing. And it goes something like this. "You know, we're giving you a chance to work this summer. We hope you save some of your money for you college. But more than that I want to impress on you the fact that this is your first government job. You're not going to be running the postal service, but that doesn't mean what you're doing isn't important. You may be just filing, but if you put that particular piece of paper in the wrong place, some contractor may not be paid, some person may not get their check and go hungry. Because you're here and then you're gone." And I told a little story which is a true story and it's true to the young people that might be listening to this. I was walking through Grand Central Station, I know you've been there, Bill, there's just all the thousands of people there. Well,

the president of a very large corporation of this country and he said, "You know, Fred, right around that corner there is the man that gives the finest shoe shine in the city

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of New York." I said this man was just giving shoe shines but he was doing the best he could. And doing so well he impressed this top executive. And so I would tell them, "No matter what you do here for the postal service, someone's going to write us about it. And we'll want to give you a good recommendation but we won't unless you earn it. You're going to see people goofing off around here, but that's not the kind of example we want you young people to set."

Now, as to the other program, we took six thousand that first hot summer. And when I was asked about the new setup, one of the things I said I thought the President should be aware that he was separating himself from the biggest single group of employees in the country. Seven hundred thousand, a group of seven hundred thousand where young people could aspire to a government job without having to have a college education. And I said I couldn't think of separating him from a source when he had the job to keep the kids off the street in a hot summer. We took care of six thousand of them. And that's the kind of thing.... Of course, there were many other programs.

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HARTIGAN: But you thought this Kennedy youth program in the government as far as the post office was concerned was a hundred percent effective.

BELEN: Unfortunately, many of those students may not realize it was the President of the United States himself that directed this be done.

HARTIGAN: As a matter of fact, I must confess that I didn't know either.

BELEN: We worked, we participated. But this was a whole program of where they had a chance to have people come in and talk to them who had wide experience.

HARTIGAN: Is this program now defunct? Or is it still in effect?

BELEN: I don't know.

HARTIGAN: I don't either.

BELEN: Hopefully it is but I just... I would say the post office department today doesn't recognize any obligation for any government program if it means they might have to spend a little more money than they would doing it some other way. Now, true, we could probably have started recruiting someone who was

going to stay on the job and not go back to school, but we wanted to see them go back to school and encouraged it. And if they decided not to we had a

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little exit interview asking them why.

HARTIGAN: Thank you very much, Fred Belen. It's been a pleasure sitting with you, going over the activities of the post office. And we also want to thank you on behalf of the Kennedy Library for the time you've given us today. And if you think of anybody as a result of this conversation that might be able to lend something to the value of the oral history department of the Kennedy Library, I'd appreciate if you'd let me know. I know you did mention Charlie Murphy, who was an undersecretary of commerce and later chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board. And I'll make contact with his secretary.

BELEN: I'll tell you someone that occurs to me is Ralph Nicholson [Ralph W. Nicholson], Ralph Nicholson was first...

HARTIGAN: Fred, I will take Ralph Nicholson's name down also, we'll close this interview off and then...

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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