Thomas M.C. Johnston Oral History Interview – RFK#2, 10/27/1969
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Johnston, Executive Assistant, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, New York City (1966 - 1968); Robert F. Kennedy's representative, Bedford-Stuyvesant Corporation discusses RFK's senatorial campaign style and his trip to Latin America, among other issues.

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Thomas M.C. Johnston – RFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS M.C. JOHNSTON

October 27, 1969
New York, New York

By Larry J. Hackman

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

HACKMAN: I don't know anything really about what you were doing in the '64 campaign. Dun Gifford [Dun K. Gifford] said there's a funny story about how you got involved in the campaign, or something. Is that right?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, it is funny because generally you think that people are eager to have volunteers in campaigns and yet it was very, very difficult to get into it. I was working as a film maker and I thought—when Senator Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] came to run—I thought that it would be a good idea to take off three months and work as a volunteer. I didn't need to be paid, but I thought it was very important, in the beginning at least, to get a not totally stupid job, although I didn't have any great ambitions or pretentions. I thought it's a good idea to ask for a salary because if they give you a salary, you're obviously going to be doing something. So I kept going in to the front door of this headquarters on Forty-Second Street. One time I'd meet Carmine Bellino [Carmine S. Bellino] and another time I'd meet Peidi Gimbel [Peidi Gimble] and another time I'd meet Natalie Cushing; and everybody's always very agreeable, but always very firm. And no way to get involved in any way. Finally I just said, "Well, look, I'm not after….I don't want a salary. I'd just be glad to work for nothing,"—as I did—"I just think it would be very helpful if he got elected."

Well, then finally I figured that what you had to do was have some very specific thing that would catch somebody's eye. So I sat down and

wrote-a four-page memo on how they could raise money—because there was a whole way—other than just from traditional sources. Alexander Heard had written this book on raising money. And there was a whole effort during the Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] campaign to get lots of people to contribute small amounts of money. So I did that and I handed it in to somebody and it filtered around. I remember seeing it after the campaign was over. Steve [Stephen E. Smith] had seen it and he sent it to Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett] and said, "See this guy. There may be something there." Then Dave Hackett asked to see me; and he asked for my resume. And I put on where I'd been and what schools I'd been to and stuff. Then I remember I put on, "188 pounds, white." That's all I remember—totally unrelated to the specifics on that bright, new thought on campaign financing. He said, "Get a car." He introduced me to Phil Ryan [Philip J. Ryan, Jr.] and Gerry Tremblay [Gerald Tremblay] and said, "Will you go around the state and work?"

I had no idea—and I don't think Dave had much of an idea—of what we were supposed to do, and by the end of the campaign we still didn't have a very clear idea. We just drove around, and would go from county to county. We had a station wagon full of posters and bumper stickers and all the things that people wanted—buttons. We'd show up from headquarters in New York City, we'd show up in Poughkeepsie [Poughkeepsie, New York] or whatever. We'd arrive and we'd give them a few of what we had in the car, a few of each, and then we'd make some kind of a very quick judgment about what they were doing. Then on our way to the next place, or we'd call up when we got to the next place and dictate a memorandum on it. These were mostly both organization and volunteer things. So we really were sort of roving around and we were both being genuinely helpful to them and also sort of checking up on what they were doing.

Then we had five coordinators in the state, five I guess, outside of New York City and Long Island. So we kind of worked with them and they would pull together people on different things. As the campaign went along we made about six trips through the state. Once it would be just initially to get some material; then we'd be helping them organize a telephone campaign; then helping them to do a voter registration drive; then the get-out-the-vote and fundraising; and basically just, if they had problems, trying to help them get them figured out.

It was really rather….I mean, it was the most fun you could ever have in the campaign. I think if you get to be in a higher position, more responsibility, it gets to be much less fun; not because the responsibility's greater or because you might risk more, but, on the contrary, because you really have so much less leverage, unless you're the candidate himself. In that middle area when you're sitting

in an office, you're really just sort of a traffic cop. Whereas if you're out doing something, even if it's just going door to door, it's really a lot of fun. You have an awful lot of chance….Well, it's much more like a sports event than anything else.

HACKMAN: Who were you checking back in with? Was this Hackett most of the time?

JOHNSTON: Dave, yeah, I would say principally. He had that sort of boiler room operation running that we had in '69. So you'd call one of the girls and give her a memorandum. I'm not sure that Dave ever saw or thought about

or paid any attention to them. His theory, which makes a certain amount of sense, is that if you keep moving, you've created something already. I mean, you may be moving in no direction. But we'd come back from a ten-day swing to Buffalo [Buffalo, New York] and up to Plattsburg [Plattsburgh, New York] and back to Albany [Albany, New York] and Newburgh, having been to Syracuse [Syracuse, New York] and Rochester [Rochester, New York] and other places, and we'd get back to New York City exhausted and ready to tell everything we knew; and the next thing you know, the next morning, literally, we'd be started back around the state again. So that was….I suppose it had some, maybe made some sort of a contribution to the campaign, but even if it didn't it was interesting; it was fun.

HACKMAN: What kind of feeling do you have for Hackett's understanding of politics and whether Robert Kennedy really looks to him for any….How does he look to him for political advice, or does he?

JOHNSTON: That's difficult because I think he's probably rather good in the campaign. Assuming that you have a structure where somebody else is making a lot of the basic decisions, I think Dave would be very, very good. He's a very attractive fellow and he's got lots of good sense and he's terribly, terribly dedicated. A lot of people found him difficult to work with, and I did in the '68 campaign, but I never did in the '64 campaign. And I thought that a lot of people enjoyed working for him in both. I think that's really the major test. In the '68 campaign I just found that he didn't seem to have, in any sense, a coherent point of view or any sequence really to his decisions or his reactions. But that I think probably was a function as much of the campaign as of Dave.

HACKMAN: Yeah, you sort of gave the impression last time that a lot of things in '68 were sort of disorganized. Is that so in '64? I mean from your point of view of the campaign are things….What are the big organizational problems that you can see from the field?

JOHNSTON: Well, I couldn't see anything really 'cause I was out; you know, a worm's-eye-view at the best. I assume that there was a lot of the same sort of disorganization, I mean, I gather from talking to people since. It's not fair to say that I didn't see any of it, 'cause actually, while we were being sent out around in the state, we'd get back for these precious twelve hours before we'd get sent….Every once in a while by some freak, or maybe by Dave's lapse, we stayed more than twelve hours, maybe three days, in New York City. Then I got involved with Paul Corbin, who's quite a character and somebody that really….Has he been interviewed?

HACKMAN: No, he's not on the list.

JOHNSTON: He should be.

HACKMAN: We've all kinds of stuff about him.

JOHNSTON: He should talk himself because he'd be very good.

HACKMAN: He was interviewed for the other project.

[Interruption]

JOHNSTON: I think Paul is….Well, I met him during the campaign because he had been moved from room to room and they thought he was going to be discovered by the press. In fact, at one point they put him over in New Jersey in a hotel and he had ordered so many telephones that they threw him out because they thought he was a bookie. So he came back to New York and got an apartment. I used to go up there about once a week or once every five or six days and really, really was amused, and I must say excited, by the way he talked about the campaign and about politics and the stories he had about it, at least some of it.

[Interruption]

HACKMAN: All right. We were talking about Corbin.

JOHNSTON: He had a capacity really of rare imagination about politics and about the whole process of organizing people, and an incredible loyalty. Well, "loyalty" is not even really the word—a kind of fanaticism about the Kennedys and about Robert Kennedy in particular. So everybody was, in his book, either a good or a bad man depending on how, in his view, they supported Robert Kennedy and helped him. There were no limits as far as what he would

do in behalf of Robert Kennedy, and that would extend to destroying people that he was working with, or trying to destroy them. So I don't think….I mean, no question about that; he's not any model of behavior. But as far as being an intriguing people and a fascinating fellow to be with, couldn't be anybody more interesting and more useful, in a way, to keep people peppered up during the campaign where you tend to lag and get tired.

I remember there were a lot of scenes where he'd take Dave Hackett and just run him up one side of the pole and down the other. He'd do things that were not too great. Like we'd get back from Buffalo and he'd say to Gerry Tremblay, "Gerry, how'd you like Rip Horton [Ralph H. Horton]?"—Rip Horton would be out in Buffalo as the coordinator—and Gerry would say, "Pretty good fellow." And then he'd say, "Wait just a second here," and he'd call Rip Horton up and he'd get Gerry….He'd say, "Rip, what do you think of Gerry Tremblay?" And then Rip would start to say, what Rip would say is something like, "Oh, he's a friend of Bobby's and I had to put up with him. And Jesus, what a waste of time." Meanwhile, Paul would put the phone up to Gerry's ear. Well, this is, of course, very, very difficult for both Gerry and Rip. So a lot of the things he did were gratuitously evil.

But a lot of the other things he did were terribly, terribly practical and helpful and even moral. Aside from peppering people up….For instance, he explained how to organize a reception for Rose Kennedy [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] in Utica with a lot of Italians who, just at that

point because of Robert Kennedy's battle with the Mafia, were very unhappy. Rufus Elephante [Rufus P. Elefante] was a big force up there. He figured out….Paul got me to work with him and we got a system set up. We had, first of all, a group of ten Italian women and they each took ten women—then we had a committee of a hundred—and each one of them wore a rose and each one of them brought ten friends. We had the most fantastic reception for Rose Kennedy, one afternoon toward the end of the campaign, you've ever seen. And I'm sure that's something that made a big difference in Utica. That was very positive. Often he did things that didn't look very bright, but were very, very helpful—I think probably the sorts of things that people thought of when they thought of the Kennedys as being ruthless. In the good sense of the word he was very, very practical and probably not that harmful; in the bad sense, and probably the true sense of the word, he was a potentially very destructive and difficult man. Once when I was in White Plains [White Plains, New York], I think it was, I called him up and said….He hated Bill Luddy [William F. Luddy], who was the chairman of Westchester County. There was a fellow named Bill Pepper who was a local volunteer. He'd been encouraging me to work with Pepper for weeks and get Pepper committed to things. Pepper was doing things against Luddy all the time; and Paul

was there saying that Pepper was just right and keep it up. Then I called him one day and we had a big problem with Luddy. It was about four days before the election. I called him up and I remember I was in a phone booth. I called him and I said, "Paul, here's the problem," and I described it. Then I said, "What should Bill Pepper do?" He said, "If Bill Pepper wants to help Robert Kennedy, you know what he can do?" I said, "What?" He said, "Pack his bags and go to New Jersey until after the election." He said, "The thing is that at this point…." And of course he was probably right. At this point Luddy had control of all the election machinery and you couldn't alienate Luddy in the last four days. You had to be friendly to him and make an effort over him, because otherwise he could just lock up the machines, or his people would. He was a person who Robert Kennedy always took rather seriously in a wry way. He felt that he had to keep him out of his life both as a senator, as a candidate definitely, and even personally. From time to time he would show up at Hickory Hill [McLean, Virginia], he and his wife. And I think probably anything he'd ever ask of Robert Kennedy, Robert Kennedy would have done for him.

HACKMAN: Why do you think that's so?

JOHNSTON: Well, two things. Probably, one, because in fact, back in Wisconsin he was the person who apparently—now this might not be right; this is what I've always understood—who first told John Kennedy that it could be done, that they could win in Wisconsin, encouraged him to get into the primary, and did a lot of the work that got it done at a time when it didn't look like it was going to be very easy. This involved organizing labor and farm groups in the parts of the state where Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was particularly strong. Then I think, second, just the fun and the real sort of robust quality of his passion for politics and for the Kennedys made it so that you….And the fact that he really….This was his whole life. I mean, more than most people around the Kennedys, this is what he existed for. I think it made a very sort of special and very limited kind of relationship,

obviously, with Robert Kennedy, but I think one of the ones which there was sort of an absolute kind of commitment on both sides.

HACKMAN: Why would Robert Kennedy have to be so careful about keeping this relationship from being known?

JOHNSTON: Well, I've never been very clear about the facts, but I gather that the combination of three things: his early identification with the very left wing elements of the labor movement, in Wisconsin; then his later association with Joe McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy], close personal relationship; and then just his ways, his

manner. You couldn't imagine a better object if you could get him on television or get him out in public, if you were against the Kennedys, than this fellow who is such a rough, tough, sort of hoodlum-like fellow, in spite of all of his charm.

HACKMAN: Can you see anything in '64 during the campaign, evidence of people that either Robert Kennedy or Corbin, on behalf of the Kennedys, has really turned off in the 1960 campaign that are serious problems in '64, getting them to work actively?

JOHNSTON: You mean Democrats?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

JOHNSTON: I don't think I was really close enough to anybody to make that kind of a connection. No, I don't know of anybody: unless you'd name somebody that you can think of—I can't think of anybody. But I can ima-….Well, I mean the obvious ones would be the Reform Democrats, west side, the Reformers, who Paul Corbin….I don't think Paul Corbin could really turn off anybody from Robert Kennedy. I don't think he was ever felt by anybody to really speak for Robert Kennedy, in that sense, so that even if you were terribly annoyed at Paul Corbin and even if you knew that Robert Kennedy felt very strongly in a positive way, a sort of odd positive way about him, I don't think you ever would have felt that this was Robert Kennedy who had done that to you.

But there's no question that Robert Kennedy, when he came into the state in 1960 and said to a meeting, among others—one very oft-cited meeting of west side, principally, reform leaders, Democratic Party—that he was not here to get involved….I think he got a question about would they do this or would they do that and he said, "I'm not here to get involved in those problems. I'm here to elect a President." That was always held against him and it's quoted in a lot of literature as an example of ruthlessness and insensitivity. Obviously, I mean I always thought that was sort of just an obvious statement of what he was there to do. It was perhaps a little blunt, but it was hardly an argument against him. But I think, be that as it may, it annoyed a lot of people and it did turn a lot of them off and made them difficult to enlist behind him. Then I think probably his meeting with Baldwin [James Baldwin] and the black leaders probably cooled a lot of blacks, or at least black leaders, about him initially.

There were probably a lot of other circumstances that turned people off, because nobody runs that obstacle course of being Attorney General and being the—even more difficult—campaign manager and the political

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adviser to your brother, who's candidate for President and President, without incurring an awful lot of enmity along the way. I think there were a lot of people that, not so much by the campaign alone but by that whole movement of power….And there were a lot of people that were just jealous, that were just plain jealous. I think that was true of President Kennedy and I think that was true of Robert Kennedy.

HACKMAN: From traveling around the state during the '64 campaign can you remember important out-state leaders who were really a problem, who really aren't working at all? Maybe that's kind of the same thing I asked you earlier.

JOHNSTON: You mean people in the state?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

JOHNSTON: …who are upstate? Yeah, there were a lot of county leaders who weren't, like Dan O'Connell [Daniel P. O'Connell] from Albany, who was not….It wasn't that he wasn't working, but nobody could work with him. He would only talk to Robert Kennedy and even then he sort of….That's his style of operating, so nobody really went close to hm. And Peter Crotty [Peter J. Crotty] was very powerful, but he was helpful because he'd been very early on a booster of Robert Kennedy's. Thereby, I think he had a special relationship, which meant that you didn't really work with him or even in his area, but he handled that. Outside of that, of course, Jack English [John F. English] was friendly. And there were some small fish around that weren't sympathetic. I think both the Onondaga, which is Syracuse, and Monroe County—especially the Monroe County—Democratic Committees were very unsympathetic.

HACKMAN: Is that Rochester?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. Rochester, right. Later on they have people who were indicted and it was a rather unattractive bunch. In both cases not very pro-Kennedy, not particularly sympathetic, but even if they had been….That's, of course, the thing that Robert Kennedy understood and that you quickly learned in working for him: it wasn't necessarily any disadvantage to have the organization against you in an open explicit way, because even when they were for you, in most cases, they weren't very helpful. I mean they tended to be ineffectual and lazy and generally not able to make much of a contribution, so you'd have to set up your own organization anyway. And when you did that, if they were very friendly, they'd go along with it, but otherwise they'd probably be annoyed by that; you'd lose them at that

point. But if you didn't do it, you were at their mercy and no matter how well intentioned, they were generally not helpful.

HACKMAN: What else from the campaign do you think's worth talking about? Are there other things that you get involved in other than…

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think there are two or three things: One is that the impression you got of Robert Kennedy….I'm sure a lot of other people have noted this, or recalled it, who were closer to him and knew him better than I, because I didn't know him at all and didn't ever really….I met him two or three times at headquarters, but never got to know him well until after I'd gone to work for him. There was a feeling, even to somebody like me who didn't know anything about it, that he was totally out of it during the first half of the campaign. He was just going around in a daze and it was understandable; I mean, it was written about, it was no perception of mine. But it was understandable that he was going through a lot of the same motions his brother had been through, and it must have been a very eerie experience. And you combine that with….There were stories whenever we went during the first part of that campaign; we'd hear constantly complaints about how he'd gotten into a car with a county chairman and ridden for fifteen minutes and never bothered to say hello or goodbye and got out; it was just like he wasn't even there. Of course, we'd report these things back. Then it got much better. I mean not because we reported them, but I mean, obviously everybody had gotten this response and that was a problem that was building up to be a great disadvantage to him. So, I think, toward the end he probably got over that initial sadness and initial feeling of just melancholy and wondering why he was in it and how he ever got there, and he began to make much more of an effort with the individuals and I think, probably, made a much more effective effort with people when he spoke.

Then there was the other side, which is part of the same thing but which has never left him, which is this difficulty he had in being the politician compleat. He never really had the ability, I think, to carry it off completely. Something would intervene, either his sense of humor or his sense of the irony of it all or just the sense of the ridiculous. But in one way or another he, at some point, would reveal—generally, I would say when he was Senator, in a way that was not unflattering or unpleasant to the people that he was with—but he'd often reveal that sense of just amusement with it.

For instance, in the campaign he was in Niagara Falls [Niagara Falls, New York] and that was

a particularly difficult town because the mayor was against him and we had a lot of problems with the….Or the mayor—I can't remember—the mayor or the county chairman, one was against him and the other was for him. E. Dent Lackey I think was the guy who was the mayor. In any case, they got him down to look at the falls and this was a great source of pride to them and everybody was standing there waiting to hear what his comment was. And he said, "Must be beautiful from the Canadian side." It was a headline, almost, in the paper the next day. It was just the worst thing that anybody could have said and probably the most honest thing. You had that

combination of lack of great interest in making a positive impression, so-called, and then also just this quality that he had.

So the two of them together worked against him, I think, in the beginning of the campaign and it was very difficult. And Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] was very….It was a lot closer than people think now, or that anybody, of course, realized after he'd won because Keating was an older man with a lot of dignity. A lot of people saw him, and a lot of women, as a man that was being ousted by an upstart. That was an unattractive posture for Robert Kennedy to be in and it caused him a lot of problems because he couldn't really come right out and say a lot of things against Keating that you ordinarily would have said, or he ordinarily would have said. So, that I do remember as being a very….It made the campaign a kind of disjointed effort. The combination of a very poor, slow start and the fact that he could never really confront Keating directly in a very hard way—even though there was a lot of literature about the myth of Keating's liberalism and a lot of efforts to show that Keating was sort of a pale shadow of Javits [Jacob K. Javits] and not that helpful to the state or two the country—I think generally it was a kind of campaign that got in gear late. But it did gain a lot of momentum and he, of course, ended up coming across a very attractive figure in the state.

Aside from that….I remember one thing very distinctly and that is that the Kennedys—I think this is still true—were much more adept at running a campaign in the suburbs and in the rural communities than in the city, say, of New York. I think most of what they'd learned in the sixties in Wisconsin, West Virginia, and then across the country was applicable upstate and in the suburbs but had very little relevance to the cities. I think this is probably one of the things that nobody's figured out, but certainly that they haven't mastered yet. What they hadn't mastered was really how to deal with a place like New York City, which after all had more than half the voters in the state.

Then you'd get the impression, which you'd get from any campaign

of theirs, which is an awful lot of hard work. But I think a more organization probably really than in the '68 campaign. Steve Smith really ran it and it had a clear, pretty clearly developed point of view, as it were, by the end. So I think that all the pieces began to fit together. Now—as I said, I think, earlier in the other interview—I think there's a good chance that, after California, that would have happened to this campaign. It might be that you'd consider California about September 15 of the Kennedy State campaign, which is a pretty inculcate and unimpressive moment.

HACKMAN: Well, I guess next is how do you get from there to the Senate office?

JOHNSTON: Well, then I had intended to just do the three months and get out. [Interruption] I was just saying that I had planned to get out after the campaign and go back to film making. That's the way I'd left it with the people I was working with, that I'd come back. I was just going to volunteer. Then Dave Hackett and other people said, "Well, why don't you stay on and spend a couple more weeks at it?" Then that lengthened into a month and then six weeks. Of course, the problem was it was fun and it was interesting and in many ways a lot more fun than film making. So I thought I'd stay on and then I'd just….Finally, when they got around to forming an office, they said, "Well, why don't

you just stay on and help out?" They never had any clear idea of what I was going to do, or there wasn't any, really, idea of anything about it; no planning, as it were, about it. Then it just ended up by the first part of the year we were in an office somewhere, I remember, figuring out what we were going to do.

HACKMAN: Yeah, well, what were you doing over the winter? What had to be done?

JOHNSTON: Well, the first, really, thing was to find something of some purpose that you were doing day to day aside from just sitting in this office. I mean that was….Because as the Senator said he didn't want you just in there answering the telephone and talking to people all day; it wouldn't have been any fun if it had been that. So rather quickly we got an office more or less organized. Phil Ryan was running it initially and hired people and receptionists.

HACKMAN: This is right after the election then?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, during the….Well, the first thing we did in the fall, right after November in the first six or eight

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weeks, is we went up and around the state, and set up these trips around the state which were kind of fact-finding trips and community forums in which he would go into a community and then they'd have six subjects: health, education, sanitation, roads, and things. And they'd have somebody stand up and speak about them and then anybody could speak or say or ask questions. He would listen and respond, usually with some officials surrounding him. They were pretty non-partisan and they were rather energetic in that they had two or three a day and we'd do two or three days together.

We'd do the north country, and we'd do, say, Rochester and Syracuse, and then we'd do Buffalo. I think we did those mostly before Christmas and then a few after Christmas. Then we repeated them a year later.

That's where I first got to meet and work with Adam [Adam Walinsky] and Peter [Peter B. Edelman]. Phil Ryan and I did those and somebody, maybe Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan], was involved in them. They were really the first thing he did in the state and I guess they preceded even organizing the office, in a sense. Then we would spend….I guess, part of the job of the first months then was to follow up on those—make good where he'd said he'd look into a book program. Then it was the job of either the Washington office or our office or both to figure out how to look into it, get it done, or let them know that we tried to do it.

I guess part of the first six or eight months would be just getting acquainted really with the people and problems. I wasn't even from New York and didn't have any clue as to what politics were about in New York and who the people were or anything, I mean, even very little knowledge about what people who weren't politicians were doing. So as far as myself, I had an awful lot to learn. Phil Ryan knew a lot more about it because he had worked for Bob Morgenthau [Robert M. Morgenthau] and had worked in the campaign. Well, he and I'd worked together in the campaign, but he, I think, is much more knowledgeable about it, especially about New York City. But, of course, I'd met a lot of people—that was one advantage of traveling

around during the campaign—in different places and knew them as individuals, so that was some advantage. I knew, for instance, a lot of the mayors or city managers in different cities in the state. I guess the first thing after those initial trips was, really, to begin to figure out what you were doing and make some kind of a job that would be rather satisfying for you and helpful to him. Now, I'm not sure—when was the trip to Latin America?

HACKMAN: That's in December of '65. That's a year into it.

JOHNSTON: No, November. Right after…

HACKMAN: November. Yeah, that's right, early to late November. Right.

JOHNSTON: So until…. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: A lot's not in there (an RFK chronology) so I don't know what you're looking for.

JOHNSTON: I was just trying to get a kind of an idea.

HACKMAN: There's probably not a lot on New York in that first year.

JOHNSTON: I don't really remember too much about the first six or eight months, but just a lot, you know, just kind of….I didn't really have much of an idea about Senator Kennedy as a person. I didn't know him very well and only really got to know him when we went to Latin America. That was sort of the first…

HACKMAN: Yeah, okay. Let me ask you just a couple things. Did he ever sit down and say what he wanted from the New York office, or did it just sort of evolve?

JOHNSTON: No. he said what he didn't want. He didn't want it to be a –and by implication, I think, said what he wanted—a place where people did just sit around and talk to politicians or whoever happened to call; he didn't want it a place where you just waited for him to tell you something to do. So I think the understanding was, from rather early on, that he expected it to take initiatives on behalf of constituents, to handle, first of all, adequately but not superbly, constituent affairs. That is all the letters, which is quite a large quantity of mail every day; all of the phone calls; all of the people who came into the office; all the requests for help on housing, on welfare problems, and all the things that people wrote to a senator about, or would write to Robert Kennedy about. He expected that those got handled in one way or another, but, as I say, not with that….He didn't, I don't think, feel that was where the real purpose of this office lay.

I think the idea was that what you should do—and I think this was reflected also in the Washington office—you should not get bogged

down and you should do as good a job as possible to try to organize it the way that had a lot of other people involved in doing it. Then at the same time, having done that reasonably adequately, you should try to get out and really undertake projects that wouldn't get done otherwise. If you didn't—by "you" I mean you acting as his agent—so really if "he" didn't get involved in them, they just wouldn't happen. This could be anything from responding to the request of an individual constituent for more help in the community library, say, to get books under a program; to going to a principal to suggest that they could take advantage of the program for the whole school; to putting together a complex of principals and school administrators to get a whole new book program; to coming up with ideas about legislation for libraries and educational materials, drawing on Columbia [Columbia University] professors and people that we had here who could contribute to that. So it really ran quite a….I think what he expected was that there were a lot of people that wanted to help, which is true, and that your job was to not keep any of them from helping, and, if possible, make their help more effective—kind of channel it and organize it and fit it in in such a way that it amounted to something.

HACKMAN: How many of the activities of the New York office had to be cleared with Washington before you could go into something? Any problems in knowing where to draw the line, what you should do and what you shouldn't?

JOHNSTON: Very little of substance, I'd say. There were some….Phil Ryan and Joe Dolan used to have problems about….I can't remember quite whether it was….Seemed to be always over mail, whether we were supposed to answer one letter or they were. Then when it didn't get answered, invariably somebody was to blame and it was either us or them, and there were some sort of long discussions about whose fault it was. But I must say, during the four years that I was working in that office, I almost never had any kind of jurisdictional problem between the two. I just never….I mean the closest I ever….As I'm sure they had with us, there were problems in getting them to do what we asked them to do. We could ask that somebody be given a pass to the White House and they might forget to do it. That created a bigger problem for us than for them and we looked on that as a….We had the same problem—which gave them the same trouble—inadvertence and incompetence sometimes. The only close problem came with working with Adam on the Bedford-Stuyvesant [Brooklyn, New York] where, at a certain period, he kind of took it on himself to come up and start telling people the ABC's of how we were going to set it up, and that interfered really with what the Senator had asked me to do. But it was very simple because all I had to do

was tell Adam that I didn't think it was a good idea, and tell him that I was going to tell the Senator that, and it was handled in a two-minute conversation. That was just, it really didn't involve the office as much as it involved the two of us, who were both equally enthusiastic about it, and one of whom had to be the person ultimately that decided and kind of guided it through.

That's not in any way to diminish Adam's contribution, but that's an example—and a very rare, almost unique example—of a problem that we had.

I'm not sure why. I think partly it was Joe Dolan in that I don't think he pressed on those types of things. I think he was really not concerned; he felt he had enough work to do in Washington. I think ultimately it was Senator Kennedy; he knew that Senator Kennedy wanted somebody to take the responsibility in New York and he knew that he, Dolan, couldn't, so he didn't make any real attempt to as long as it ran along well. That isn't to say that he wasn't interested or involved; he'd come up and spend time and we'd go over things. But we could go six months without really hearing from him; we didn't, but I mean we could have because I think he felt that that's the way he'd seen it run in the Justice Department [United States Department of Justice]: people had areas of responsibility and they reported directly to Senator Kennedy, Attorney General in that case. And as long as that worked, it wasn't up to him to change it; it seemed to work and it fitted in. I think the fact that it worked wasn't any of kind of reflection on us in New York, as much as the fact that it just fitted the way Robert Kennedy liked to work. He'd want to turn to somebody who was there and say, "All right. Would you do it?" Then that person, not the person who was on the organization chart to do it, was the person who was on the line for it.

Now one thing he did say, which was probably the heart of what he imparted to me and what was perhaps different….That's why it's rather ironic now that Senator Javits comes to me here, or sends, or both comes to me and sends the man that he has working for him and says, "We want to run our office just like you ran yours." Well, as I said to the guy that's working for Javits now, "The difference is that you're not working for Robert Kennedy. It wasn't me that ran it that way." It was well run, but it was principally because he understood that the way to do something well is get a lot of people involved and not to try to run it all yourself.

At a certain point I was trying to do a lot of things myself, which I didn't realize at the time but learned I could get other people to do probably much better than I could do them. And he explained rather patiently one day when we were driving back from Poughkeepsie to New York City, said, "What you do is just get a lot

of people going on these things. They may not work out. But if they don't they won't be your fault, first of all. Second, they won't have cost you as much effort as you're putting into them now. And finally, they may well work out." I really realized then that I hadn't been doing that. I mean, even though I thought I was involving people, I was involving people on the sort of minimal scale. What he meant was get fifty lawyers in and get them working for you; don't just talk about getting the people that are on your staff or getting two or three old friends of the Kennedys to help.

As we got into that we found that it really did work and you could get a lot of people to do things. Of course, a lot of things they did screw up, but then you could watch those things and avoid the worst part of them. You got so much benefit out of it that I would say by the end of the….That was really what he wanted done to that office, and to the extent we were successful with that, I think it was the direct result of his deciding that that's the way it should be done. And I think probably by the end of 1967, into the winter of '68, we must have had three-quarters of our work done by volunteers at every level, everything from the simplest phone calls and letter answering up to very, very important and sensitive things.

HACKMAN: What happens to Ryan that he leaves by December? Is it that he can't understand this system? You know, what is it, the little things like the mail, you say, that keep coming up?

JOHNSTON: No, I think probably there was something between him and the Senator I didn't understand. I've never really been clear. I liked Phil and I think he did a really good job. First of all, I must say I was sort of awed because he knew everything about it, as I say. It's sort of like if you went to the man who plays the biggest calliope in the world, or something, and he knows all the steam holes and the different keys and you don't know any of it. I always felt that he was much more knowledgeable than I was, and really much more effective as a result.

The Senator would always ask me rhetorically if I'd ever met a man more disorganized than Phil Ryan. So I gather that he didn't think he was very effective. I suppose that was probably the thing, that he just wasn't a very organized, in that sense, person. But I thought he did an awfully good job. He's very dedicated and, I thought, very, very able. It was never any problem, I mean, between the two….He was fantastically nice with me and was never….The Senator was good about it, too; he never made it seem like he thought I was better. It came as a shock to me that he thought I was

better organized than Phil.

I think finally Phil just thought—I mean he was never asked to leave or anything—he just thought….One day, he told me, he said, "I think I'm going to leave in order to go into the law, practice the law."

Of course there is a limit; there is a limit to that job in a way. I never reached the limit but I could image that I would have at some point. And part of the limit is how you define the job. I think that he defined it, probably, more narrowly than others would have and saw it principally as sort of protecting the Senator's interests against people, which a big part of it was, actually. Perhaps even the most important part was—not the most important; certainly the least interesting but perhaps one of the most important parts—simply protecting the Senator's, his reputation and political capital against attempts to raid it and attempts to use it foolishly. Phil was very vigilant about that and very concerned about anybody or any group that was trying to take advantage. So there was that element. Then I think the other side was he saw it as a sort of advance man's job of getting him in and out of places, and he didn't really think in terms of what new effort could we start, or what new project—although he did on some and he did a good job on some. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: Are there groups….Is it obvious, say, in early '65, or through '65, that there are groups that really are going to require a lot of attention to improve his relationship with? Are they ever outlined by Dolan, or just is it obvious?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, I think it was obvious. The answer is that you don't—at least I didn't, quite honestly—perceive of it in '65. I think Dolan probably did, but I'm not sure that anybody thought in terms of dealing with them as groups at that point. I think that came to us later. The first job was a much more hazy focus. Just becoming a New Yorker really is the first thing, to establish that he was not a fellow that was just using the Senate seat to go elsewhere and that he cared about the state and that he was able to get involved in lots of projects. I don't think it ever broke down initially into labor or Italians or Jews or Irish. I think initially his first job was to show that he was able to really produce for Clinton, New York, and Buffalo, and people in New York, and that he was able to get into the Senate and be an effective senator. Those two things really.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything that first year, while Wagner's [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] still Mayor, about relationships with Wagner and his people, his staff?

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JOHNSTON: Yeah, I can. I recall feeling great frustration working with them because there wasn't any….There was no attempt, because it was Robert Kennedy, to be difficult I don't think. I think they all accepted the fact that he was Senator and looked on it as a plus. After all, it gave them the Democratic Senator and they had that much more access to things in Washington. There was no dynamism of the sort, in the Wagner administration, that would have been a sort of protagonist against Robert Kennedy. There was just no….

At that point it was an exhausted and sort of stumbling halt. So you didn't get a feeling of hostility or aggressiveness toward the Senator or toward you or any of the people working for him, as much as just incompetence, lack of imagination, fatigue, being overwhelmed really with the city and the whole thing, and kind of exhaustion. If you propose something….

There were some good individual people. I think Milton Mollen—for instance, if you got on a project with him he could be very helpful—and his people in the housing area. Who else? There weren't too many. Screvane [Paul R. Screvane] was reasonably good, although very hard line on the poverty program, very, very unimaginative and unsensitive as far as the political problems in the city, and quite obviously, while impressive, not the man to be mayor the next time around; at least doing the things that nobody who should be mayor would do at that point. Edelstein [Julias C. C. Edelstein] was the great presence in the whole administration at that point. Everything seemed to end up on Juli Edelstein's desk or under his bed somewhere, and as a result he was a great stopper of things and, in a conspiratorial way, implemented things.

It was hard to see very many things that were being accomplished in that year. It was as if something had just run out of gas. For instance, one thing that we did with them was really moving into a vacuum. I can't remember the dates, but I guess it was in June. We had Udall [Stewart L. Udall] come up and take a tour which we had set up and arranged, and to which we invited Wagner and Javits. We got the helicopters and we got all the….We got them from the government, but we arranged to get them. We arranged the tour and we took a tour around the whole of New York City, the five boroughs out to Station Island and Jamaica and my place and Coney Island and then on around. We then toured the city to look at the parks and playgrounds, the idea being that we would get some money from the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation to do a

study—it was a combination of BOR [Bureau of Outdoor Recreation] and HHFA [Housing and Home Finance Agency] at that time. Udall spoke at lunch and we had a lunch at the Tavern-on-the-Green which Eli Guggenheimer [Elinor C. Guggenheimer]

and the Park Association [Central Park Association] helped to put together. Afterward, we formed the committee. I remember the *Herald Tribune* [*New York Herald Tribune*] said this was a real great initiative of Senator Kennedy's. This is an obvious need which Newbold Morris and the people in the administration who were responsible for it had just no sense of, and had not grasped. Of course, this is what Hoving [Thomas P.F. Hoving] understood. And I think probably one of the great successes of Lindsay's [John V. Lindsay] administration was just grasping this, so it wasn't original or particularly perceptive of us. Out of that came the basis for a grant to the city of New York, to the Parks Department, for a study of all the recreational needs and kind of an integrated action program. We worked very hard to come up with the people to run the study. The point of all this, the fascinating part of it, was how difficult it was to deal with the city. It was very difficult, actually, also to deal with the federal government, because you had the two agencies and they were very competitive. It was a new program so they were writing the guidelines as they gave us the grant. But work with the city was terribly discouraging because they just were not there. Finally Eli Guggenheimer and the Planning Commission [City Planning Commission] put it together, but you could just feel very little energy and very little intelligence going into the running of the city.

HACKMAN: Who are the people around town, particularly in that early period and then if you can develop that over the whole four years, that really became helpful to Ryan, to you, to Robert Kennedy in getting things moving in New York?

JOHNSTON: Well, that's an awfully long list.

HACKMAN: Maybe that's too broad.

JOHNSTON: That includes an awful lot of people. What's rather interesting in New York, I think, and what made it possible….I mean, I'm not sure how other people really judge because I was too closely involved to be a good judge of Robert Kennedy's accomplishment in this particular area….

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

JOHNSTON: In New York. So it's hard to….I mean, I certainly wouldn't be a very good impartial judge, even if I were in the right position to look at it. I gather from people like Javits and others that they thought he did a good job and that he got to organize well and was effective. The *New York Times* and other people wrote as if it were the case.

If to the extent that that's true….I think it's really true because he understood that it wasn't so much that you relied on

any individual to really move it along, as that in this city in particular you had so much already in your favor in terms of accomplishing something if you could just bring people together. I think this is true even in Lexington, Kentucky, but it's really truer in New York than any place. First of all, there are so many able people here that what you're talking about is, in many realms, some of the most talented people in the country and some of the most organized, and people with organizations that they can throw into action and other friends that they can bring with them and so on. Those people are isolated from each other by the fact of the city, by the way we live here, much more isolated than their counterparts are in Rochester or Lexington, Kentucky. It's a combination of just the physical way people live: the great density; the number of sub-universes within the big one; all kinds of things; the fact that people commute; the pace of the life; the mobility of things.

Anybody that sits down and says, "All right. We're going to call a meeting on the subject of mental health…." At one point we did all of these: hot breakfasts for the schools for mentally retarded, parks and recreation, UN [United Nations]-community relations, economic development, public housing, a short film theater; almost any one of twenty or thirty different efforts that you want, conservation, air pollution, and so on—any one of those things. If you were a senator from New York and Robert Kennedy—but even without being that—I think it's possible. Just by being right, or more or less on the beam with something, you could get people to come to a meeting who otherwise would never have met each other and would never have joined forces to work together. I think that was really the key to it. Now I could give you a list of about 150 people who were very, very effective. The problem with naming any ten of them is that you don't really….It suggests that there were others that were less important, whereas in fact….I'd be glad to type up a list and just add it.

HACKMAN: Probably easier, if we discuss specific things, to throw in names as we go through.

JOHNSTON: But I think that's the really major difference between Kennedy and Javits or Kennedy and most anybody else in the state so far.

I think in that area he had a great advantage in not being from New York, because he didn't have any alliances here. You didn't have any particular enemies of the sort that you have when you grow up in a community. He didn't have any particular friends on whom you rely

for judgment, perhaps too much; he was pretty independent and free about that. And, of course, I had that same advantage not being from here, so I was able, and he was really able, to say, "All right. We want to work on this education bill, want to make an amendment. Who can we get that's helpful?" You start out without any biases, you begin to get advice, and you really pick them in the most appropriate way. It doesn't mean you don't make a lot of mistakes, but you're far clearer, I think, than probably you would have been had he been doing this in Boston [Boston, Massachusetts].

HACKMAN: Can you remember things coming out of the ’64 campaign, solid commitments that you really felt you had to get right to work on and that you felt you had to treat seriously?

JOHNSTON: Yes, in the whole idea that he was going to look after New York. But I don’t think the whole idea that….I found it very….I really ought to think about it before I say that, but I don’t remember many times, or any times really, where there was a real quid pro quo in terms of support and then something we would do later. Now, that doesn’t mean that there weren’t such things, that Steve Smith didn’t arrange to have something done that I don’t know about. I mean, he’d be a better person to ask that of than me, but to the extent….

First of all, I never was very interested in the strictly political side of it, talking to politicians and so on. I did a lot of it, especially with upstate ones, and I got involved with the city ones and I was with him a lot when he talked to people like Zaretzki [Joseph L. Zaretzki] and Travia [Anthony J. Travia]. It was something that bored me and I think it probably bored him, but he didn’t have any choice. He saw there was more purpose in his doing it than mine. I had things that I could do more effectively, so I did them and I didn’t really get directly involved in that much, even though it would be hard to say that there was a clean and neat separation.

If you were setting up his schedule for the day, which I did pretty much every day, you’d inevitably be dealing with all the political people. I don’t think anything that came out of either of ’64 campaign or….I’d say the only thing was really demands on his time. For instance, fundgivers, important contributors, were often….I mean it was often usually after they’d bitched about not having ever seen him that Steve would call up with a list of eight or ten people. We would try to work it out so that he would go by and see Maurice Tempelsman for half hour or somebody else for a half hour or have a lunch and invite six or eight of them to lunch.

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HACKMAN: You mentioned your contacts with out-state political figures. Does that continue after Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] comes in, to a great degree, or is this up to that point?

JOHNSTON: Pretty much up to that point. What we did then was sort of break it up so we had the Hudson Valley and Long Island and the city and he had the rest of the state. Generally, after that, they worked directly with Jerry or Jerry would funnel them to us or to Dolan, as the case was. That’s the one thing—at least I found—that I thought was awfully satisfying: that there was never much bitching or worry about who had what rights and whether somebody was in somebody else’s territory.

Jerry was a little sensitive initially because we had been working in that area. And I guess Jerry and Phil had some sort of arguments about some things in that area; but I’m not sure about that. But very little, it was very rare between Peter and Adam and me and Joe, later on, Frank [Frank F. Mankiewicz] and Jerry. There was so much work to be done that you really couldn’t care less whether somebody was in, as long as it wasn’t directly screwing up what you were trying to do; and that was very, very rare.

I think the reason for that was both the quantity of work, the amount of work there was, and also the fact that Robert Kennedy was considered to be a fair judge by the people working for him; so there wasn't any sense, I would think, in acting like you were doing more than you were doing or pretending that you were running something that somebody else should be. He wouldn't tolerate that; he was very disciplined, actually, about that part of the….

In the campaign I don't think it held because I don't think they—in the '68 campaign—ever got the breakdown clear enough so that he or anybody else knew what anybody was really responsible for.

The unfortunate part about the campaign and about the attention given the campaign in these books about him is that (at least the recent three or four books written) they talk about Robert Kennedy—because most of them spent the majority of their time with him during the campaign—as if the sort of essential was the one that was in action between March and June of '68. I would think if you were going to judge him as an administrator, as a man who runs something, if your question as a historian or as a person curious about this man was how well could he have run something—aside from his abilities, his charm as a sort of hero of the moment, a cult figure in America—"What were his real capacities in terms of getting things done and

getting people to work?" I think if you look at that period from '64 and '68 and look at the way in which he utilized the very slender resources of his staff, and used them as kind of leverage to get at a far vaster number of people who were either friends, but not working for him, or people who wanted to help but who were not friends and then never worked for him and weren't on his payroll; I think if you look at that closely and see how he did that, you got a real sense of his, probably, true capacity. That's not in any way to diminish his importance as a spokesman on major issues.

HACKMAN: Are there any groups or individuals that you can remember that he doesn't want to work with at all, that he just doesn't like or thinks they're dishonorable or whatever? New York people?

JOHNSTON: Well, I think he was generally bored by the leadership groups, the sort of—how would you describe them?—the people that run these organizations in New York City particularly, for instance, the labor leaders. He loved the labor—he loved to go to the meeting of the hospital workers or get together with a group of just working people somewhere. But with very rare exceptions he had nothing but sort of impatience and boredom in response to the thought of meeting with any of these leaders. Van Arsdale [Harry Van Arsdale, Jr.], Louis Hollander—these people really turned him off. I think to a lesser extent political leaders—Zaretzki, not Travia, because he was really a real person. But I think his feeling in most cases was that they were not really there; there was something predictable and very pompous about them. And often, I must say, often they weren't very sympathetic to him. They were not friendly to begin with and that doesn't make it any jollier. Then probably even the leaders of these groups like the Jewish Women's League, whatever—all of those types are pretty hard to take and were for him.

So I think the answer is that he tried….We found out rather quickly it was a mistake to setup meetings with those sorts of people, even though they seemed to be people that could deliver these groups.

Now, as to any one group as opposed to another, I don't think so. I think he enjoyed, obviously, problems that involved more, well, where he was involved with students or blacks or Puerto Ricans. But even there, for instance, take the Puerto Ricans: we had a number of meetings with Puerto Rican leaders which were just totally boring, in which he didn't make any effort. So it wasn't just a question of rich being boring and the poor being exciting and interesting. The leaders,

the self-appointed and the elected representatives of the Puerto Ricans, are often terribly, terribly uninteresting.

HACKMAN: Would you have to do a lot of explaining for him then? Say, he has an appearance with a group and he's not excited at all or they're not interesting to him, do you have to go back and cover up then and say, "Look he had a bad night," or, "This is the way he is." How do you handle something like that?

JOHNSTON: No. When that happened, I didn't do it because I just felt that he….I didn't think you could really do that persuasively. I think you just had to say, "That was a bomb," and it was probably your fault for setting it up. Then just try to learn whatever you could. But I don't think you could persuade anybody.

There were some times. There were a few instances like that where a guy would travel, a priest would come all the way from some northern regions of Canada with a project for the John F. Kennedy hockey rink. He'd arrive and get put off for four days, and he'd finally get to see him and the Senator would just look at him and say, "Thanks,: or something; wouldn't say any more. Then you felt that this guy had broken his back to get down here with a huge model and the money they'd collected and everything. It was just not, his response….I mean again you blamed yourself for not….Because obviously if you knew all that—you probably hadn't told him enough, or he just wasn't there and wasn't with it that day and so you'd make….Then you really would try to.

Generally where he was curt or terse it was going to happen again with the same group; it wasn't usually inadvertent. It was usually just that he wasn't going to make an effort for them. I remember once in Washington—and I'd seen it; it's happened a lot—where a guy came over. We were working on a program with Cornell [Cornell University] in Ithaca [Ithaca, New York] on agriculture and Peter Edelman and I were developing it. A guy came over from the Agriculture Department [United States Department of Agriculture] sent by Freeman [Orville Lothrop Freeman] to brief us, I think it was on the new milk program that they were developing. He got off on some part of it or some subject that was semi-related but not really. The Senator cut him sort within thirty seconds and said, "Listen, you're wasting our time. This isn't what we asked about. Will you please go back; if you've got to, come back but don't waste our time." The guy didn't say anymore, just got up and left. I think it was rather healthy to do that to this sir, because obviously the guy hadn't prepared what he was speaking about. It was rather rude, too, but you were in a dilemma. I admired it in a way. So I

just felt I wouldn't encourage it. I don't say I'm not sure that I would have done the same thing. I thought that there wasn't so much of the other floating around, of being so warm and not wanting to hurt anybody's feelings, that it's rather healthy to see somebody cut through it all. And it wasn't just because he was powerful; he happened to be right and the guy was wrong.

He very rarely did that sort of thing when he was wrong. The problem is that when you do that publicly, even when you're right, it looks mean. It wasn't good for "his image," but I thought it was a rather healthy tonic for people that are like that and just for the whole atmosphere, generally, and for us working for him; it made you much more alert. Like once I set up a dinner, which was a disaster, with a group of so-called civil leaders. It was the only time he took Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] to dinner in New York at a function at a private home, somebody's home for dinner, which was not for fun, for pleasure. It was so awful and people were drunk. I mean it was all very elegant and everything but they'd all had a little too much to drink and they were asking the rudest, stupidest questions you could image, yet in a kind civilized way. He just sat there and refused to make any effort to defend himself.

I thought that was a great quality, and I think it was a great limitation, too. It meant that—whereas Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] will be out reading for people and saying, "How are ya?" and Javits would be busy and Lindsay would be busy explaining themselves and justifying themselves—Kennedy would just sit there and look at them and he wouldn't move his little finger. I think in the end…It's like the time on Roger Mudd's [Roger H. Mudd] interview with him when he was asked why people were angry with him or why so many people felt strongly against him. He just sat for about thirty seconds and mumbled, "I don't know." That I think got through to people as being rather real. Real in the good sense—he wasn't going to spend a lot of time justifying and beating his breast and defending himself, boring people.

HACKMAN: Is there any difference in the way he looks at people like Zaretzki or Steingut [Stanley Steingut] or more regular guys and the way he looks at the reformers?

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

HACKMAN: I mean in terms of being interested in them, is he more interested in the reformers as issue-oriented people or do they turn him off too?

JOHNSTON: No, I think they bored him as issue-oriented. I think he liked the reformers more as individuals. He'd much rather spend a half hour with a cup of coffee with three or four—Ronnie Eldridge [Ronnie M. Eldridge], Jerry Kretchmer [Jerome Kretchmer], Al Blumenthal [Albert H. Blumenthal] and two of three other people like that—than he would with an individual Zaretzki, Steingut, whatever. On the other hand, I think, as a group he found it impossible, relatively, almost impossible to work with the reformers, and much better and much more satisfying to sit down and work something out with the regular people. Most of them will tell you the same thing; they really are difficult as a group.

The Silverman [Samuel J. Silverman] thing was the best example possible. Really they had everything going for them and yet it just took an ultimatum from him to mobilize. He did like the reformers; he liked the brightness and they fun they had.

HACKMAN: Was there always the idea that you would appoint someone upstate or is that something that evolves?

JOHNSTON: No. He announced when he ran, or right after he was elected, that he'd have an office in Syracuse. He actually asked Walter Sheridan [Walter J. Sheridan] to do it and Walter said he'd do it and then didn't do it or decided not to. Then he got Jerry.

HACKMAN: Can you think of kinds of things that you or other people up here came up with, proposals to get him involved in things that turn him off, that he doesn't want to do? Projects or just causes?

JOHNSTON: There are very few things that he didn't see some merit in. I can't recall—I forgot it rather quickly—anything where he just said out-of-hand, "That's a bad idea." Generally, whether you proposed a short-film theater in the UN area or a food stamp program for Westchester County or….It would have to be a pretty out-of-it idea or something without any sense at all or no political judgment, some lack of judgment, to have him say to you, "We don't want to do that," because I think he really did operate on the theory that if you were doing something, it was better than nothing. Chances are….Now, he would establish priorities among the various things you were doing and say, "I want that done." That implied that the things he didn't say he wanted done were less important, but if you could work it out so somebody could work on those other things….I'm trying to think of….

A Christmas party we had after the first two years—we did it two years. It had been originally his idea but we did it so poorly;

it was such a mess really that by the third year we both agreed that it would have been much better to not have it. We didn't; we just skipped it. But that was just because we hadn't been able to make it work right. I think there were things that he never really took hold of, that were pro forma efforts.

For instance, for a long time I pushed, we had Carter Burden working on an effort with the labor movement to get friendly with them. He agreed to it in principle and he'd go along with it, but he never got worked up about it and it never went anywhere. I don't think it was really his….Well, now I think it just was 'cause it was difficult and they weren't interested and he wasn't.

I suppose the major area like that was our efforts to get him interested in picking, in helping improve the caliber of candidates that were running for New York offices. Then you met a kind of stone wall in a funny way, and I could never figure out why. He just didn't seem….Somebody asked me about that the other day about whether it was because he didn't want any competition in the state, really didn't want to develop strong candidates; or whether it

was because he just didn't want to spend the time on it personally, felt there were more important things than that; or whether he just thought it was hopeless and you weren't going to get any good ones by that process. They would either develop or not. I'm not sure which of those three reasons is true. I suppose it's a mixture of all of them. The result was that you could talk yourself rather blue in the face about, say, the last case, the ease with which Lindsay could be beaten—this was two years ago—if you could come up with a good Democrat to run against him. He tolerated it. He didn't say, "Don't work on it," but I mean you felt that he thought, "That's very naïve." You know, naïve to think that Lindsay's going to be easy to be and naïve to think that you can come up with anybody that can beat him, which is I suppose even where he put the emphasis between the two. I think those sorts of efforts left him kind of cold. We got together a group, got some contribution, got a girl to work on researching white papers on Lindsay. We had a group that included Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel] and Bayard Rustin [Bayard Taylor Rustin] and Paul Braddon [Paul E. Braddon], Judiah Gribetz, Eli Guggenheimer and others. And out of that we were hoping to get a candidate—and Debs Meyers. I think he just felt it was kind of a kind you went through and probably didn't end up with much.

The other area where….Yeah, now that I think of it, there was one other area where suggestions generally fell on sort of deaf ears and that was in the realm of anything to do with foreign policy. If he asked you a question about it or if you got out of a specific

point that was of any interest, that was one thing, but I think generally he felt that he didn't want anybody who wasn't writing a speech….I think this applied really to Adam and Peter as well as to us, but even more to use because we weren't involved in the specific legislative or speech-writing parts that got into foreign policy. I think he generally felt that he had much better direct sources in McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and Maxwell Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] and Harriman [William Averell Harriman] and all of those people than anything we could give him, or let's just say, anything I could give him. Whereas I could tell him what was going on in Harlem [Manhattan, New York] or who the best guy in community mental health was, he knew that I couldn't tell him anything new about Laos or Europe. He didn't resent it if I had an idea or thought about it. He'd be glad to talk; we talked about those things, but I don't think he really took too seriously any….For instance, we were setting up the Lawyers' Associates program when I mentioned that they might work on foreign policy—this is something that a lot of them were interested in—he was very….He said no, he didn't think that would be worthwhile, and he really didn't want any help from us.

HACKMAN: At the time Ryan left, any question that you'd take….Were you a natural pick, I guess, to take over? I mean do you know if anyone else was considered?

JOHNSTON: Well, I don't know. When he did leave I said that I didn't….See, I didn't have any desire to run an office because I realized, as I think it was, that it was as much of a nuisance to be running it as it was a pleasure and a satisfaction or a positive responsibility, because it meant that everybody called you and then whenever there was a problem….And you had to spend a lot more time on the political thing and I was interested in working on Bedford-Stuyvesant by that point and had plenty to do on that. So

then I left it with Joe, and then I talked to the Senator and said I'd much rather not have it be me, but we just would get some other people in and give them specific responsibilities and I thought they could all work….I didn't really see, because Phil hadn't run it as if he'd run it, I didn't see any need really to run it that way. I thought it was much better and I thought the pleasure of working for Senator Kennedy was the pleasure of dealing directly with him and nothing through somebody; I appreciated the fact that I didn't have to deal with Joe to get to him but I could just talk to him about it. So my thought was to just do that and I don't think I was ever—if the newspapers hadn't said I was running the office….Joe Dolan thought I was, just as a practical matter, because it made it easier for him. But I don't think Senator Kennedy would have ever….I don't think he really ran it that way or

conceived of it that way. I think something that Earl Graves [Earl G. Graves] or Carter Burden or Dall Forsythe [Dall W. Forsythe] was working on or a volunteer, if they were working on it for him, I don't think he felt that—in the sense that Joe was running the Washington office where you had this huge sort of factory of people turning out mail—that I was in charge of it, in that sense.

On the other hand, the problem is that in a much smaller way we got involved in many of the sort of logistical problems, the same sort of responsibilities that the Washington office had. And at that point, then, you did need somebody who would take the blame if it went wrong and who would delegate somebody to do something. It kind of evolved. I doubt, frankly, whether they thought of somebody else to put in over me, so much as whether they just though, "Let's just leave it fluid," which was my thought and which would have made a lot of sense if we'd been able to do it on a sort of project by project thing.

HACKMAN: How did Carter Burden and Earl Graves and Forsythe come in?

JOHNSTON: Well, let's see. I can't remember the sequence but Earl was an advance man, I think in the '64 campaign, and very helpful in Brooklyn [Brooklyn, New York], just generally. We had set out deliberately to find somebody. We had a policy of getting some black people and Puerto Ricans in the office. That's how we got Jackie Greenidge [Jacqueline Greenidge] and Millie Williams [Mildred Williams], who were black secretaries; that's how we got Cabrera [Angelina Cabrera], who's a Puerto Rican secretary. Then we figured that we just better have somebody who was black—a man on the staff, not driving a car nor typing a typewriter. Then the idea was, "Who?" and I went through a whole bunch of people including George Wiley [George A. Wiley], who used to be with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] in Syracuse and is now head of the National Welfare Mothers' League, and a lot of other black people. It was terribly difficult to come up with somebody who was willing to work for Senator Kennedy and at the same time independent and really a spokesman for, or not a spokesman, but a representative in terms of younger black people, because a lot of them just didn't….I don't mean that they had any ideological problem in working for him, but they temperamentally found it difficult to conceive of themselves working in a rather relatively low paying job, hard hours, for one man who was white. A lot of the most able people….While we never got around to talking about it in those terms, you sensed that that

was a problem. We were competing with a very low salary for somebody who, if he was black and good, could get a salary pretty much twice, and a job with a lot of

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good responsibilities and a lot more security than what….Then I must say I wasn't very good at recruiting people, I don't think, anyway; I didn't think that I was ever very good at it. Earl looked awfully attractive and so after a lot of interviewing and checking and so on and finding some problems in his record and then overlooking them and getting on into it, we ended up hiring him.

Then Carter really got hired by the Senator, who just had met him at a party and understood that he was interested as a law student, or just getting out of law school and was interested in politics, and said, "Why don't you come to work for me?"

Dall was, I think, an intern one summer and then a volunteer during the year and terribly bright and terribly good and so he came to work when we had a chance to hire somebody else.

HACKMAN: How well did Graves work out over time?

JOHNSTON: Well, it's hard to know. I think the fact that we had somebody black on our staff was probably a plus, as a first proposition. I think the fact that it was Earl as opposed to somebody else probably was less than satisfactory. It was difficult because he's a very able and attractive fellow in many ways but he's got a manner that gets a lot of other, especially people who were subordinate to him, very upset. I think everybody from John Seiganthaler and Burke Marshall, who just worked with him briefly at the King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] funeral in Atlanta, to the secretaries who worked with him every day found him difficult. The Senator often commented that he was very tough on the drivers. On the other hand, he's a very well organized fellow in terms of the logistics of getting something moving and setting up, advancing something. I think he's an attractive fellow to talk to and to be with. So it's a mixed bag; I don't know. I'm not that sure how somebody else would have worked out, and I'm not anybody to judge. Who knows how effective I was, or how many bad things I did during that same period. But my sense is that, from people talking in the campaign….Let's put it this way, I would hope that—he's my choice; I mean, I chose him for the job—I would hope that I would somehow have a little bit better sense about how to pick people.

HACKMAN: I ask primarily because we're interviewing him, or we've done several, and just to help historians sort of put it in perspective. Maybe the most useful thing is just for you to sort of define really his responsibilities and how much independence he had to operate in these areas.

JOHNSTON: He was kept in a pretty tight….He never really had

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completely the same independence that, say, even Carter and Dall did, because we found that very often he'd exceed what had been initially

given him, and then we'd find that we'd end up with either a greater commitment than we thought we had in something, or more people angry than we thought we ought to have. Then we'd have to sort of rethink it with him, and often the Senator would bring it up and say, "Better maybe talk to him or try to…." I don't want to describe it as ever anything that was very, very unfriendly, but there was a sense that he, just as I was throughout that period, was learning a lot, had a lot more to learn than we had to teach anybody. The thing of it was though that Earl would just ride rather roughshod over people and had what I think it was Joe Dolan or John Nolan [John E. Nolan], I can't remember which, called "tunnel vision," and as a result often left people, secretaries and other people, in tears. Yet, as I say, he could be effective in the given situation. So our effort in working together with him was to define some of these problems with other people and some of the problems of just judgment about things. Then at the same time, on the other hand, to limit him to work in areas where we could pretty well watch the progress of things. So, he was never given, for instance, the sort of wide authority, even to work in the black community. We tried to pin it to a specific part. Now that isn't to say that he didn't also work in the black community. In the campaign he was sent in to do voter registration, but very rare just to move around the community.

HACKMAN: Do you recall many philosophical differences that he had either with you or with other people all across the board in the Kennedy camp, primarily on race thing, but among other things?

JOHNSTON: No. I don't recall. I think they were generally far more sort of tactical differences than any substantive or strategic. I think it was generally a question of how to get from A to B. Now he might….Of course, I could be wrong, and there might have been in his mind substantial differences and we were insensitive to them. But as a rule he was, I thought, very supple on matters of that wherever it was a question involving something like that. Although I don't think anybody ever asked him, as far as I know, to do anything that he would have felt was, or could have legitimately felt was inconsistent or inappropriate, although he could well have felt that and we might not have known it. I think generally the real problem were ones of just how did he achieve what we both agreed was worth doing without upsetting a lot of people along the route. The best instance is when the Senator would come back a number of times and just say, "Earl, you've got to stop yelling at the

driver." He'd be telling the driver, "Move quicker." The Senator would just say, "You know that he's got a tougher job than you do. You don't have to yell at him." That would make its point, but the difficulty was then he would probably be very apt to repeat the same thing three or four days later.

HACKMAN: How does the New York office get involved in political campaigns in New York? I guess the Beame [Abraham D. Beame]-Lindsay thing, and then the O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor] thing.

JOHNSTON: Not directly. Well, directly, but not principally. Generally, Robert Kennedy, first of all, was rather lukewarm about the two races, as you know—Beame and O'Connor. As a result, he didn't really commit that much of himself to it, even though he spent a lot of time on it. But even more than that, even if he'd been very enthusiastic, I think he felt that his office was something that was there and had enough problems and responsibilities that it had to run on its own, and that he probably couldn't any more pull people out of it to work in a campaign, that he could, say, take somebody from Washington.

Also the types of people that were in it were not very good in campaigns compared to—I mean if you take me as compared to, say, Bruno. Bruno is much more helpful, useful in a campaign than I would be so he would get pulled into whatever was going on. He was probably, of all the people in our whole office, the fellow who had the most single set of skills that would be useful in a campaign. Second, would be speechwriters; people like, say, Peter would go. He wouldn't put Adam in, but he'd let Peter go. Then probably third, somebody, a sort of press fellow could help out. But I'd say his commitment was pretty mild to those campaigners in terms of people, in terms of his own time.

Then, actually the other thing is that you had Steve Smith, who really did most of the political work in the state. There was anything important to be done politically, I wouldn't do it; that's the simplest way to put it. I would be there and I could bring a message from Zaretzki to Travia or Travia to Kennedy, but I wasn't involved in it. Then what you had was, Steve would get involved or decide who would get involved and how much he would be involved, and then it would work out of that. Actually if there was something to be done, I would go over to Steve's office and work with him there. So it's not to say that we didn't get involved, but it was much less than you might think at first glance.

HACKMAN: How was Smith to work with on things like this, Steve Smith?

JOHNSTON: Well, on political things I think very good really. It's a little hard to judge because I never really….First of all, a lot of fun to work with, a very attractive and very….I think that's most people's impression; it certainly was mine. Even if it didn't work out, what you were working on, you enjoyed the time you'd spent on it. I was just thinking the other day about a project that I was going to try to get him involved in working on now which involves sanitation in the city here. I thought, well, even if it doesn't work out, we will have had a good time of it. Of course, this is less true in a campaign where everybody takes it all so seriously and you can't afford to, maybe, have that frivolous approach to it. But generally, and even in the campaign, there's a lot of fun in his method of going after something. I found it difficult to actually finish up something with him; I found that hard to do. I think probably that was a function of the fact that most of the things I wanted him to do were very far down the list on his priority: raising money for a park in the Bronx, which we never seemed to be able to do. He had things which were real imperatives, and these seemed like rather gratuitous efforts that didn't have any deadline, didn't have any real inevitability about them. So I would be working with him on them and he'd say, "I'll follow up on"—something. I'd say, "Fine." So it would get kind of….We'd both go off on something else and come back.

So it's a rather incomplete….But I don't think that's a comment on him as a person or as a worker so much as just the fact that he had bigger fish to fry.

HACKMAN: Are there many things like this, say, raising money for the park, or whether it was sanitation in that period or whatever, that you might be working on like this, and you might be working with Steve Smith on like this, that the Senator would never get involved in?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, a lot. Yeah, because I would only bother him or get him into things where he really could make a contribution. I wouldn't be likely to undertake anything of any importance without letting him know that we're doing it, but it would be something that would be done in one sentence and he'd say, "That's fine," or whatever. There were a lot of those things.

HACKMAN: Do you report to him on paper periodically? I mean is there like a monthly report that goes in or something?

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JOHNSTON: Initially, we did do that to Joe Dolan in the first three months, but after that it became kind of more paperwork that was worthwhile. In the beginning we had three categories: things underway, things completed, and things about to be begun or something. Then as it worked out what I would do….And I think everybody that worked with him had one way or another probably the same approach, although Joe Dolan put more things on paper. But if it was something like the Bedford-Stuyvesant thing or anything which was a major project I'd write a memo about it and then he'd read it, but I was much more apt on most things to just have a yellow pad of about twenty things to go over on the way in from the airport or on the way out, or in the apartment. So that when he was up here—he was here two or three days a week—I'd be with him in the morning usually and at night and then a good part of the day. Joe and I often talk about it because he'd often get me to bring up things that he hadn't had a chance to catch him with in Washington. I had a better chance in many ways to get a lot of things before him than, say, Joe did in Washington, certainly Jerry Bruno in Syracuse, just because you had a kind of captive audience in the car and it wasn't quite as busy in some ways as it was in Washington.

HACKMAN: One other thing on operations and that's the press: who handles the press? How much time do you spend with New York press and how much is done out of Washington?

JOHNSTON: Well, I didn't….You inevitably ran into them in two different ways: one, organizing them to get somewhere where he was going to be, and that way it was simply a question of calling them or getting the story to them. That was just like mailing out to anybody else or any other group really, just about, although you had to know which ones to call and something about the papers and the timing to get out the release. But we did all of that or most of it; when it was involved with New York, we'd do that from here, getting out copies of speeches and stuff. I suppose the other type of relationship is where

they'd come to you looking for something, usually an article about him, or, in some cases, some specific subject, or some interest in the office and how it was run, or something of that order. Then you really had to give them whatever time it took, and you really….Wherever possible if they could see Wes Barthelmes [A. Wesley Barthelmes, Jr.] or Frank, I would get them on to him, because I found it rather time-consuming and not very fruitful in terms of what I was doing. And I didn't think that I did….I thought Frank was probably better at it—or get them to the Senator himself. I mean I found it generally sort of boring

for me, and probably not as interesting for them as it would be from somebody else. There were some exceptions to that—people like Breslin [James Breslin] and Hamill [Peter VanVechten Hamill]. There are some really good first class fellows who were reporters and who were up here but I found a lot of them to be very uninteresting and really pretty pedestrian in terms of their questions.

HACKMAN: Did Barthelmes and Mankiewicz do a reasonably good job, from what you can see, of giving enough time to the New York press?

JOHNSTON: Well, Wes never really got in gear as far as I could see. I guess he had so much going on in Washington, trying to get hold of that, and then by that time he'd left. Then when Frank came on….Yeah, I think he did a pretty good job. It's tough, because it's a tough job. I think he hit into a period where there were lots of moments for snafus and all, and where there were a lot of very—where the Senator was….Where Vietnam was so important and where all of that was….I really am not in a very good position to judge how well he did. I know he did well in a personal way with the press. I had heard the Senator complain about him quite a bit, but I think that might be normal for people. I think if I were in his position I might have complained about whoever was my press secretary. It just may be a very thankless job in that way.

HACKMAN: Do you remember specific kinds of complaints? I mean, what was he usually upset about?

JOHNSON: Well, I don't know. I think he didn't….I'm not sure what he thought of his judgment. I think he….I don't know. I guess I really shouldn't—it's not worth going into all that now because it's not….But I think, and as I say, it has two sides to it because it was a very difficult time for Senator Kennedy, in all that period, in terms of reaction to his position and the pressures on him. Frank, I think, got caught in the middle of a number of different events and misunderstandings and things where he either did something or avoided, or didn't get around to doing something that the Senator thought could have been handled better, and as a result rather sort of showed his impatience.

HACKMAN: Did he talk a lot about the *New York Times*?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, yeah, quite a bit. The *New York Times* became kind of a joke in a way with us because it was the—not a joke

that didn't lack in certain bitterness. The *New York Times* seemed, especially the editorial page, to be consistently difficult as far as he was concerned and very….We had lots of….Of course, a couple of things you have to remember: One is that until 1966 there was the *Herald Tribune*; so until that time a lot of our problems were a lot less major, not because the *Herald Tribune* carried anywhere near the same amount of weight nationally or even locally as the *Times*, but it did offer a counter, another source of news and another source of daily editorial comment, but principally another source of news. Its stories would oblige the *Times* to change its stories and this was a major factor in any politician's life, especially anybody that was in the news as much, and in as many controversial ways, as Robert Kennedy was over the different months that he was here.

When the *Tribune* went out the *Times* had absolutely no interest—I mean as far as we could see—in paying any attention to anything. It wasn't totally blind or totally unfair. There were a lot of good reporters and a lot of very fair stories, probably many more than weren't. But there were too many times when you just felt that it was a sloppy, complacent and arrogant newspaper and that there was no way, you just had no way of dealing with it.

I remember Dick Witkin [Richard Witkin] was writing a story, which ran for ten or twelve days, about how Kennedy was going to run against Javits in the constitutional convention. This would have been possible because they each could have been head-of-the-slate candidates and this would have been the first….This was a great story, or so thought Witkin. It was a rather interesting story, these two great vote-getters in a head-on clash in a state-wide contest. As it turned out Wagner ran on the Democratic slate and beat Javits, although it was very little publicized in the end. The point was Kennedy never intended to run and said from the beginning he wouldn't run any conditions; that was that from almost the beginning; there was a little hesitation. Yet we could never persuade Witkin—this is not of any great moment except to give you an idea of the attitude of the *Times*—that this wasn't true, nothing the Senator would say. It wasn't that he reported that somebody else said, he said that Senator was planning to run, and had said this or that which led on to that, and he didn't claim to have any other source of information. It was just based on these statements.

Finally one day the Senator got really angry at Witkin at the airport and said, "Are you deaf? I told you this three or four times." Then I called him about two nights later and said, "Have you seen the story in the *Daily News*?" I said, "It's on page thirty-eight and

they've got the facts." He said, "Tom, nobody reads the *Daily News*." And that was their attitude essentially: nobody reads the *Daily News* and it doesn't happen until the *New York Times* covers it. As Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] said, "The real problem with the *New York Times* is there's not two of them" That's what we were up against. But you put that together, that ability to be arrogant and not to make any change, with the attitude of Oakes [John B. Oakes] where, for instance, he had an editorial called "Kennedy on Kennedy," which was a real classic. He criticized Robert Kennedy for his position on Vietnam, which was absolutely in every essential the same that the *Times* had espoused a month before, exactly a month before in the same editorial column. We had Abe Rosenthal [A.M. Rosenthal] and Arthur Gelb over for a breakfast

one morning, the Senator did, and he showed them the Xeroxes and they looked and they said, "Of course it's ridiculous." But they said, "What can we tell you? That is not our department. You know the story about why that's the way it is." They weren't just being nice guys about it; they really were as chagrined as we were. And there were many, many examples of that.

[BEGIN SIDE I, TAPE II]

HACKMAN: Yeah, I guess the first thing is: just how do you happen to go on both these trips?

JOHNSTON: Well, really I don't know how I went on the first one, and I guess the reason I went on the second one was because I'd been on the first one. I think the first one just happened almost by accident, that I was just around and John Nolan was going down to Latin America and he said, "We need somebody to go." I think they'd asked somebody else; I don't remember who even, but I think there was somebody else who couldn't go—Tom Hanan or somebody, or Tim Hanan.

HACKMAN: Tim Hanan [Tim Hannon], yeah.

JOHNSTON: But I'm not sure; maybe they talked about asking him. Then the Senator said, would I like to go and I said, "I'd love to go." So then I just went. We really didn't know much about each other; he didn't know much about me and I didn't know him well before that trip. I just went with John. I guess, let's see, I went to Mexico and then….We just planned to go and we went different….We went to Mexico City together and then split up and took different parts of the….I went to Venezuela and he went down the other side and we met up, and split up, and then met up in Brazil. He had advanced Lima and Chile, and I'd done Argentina

and Venezuela, and together we did Brazil. So among other things it was a very big—I thought at the time and looking back on it—a rather risky, rather imprudent thing to do, to send me down there; although I guess he must have had some idea that I wouldn't have done badly, but I wasn't sure where he got that idea.

HACKMAN: Any instructions? I mean, what really had to be done? Who outlined what had to be done?

JOHNSTON: Well, no. John understood it and he and I talked about it. What really had to….It came out really in conversations with him. The Senator just said, "Work with John." I guess the idea was that it would be up to John Nolan to see whether I was going to be helpful or not, and to what extent we could count on me to do something. He went over what kinds of things we wanted to do. We had examples of itineraries from each of the embassies. We were to fit into those itineraries things that we thought would be useful and helpful and interesting to him and then get rid of things that we thought were boring; cut it down and then make it all work logistically; and try to keep friends as much as possible

with the State Department [United States Department of State] along the way but not, explicitly, not to keep friends with anybody, including the ambassador if it resulted in making his trip less interesting, or taking away from it the character that he wanted, and had had in other trips.

HACKMAN: What did he really want to do? Was that ever stated clearly?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. He wanted, first of all, to avoid a lot of boring embassy meals and meals with heads of state. That's a rather major accomplishment just to do that if you're a traveling senator, especially one as well known as he was. So that was his first objective. Then second is to get out and really find out what was happening by meeting a lot of different groups form a lot of different sections of the country and sections of the different classes and different laboring and student groups, and not to be simply involved with whoever the government thought he should see at any time; to meet the most interesting individuals in any one of those countries. So, for instance, in Brazil it was not simply to have him meet the union leaders and the student leaders, but also to met Gilberto Freyre [Gilberto de Mello Freyre] or Candido [Antônio Candido] or Mendes [Murilo Mendes] or, well, any three or four other really interesting people there, and spend some time with them, not just to do it in the….I think the emphasis was on having something that came out right publicly, but equally important, that gave him an experience which was something real and not just a sort of passing through the country.

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HACKMAN: Who was he looking to for advice on what kinds of people to see and where to go, I mean back in the States?

JOHNSTON: Well, I think Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] was very important on giving him that advice. There wasn't anybody really in the State Department that he thought much of at that time. Thomas Mann [Thomas Clifton Mann] was there; he didn't have much respect for his judgment or the politics that they were implementing then. I think Bill Rogers [William D. Rogers], the fellow who had been head of the Alliance [Alliance for Progress], was very important in helping set it up. I think individuals—as they did with his trip to South Africa and I think with everything—individuals popped up with ideas; different, rather unpredictable sometimes. Out of it all, he began to get a sort of a pattern together. I think Dick was principal. Then he had a lot of ideas of his own about it….For instance, I think the idea of going to all the barriadas in Latin America, just about, was really probably his. Nobody had to suggest that he do that.

HACKMAN: Why so many of them?

JOHNSTON: I think he just felt that that was the right thing for him to do in terms of the public character of the trip, that it could too easily become a thing isolated, for people; and he felt that. So one thing was just the kind of point he wanted to make while he was down there, and that was both a point back here in this country and also a point with regard to the Alliance and the battle that he saw it in, or the battle he felt it was. He thought that by being there….It didn't do any good when you were in Chile to have been to a

slum in Peru; you had to go do it again in Santiago [Santiago, Chile], and so on every day. So you were always….Then I think also those were places where he felt the most warmth and the most meaning and—this is maybe most important all—where President Kennedy had meant the most to those people.

HACKMAN: What kind of problems did you have in that first go-around with the embassies or any other people in setting the thing up?

JOHNSTON: Well, no problem at all in Venezuela and very little problem in Argentina. John had, I think, some problems in Peru. We both had, eventually, some real problems in Brazil because we were there at a particularly shaky time. While I was up setting up the visit to Brazilia [Brazilia, Brazil], he was going to visit the Supreme Court and speak on November twenty-second in front of the Brazilian Senate and House. The government eliminated both, or suspended both, and so it eliminated our day in Brazilia. It also

indicates the kind of difficulty with which you were working and the fact that we then got into some rather basic judgments with the ambassador: number one, whether he should come at all. Once that was resolved affirmatively—and which John and I really had to figure out—then if he was going to come and spend five days in Brazil, how closely could he identify with that military regime. And there we got into some very fundamental disagreements with Ambassador Gordon [Lincoln Gordon], who felt that this regime was not that bad and it had to be understood; that in the dynamics of Brazil it made a great deal of sense for Senator Kennedy to be pretty closely identified with them and, most of all, to steer clear of any association with any groups that weren't sympathetic or—that's a little strong—that were overtly unsympathetic. We felt that, even perhaps in the dynamics of Brazil, it might not be altogether unhealthy for Senator Kennedy to be seen with and give encouragement to other elements of the country. Even while we might not be competent to make that judgment, we were quite sure that in other countries in Latin America—if he was exclusively involved with the military regime of Brazil, at that time a very oppressive one and a very unattractive one after these acts in November of '65—that would not be a very good thing for the United States or for Senator Kennedy or for the Alliance in the rest of Latin America. So we were into some very long discussions, many of which were resolved and then changed, and it was a lot of back and forth. I don't think in the end that Ambassador Gordon was very happy with us and we weren't' very happy with him.

HACKMAN: During the trip itself did you make all the stops with him or how did you move…

JOHNSTON: All but the two, one in Peru and one in Chile, where he went out from the capital. Then I was working on the next part of the trip and stayed with Adam, in both cases, in Lima [Lima, Peru] and in Santiago. One of those was Cuzco in Peru and the other was Concepcion in Chile.

HACKMAN: The student thing.

JOHNSTON: The student, yeah. I was in there. John Seigenthaler and Dick Goodwin were there, Bill vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel].

HACKMAN: How did he pick? Well, Goodwin is fairly obvious. Why do you think he picked Seigenthaler and vanden Heuvel to go along? Maybe it's a good time for you to talk a little bit about the vanden Heuvel relationship.

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JOHNSTON: Yeah. Dick Goodwin he picked because, number one, Dick would be good to go anywhere with. He's very bright and the Senator enjoyed his company and found him very able and helpful in lots of ways, and in this case he had a particular knowledge of Latin America. Seigenthaler, I think, he just really enjoyed having him with him; he enjoyed being with him, found that his judgment was extremely good—good sense—and that he was fun to be with. I think Bill he found that he was fun to be with primarily. I don't think he really counted on him to be that much of a political arbiter or a spokesman. I think he enjoyed….Bill was very light and full of jokes and I think Bill contributed a lot just by the fact that he was rather frivolous and fun and jolly, at times when everybody else could be rather grim.

HACKMAN: Did you get involved in things like which press people you'd take along? How does that work?

JOHNSTON: You mean from the U.S.?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

JOHNSTON: Well, no. We didn't have any real control over that. We just would say what the schedule was and people would get named to it. Now, I mean he might have been able to get somebody to name somebody to go, but that would have been a pretty tricky thing to get involved with. I think, in some cases he would say to a reporter, "Why don't you get them to send you?" You know, just kind of like, "Why don't you come along with us?" Then that guy would hustle back to his desk and say, "What if I got to go on this trip?" But that was a very small percentage.

HACKMAN: How concerned was he with the way the press, the American press was handling the trip?

JOHNSTON: Very.

HACKMAN: How would he keep up during the trip?

JOHNSTON: Not very well, just very unorganized really. We just got clippings from people at home in letters often, and then sometimes if something bad—or, in our terms, not helpful was done in the press—came up, then somebody

would send a cable or something. But it was rather haphazard, and the cable might or might not get there. For instance, there was a story written from Argentina about some internal, local Democratic thing he was going to do in New York based supposedly on a story that he had told somebody on a plane

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between Chile and Argentina. That was upsetting and he paid attention to that. He obviously was aware of how important coverage was to him back in his country.

HACKMAN: How did speeches get written? Was there a lot of speech writing at the trip went on or was there much preparation?

JOHNSTON: No, I'd say there was some preparation but most of it seemed to develop, in both trips with the trip itself. I organized a whole book of sort of ideas about each country before we went, and material for speeches, and I think nobody paid any attention to it at all. I gave it to Adam; I know he never looked at it. I think Bill Rogers might have, but I don't think it….What you found was, with the exception of the speech in South Africa, Cape Town, that somehow it took being there to really….First of all, it took Adam generally being within two to three days of any deadline for a speech to really get worked up about writing it, and the Senator probably the same amount of pressure to get worked up about having Adam write it. So that meant that you were usually writing it for the next country, or for that country depending on how long you were there.

HACKMAN: Did Walinsky write most of those things?

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

HACKMAN: Goodwin didn't write a lot?

JOHNSTON: Goodwin wrote very little, almost nothing. He looked at all of them and gave ideas and had good ideas about them, but Goodwin tended to give general advice and to sort of be around and help on different things.

HACKMAN: What do you remember about Pedro Sanjuan [Pedro A. Sanjuan]? Do you know him?

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

HACKMAN: How much help is he, or what kind of role does he have?

JOHNSTON: Well, he didn't have a very….He was a very pleasant and not very well organized fellow, but a very nice and attractive man who seemed to….I don't remember him being that involved in much except maybe in helping translate on some things, and kind of helping. I shouldn't say that he wasn't….No, that isn't right. He was involved and he was helpful, but I

guess not in the way that Dick was, by any means, and not in that line.

One of the very funny things was that Dick set up an interview with some poets and intellectuals. Has anybody told you about the Chile and the Peru….

HACKMAN: Yeah, I think someone's mentioned it but….

JOHNSTON: Where they had a meeting in the basement in Lima and the Senator went there. This was sort of the elite, sort of like the left side reform and intellectuals of Lima. They all were attacking the U.S. and oil interests of the Rockefellers and the Rockefellers. Finally he got so annoyed that he said, "God, you're sitting around here on your tails in this basement in Peru." And he said, "Why don't you just get off them and go ahead and nationalize oil refineries? If that's what you want to do, why don't you just do it and quit talking about it?" And said, "In our country we eat Rockefellers for breakfast." Of course, three days later when we were in Santiago this all appeared in the weekly, left newspaper back in Lima. It had been recorded under the table. So by the time….

It was really funny because, of course, there was a lot of chagrin and a lot of annoyance in the embassy. They'd been working hard to keep all of this thing under control. By the time we got to Argentina, there was a reporter who came up and said, "Senator Kennedy, I understand that you and Mr. Rockefeller have breakfast together." There were a lot of funny, kind of disorganized and confusing….The trip to the Amazon was really full of kind of things that nobody had foreseen and rather interesting things that made it….It wasn't what you'd call a jolly trip in the sense that it wasn't a trip where you went to many parties or anything, but it was an awful lot of fun.

I think he saw northeast of Brazil, and he did go to quite a few smaller towns in Argentina, Peru, Chile, and went through quite a lot of….For instance, in Venezuela he was surrounded, supposedly, by terrorists all through the trip to Caracas [Caracas, Venezuela]. It's quite a nerve-racking trip in a lot of ways because it was very, very pressed and at the same time, there were a lot of these threats, and you didn't have any control over it. There wasn't much security; you just went through it, didn't have any sense that you'd get through it because there'd been people shot, and people in the embassy saying that Caracas had had windows dynamited and things.

HACKMAN: Any recollections of his reactions to Frei [Eduardo Frei Montalva] or other political figures, particularly?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. Well, he was….Who was the head of Peru until recently?

HACKMAN: Belaunde-Terry [Fernando Belaunde-Terry]?

JOHNSTON: Yeah. He thought he was a pretty attractive fellow and I think he really liked Frei. Then the guys in Argentina I don't remember too well, but they were pretty obscure, just saw them, went in and out. People that he was most impressed with, I guess, of all were the priests in the northeast of Brazil. Don Helder [Hélder Pessoawas Câmara] not there, but whoever the other….Two or three others were very good. They were up around Recife [Recife, Brazil]. Of course, he didn't have much for government. But I think the student leaders in Brazil, as he would find later in South Africa, were terribly impressive.

Of course, throughout, the Peace Corps volunteers were, first of all, very great sources of information for us, and help and advice in setting up the trip; probably more helpful than the embassies. I mean not more helpful in terms of all the logistical implementation, but in terms of kinds of things that he was interested in that you wouldn't have thought of. They were very, very good. Then when he got to know them and talked to them—and he generally had lunch with them or met groups of them wherever he was—I think he enjoyed them an awful lot. I think he probably got fantastic….

Of course, the other thing which is important not to forget is that he got incredible receptions through this thing. I don't know how you judge receptions in Latin America or anywhere else. In numbers they were mammoth. Even in little towns like Mendoza, Argentina there will just never be a group of people, as many it seems, and as exuberant over his visit there. So all of that, among other things. In addition to what it does for the person politically, and what it does for what he represents politically, it also does a lot personally for somebody. It just is a real boost and it means a lot, the fact that they felt so strongly about President Kennedy and so positively about the United States. You can't help, now, but compare that to Rockefeller's visit where he went pretty much—or Nixon's [Richard M. Nixon]. Just a totally different attitude about America.

HACKMAN: Can you remember Alliance for Progress projects that particularly upset him, AID [Agency for International Development] projects or whatever that….

JOHNSTON: That upset him. We didn't get him too involved in bad ones. You mean ones he heard about or visited?

HACKMAN: Yeah, if he visited, where obviously red tape was slowing things down or the project directors were screwing things up or whatever. I'm just thinking in terms of he comes back and he makes the speech.

JOHNSTON: Well, yeah. I think he heard a lot about it from people. I don't think that….First of all, it would have been hard for us to get him to. We probably wouldn't have wanted him to, and we wouldn't have been permitted by the U.S. people to let him go near a really disastrous one. We, because we would have thought it was a waste of time, and they because they would have thought it was a bad idea. But he did visit enough people who told him about the problems, and he saw enough needs that weren't being met and heard enough about food that wasn't getting through. For instance, the

John Kennedy village near Rio [Rio de Janeiro] that was built displaced a lot of people from the favelas that were right near the beach near their work to put them fifteen or twenty miles away, where they had to spend half their money on bus fare, in very unsatisfactory conditions. You hear enough about projects like that so that you almost sense you've been there. Then, even in Caracas, you could see that a lot of the apartment buildings just weren't very appropriately designed for the living habits of the people. Then you saw these incredible conditions of bad sewerage and so on, and you felt, "Hell, if we're doing anything down here, you'd think we could do that." But like New York City and the garbage here, if you can't do that, you probably can't do much else. Then he'd hear from the Peace Corps volunteers about bad AID projects and I think that made an impression.

HACKMAN: Are there things you can remember on that trip to the Amazon, particularly the one up the river, or whatever, when you get caught in the rain storm and all that? Anything that hadn't been written that….

JOHNSTON: Well, there were a lot….You mean in the Amazon itself or just in general?

HACKMAN: Well, just in general. I don't have that many specifics. I don't know whether you can tell anything just from the schedule—or other things that you remember.

JOHNSTON: Well, I remember…First of all, he really did work on that trip; he really went at it day and night, and by the time he got to Brazil I think he was ready to rest. That was toward the end, and when he got there he said—we'd had some problems with Lincoln Gordon, as I said—he was eager to stay on the

beach and swim a lot. So we called the Gordons and told them he wouldn't' be staying at the residence, which was, I guess, kind of a mixed blow to them. I guess, they were relieved in a way but also kind of annoyed.

We spent three or four days on the beach in Brazil, in Rio and did other things; and went through all Rio. Also he really had a good time just swimming and going around. Then we went up to the northeast; we went to Baia, San Salvador and up to Recife and then on to the Amazon.

I would think, probably, that was the most relaxed and sort of pleasant part of the whole trip, and probably also the one in which, funny enough, he got the most involved with the students, really to the point where….For instance, Adam and I had been pressing—and I particularly because I'd been involved in it—really to have him be more against the government, more outspoken, and go to some groups that were not sympathetic to the government. We'd gotten some telegrams back from Lincoln Gordon that said, "Such and such a group is definitely out," and, "If you do that, the government will really be unhappy."

So put in that position he obviously….He asked my advice and I said, "I would think probably your judgment's better, but I feel that it's a very small thing to go. This is a group in Sao Paulo [Sao Paulo, Brazil] of students; these are good people and you'll see when you're there, they're not Communists; they're not wild people; they're just normal students." But in any case from a distance….This was in Peru where he had to make the decision. Dick Goodwin

thought it was wise to not see them and it probably was without….And he couldn't know that I was right. But when we got to Sao Paulo it was great because Adam, of course, and I agreed about this particular group and about the whole thing in general.

What happened is we arrived in Sao Paulo and we were pushed around by a policeman. That had happened in Argentina already. Somebody'd been beaten by a policeman, somebody like Seigenthaler or somebody who was trying to get in back with the group, and a policeman in Buenos Aires [Buenos Aires, Brazil] had run over a girl in a police motorcycle. So by the time we got pushed around more by the police and the army in Brazil at the airport with some people—elbows and bayonets and things—everybody was sort of really annoyed by that. By about the third hour after he'd been there in the evening, he was up on the top of a car really saying, "Down with the government. On to the palace." And yelling, I mean, talking about revolution. Of course, a lot of these things, it's just

as well, were not reported back in the States, or if they were, were not reported in any context: but they obviously really were upsetting for the embassy.

It was interesting about him as a man, because he never would have agreed to make that as a written speech, and yet I don't think it was by any lack of control exactly, although you'd almost have to put it down to that. I think it was more just a sense of the moment, and the truth of that moment was in that. And you saw it later in South Africa when he led the people singing "We Shall Overcome." I mean, there wasn't any political logic to that; if he had known ahead of time that he'd be singing "We Shall Overcome" with a lot of students in South Africa, he probably wouldn't believe that. But, that was, I think, revealing, both about him and also about the conditions in those countries and the fact the police and the police state can really move you to do things that you don't think you're capable of under normal circumstances.

I think he met some very impressive….As I say, the priests. I don't think he had any formed, well worked out ideas, before he got down there, about how to handle these problems. And I'm not sure that his speech was so much a fruit of the trip, as of thought after the trip. But the trip—and this is true also in the other trips he took both to South Africa and also in other parts of this country—the trip—gave him a matrix, kind of a hard core of knowledge that was his, out of which he could develop something in terms of policy, and against which he could measure other proposals, and his own. I think that was probably what he looked for in those trips, and what he got.

HACKMAN: Anything on the physical adventure side of things that you got out of this trip, that side of his character?

JOHNSTON: Yeah, the obvious thing was in the Amazon, but that was less….I don't think there was anything really that risky involved in the Amazon; it was just kind of messing around in the Amazon. But what was rather revealing….I remember we were swimming and we were on this breach, the Copacabana [Copacabana Beach] in Rio. He had gone up with Seigenthaler—I was back with Mrs. Kennedy and somebody else and we were swimming—and they had gone up a couple of miles just walking and then they'd gone in swimming. There was a thing in Rio which—I didn't realize when I was there before and then I realized it as some people told me about it—is this fantastic

undertow that takes you way out and swoops you off. They have boats often that are patrolling out from the beach, four or five hundred yards, and they just make a practice of fishing people out as they

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get swept out. There weren't any boats out that day because it wasn't that rough; they only have them on sort of bad days. But it was still very rough and if you didn't….When you first arrived you'd say, "Wonder why all these Brazilians are sitting on the beach. Why aren't they out swimming? There's nobody out where the waves are breaking—this great surf." So I learned about all the people who had been washed out, and you get to get sort of a respect for the waves after about a few days. But I hadn't told Senator Kennedy about it and I didn't think that anybody else had.

I was walking and somebody said it was time for lunch, "Why don't you see if you could find him?" So I started walking up this beach. Then I asked some people and they said, "Oh, yeah. He went in out there. And they said, "He hadn't come back." And I thought, "Oh, God." And they were really sure it wasn't a question of he might have gone up a hundred yards; he just stopped here and walked in and he's out there somewhere. I swam out there and kept going further and further out thinking that—not that I was a better swimmer than he was—I would find him maybe somewhere and tell him that it was a good idea to get on back in. I got out far enough to get in that place where you're not supposed to be yourself and got hit by a wave and thrown all in the sand and got almost knocked out and just about going under and then got dragged back. I came back in and then went on back to the hotel thinking he might be out there or whatever, and there he was back in his room. I said, "I'd been out looking for you and I got out…." I said, "I'd looked…." He was really great because I said, "I've been out looking for you and I almost got drowned myself." And instead of saying, "Gee, that's too bad," or "How nice of you to look," he said, "Well, I guess that's the difference between you and me; I'm used to it." And he had been out and he had gotten back and that was….And I think probably….

There's that story that everybody always tells about Walter Sheridan in Detroit. You haven't heard that one?

HACKMAN: I don't think so.

JOHNSTON: He's in Detroit and he called the Senator and said he's very sick. He was up there for an investigation and he had the flu and he had a temperature of 102° and he thought he'd go to bed for the afternoon. The Senator listened to all that and then he (when he was Attorney General) said, "That's fine, Walter. If you're too little, don't play the game."

I think a lot of his interest in physical things was very competitive. It was competitive against himself ultimately, like things

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on the mountain, but also very competitive with other people, but done with….They sound like kind of tough things, but in most cases they were done with humor but with this sort of steely edge, too.

HACKMAN: Did a lot of people around him feel he did stupid things physically, took chances which were stupid for someone with, ten kids to take?

JOHNSTON: No, I don't think….I think there were some people that would talk like that, but I mean I don't think….I think that anybody, like if you knew him, you just felt that was just normal. I mean that's just what he really would do. That would be something that….And I don't think he ever took that many incredible risks. I don't think he was really dumb about it actually. I think he did things that most people wouldn't want to find themselves doing often, but I don't think they were really extraordinarily risky. Now he did talk once about going out mountain climbing again on, I think, Everest or something, and that worried some people because they thought—including Ethel. But they never would have said that to him because they thought that would just make him want to do it more. Of course, in that whole element, which is a thing you get into with him….I don't know that I mentioned that; I maybe mentioned it before. He had a recurring kind of like an escape thing in '68, when he'd keep talking in the first part of that year about what he'd like to do—go off to the Arctic or go on some kind of exploration somewhere. So I think a lot of it was tied up with that, that it was: in order to have anything that you could really hold on to, you had to get away from a lot of the kind of complications and confusion and distortion that he had to put up with every day.

HACKMAN: Anything else on that first trip?

JOHNSTON: Well, I think the other major thing is just that, for me, just from my own personal relationship, I got to know him really well and to really like him. Up until then I hadn't any idea about him as a person really. I knew something about the people that worked for him and I liked them, and that was probably for me sufficient idea that I'd like him if I knew him. I liked his ideas politically, but I really was much more involved with him because of his brother. See, I'd really never….I'd always heard these stories about him, in the beginning, about how he was so tough. Gore Vidal was the only person I'd ever read about him. He was very, not the most attractive figure as painted in those stores.

They all sort of rung true to me; they had a real….The fact that he, not so much that he was tough, but that he had this sort of overriding moral vengeance to work his wrath and the wrath of his powerful group on anybody who opposed him, or who he felt was unhelpful or unpatriotic. Those caricatures, or characterizations of him, I thought sounded true and they sounded just the opposite of what you liked about President Kennedy, what I liked about him. So when I went to work for him, initially it was with that kind of reluctance that I thought, "Well, here's a guy who's probably a very limited person, but who at least says he's going to do what President Kennedy started to do, and what more can you ask? Certainly Wagner isn't going to do it in the state of New York, so you might as well get in there and help out." Then, as I say, when I got in I enjoyed the fun of working, and the people. But I mean it was always rather tentative of me, initially, because I never really felt that he was anybody that I would care to….It never occurred to me that I'd have the chance to know him particularly, but to the extent it did, I didn't have any

desire to or any feeling that it would be a particularly significant thing for either one of us. So when I did really….

It was November, and I'd worked for him already nine months. I'd been on trips with him and I'd seen him and all, but just in the way that you would; just kind of working along and not really having a chance to see what he was like, and him not making much of an effort or spending much time: you just didn't get any impression. So the major thing, in just a very personal way, was that you got to really know him and to know Ethel and that, I think, was quite….

Now, I'm not saying that the stories about him before 1963 weren't true. He might be a different person and I didn't know him then, but they certainly….Certainly when you got to know him as well as I did from then on, and you got to see as much of him as I did, that your judgment about him as a human being—all other things aside, all the political things aside—was remarkably different from what you would have expected. This has always been a great source of amazement and amusement to many people who have been that close to him to see how different the public picture of him was.

A trip like that made it very easy to get to know him because you were just thrown together in a lot of things, and under a lot of pressure really, and lots of chance to screw things up, and lots of chances for him to get angry. One of the amazing things is, in all that time I think he got angry—I mean, in the whole time I worked for him, in the whole Senate thing—he was upset once over something, and then over something rather unimportant and got over it very quickly.

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HACKMAN: You want to talk about that?

JOHNSTON: The one thing he got upset?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

JOHNSTON: Well, it was just he couldn't find his cuff links one night and he thought I had them and I didn't. I just told him I wasn't there to get his cuff links, in a sort of nicer way than that. Then maybe it was by telling him that that he realized he wouldn't….That was sort of early on and he didn't know me and I didn't know him, and he acted like I should produce his cuff links and get them into his shirt quickly and I really didn't know where they were. I would have been glad to help, but it was a kind….And it was a little embarrassing because there was somebody else there so he didn't carry on about it.

Otherwise, and just generally, he was just terribly, terribly agreeable and if things went wrong as they often….We made many mistakes but he would just ride with it, and you felt he'd seen a lot bigger mistakes and seen a lot worse things. Yet it didn't mean that he didn't know it was screwed up. He had a good way of letting you know that he knew. It's rather rare, because he wouldn't….You weren't off the hook about it. It wasn't as if he was indifferent or that he didn't really perceive that it was all screwed up, but, on the other hand, he wasn't rubbing it in and disagreeable.

Now sometimes he was capable of being, and I've seen him be that way, but I mean it was sort of very, very rare and I think that's why he got such loyalty out of people. Aside from

the qualities of intelligence and humor and so on, positive things, he really was terribly sensitive about other people's feelings and he realized that if you were in this, it was….He only wanted you in it if you thought it was worth doing for its own sake and that it was probably worth some considerable sacrifice of your energy and time and everything else. So he didn't, I think, feel that he had any hold on the people, that he didn't own anybody that worked for him and he didn't act ever as if he was doing you a big….Well, it was curious, he did give you the impression, which I always felt was true, that it was a privilege, that you ought to be grateful to be able to work with him. But he did it in a way that was not complacent or condescending on his part—or arrogant. And at the same time, he gave you a very strong impression that he was glad to have the chance to work with you. If he was asked what the best part of his job he'd say, "The people I work with." He'd say that, I think, meaningly.

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HACKMAN: This little thing with cuff links. Is this kind of thin, something comes as a problem for a lot of people around him—Edelman and Walinsky, or you know?

JOHNSTON: Do they have cuff link problems? I don't know. You mean do they mention it as a problem?

HACKMAN: No, I mean does he expect some fairly mental things like that from a lot of people who maybe some people would think, he should treat with a lot more respect because…

JOHNSTON: Well, no, I think that's a prob….No, I don't think that's worth exploring. Just briefly, because it's very easy to make fun of, say, Bill vanden Heuvel because he carries his shirt. All right. Now if that's all you did for Senator Kennedy, obviously—no, say, if that's all Bill did. But if that's all somebody did was rush around with his underwear and his talc bottle and stuff, that'd be a rather humble job. It might be a great job, but it wouldn't be, as you suggest, it wouldn't be a job for Adam, or I wouldn't have considered it a good job for me or Peter or anybody else that was working in his office.

Okay. Now on the other hand, he had to get dressed to go speak and he had to be concentrated on what the hell he was doing—or he had to get in the car or he had to get a rather comfortable seat on an airplane. He couldn't constantly be pretending to be just the average guy standing in line at the shuttle. I think he often had, in fact, to stand in line for the shuttle because it was too painful to people to watch him go by. There were too many people that complained. But I think the idea that he ought to, every morning, fix his own breakfast and never ask anybody to do anything for him is a little unfair and a little unrealistic.

On the other hand, somebody like Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] managed to turn what would be just somebody's helping hand into kind of a sign-of-caste and to make it look like, if you poured him a drink, you were in some way a menial slave. But I think the Senator would let….What he did, which was very good…And, as I say, this thing with the cuff links happened once and that was that, and it was just a moment of—he thought I knew where they were and I didn't know where they were and so that was that. But generally if he asked you to do anything….Suppose he would say to Peter, "Fix me some eggs," or something, he would do it in

a way—or he would have fixed Peter some eggs, himself, the time before. So there wasn't any problem about it. I mean it just never came up, at least as far as I know, among any of us because you

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didn't feel that it was anything that he made significant and therefore nobody else, except really an outsider who would come in and say….I could see somebody walking in and seeing Peter Edelman struggling with some scrambled eggs or something. Now I don't remember whether he ever fixed any scrambled eggs, but doing something similar to that or down on his hands and knees looking for Mrs. Kennedy's brooch or something that was supposed to have been lost over by the chair someplace. Well, if somebody walked in and saw that, they might say, "Well, here's Robert Kennedy. He's got these Supreme Court law clerks cleaning up his wife's jewelry. Isn't that absurd; isn't that typical of all we've heard about the Kennedys?" Well, that's grotesque. You can do that to anybody under any circumstances if you set out with that….But that really is missing the whole point of it. I don't think it ever….But I think it is a problem with all public figures, but you see it only really becomes a problem—it's a potential with all—when they need that kind of servant-master relationship, either because they're not secure enough to treat you as an equal, or because they need the adulation. Robert Kennedy was refreshingly and astoundingly free of both those needs, and as a result people that worked with him felt that they were just helping out, whatever they did. I think that's probably….The fact that he just avoided getting irritated when things went wrong and the fact that he avoided hurting people's feelings and putting them in….I think he knew some people were more supple and they could be worked with in some ways that others couldn't, and I think he was very sensitive to that. And he was sensitive about—not always, but often—about somebody's wife. He thought a lot about the people around him, which is not something that's always been attributed to him. It's certainly not the picture I had, initially, when I first heard about him.

HACKMAN: What about South Africa then? Do you want to talk about that some?

JOHNSTON: South Africa. You know what might be better? Why don't we do South Africa and Bedford-Stuyvesant—is that okay? –the next time and quit now, because I'm going to look at the South Africa notes anyway for something else, and I think I'd be better. I mean I'd have more specifics.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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Thomas M.C. Johnston Oral History Transcript – RFK #2
Name List