

Theodore C. Sorensen Oral History Interview – RFK #1, 3/21/1969
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Sorensen was staff assistant, speech writer to Senator John F. Kennedy (1953-1961) and Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964). This interview focuses on Robert Kennedy's decision to enter the 1968 presidential race, his relationship with candidate Eugene McCarthy, the Kerner Commission Report, and the Vietnam Commission, among other issues.

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Hackman Interviews - March 21, 1969 and
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Theodore C. Sorensen

Theodore Sorensen

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Theodore C. Sorensen
RFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

THEODORE C. SORENSEN

March 21, 1969
New York, New York

By Larry J. Hackman

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

HACKMAN: I thought maybe I'd get you to start talking about any discussions you might have had with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] through '67 on what his plans might be for '68. Were there any discussions at all on the possibility of running against the President?

SORENSEN: There were. Now, you see, everything that my normal memory can dredge up, I have already put down. I'm writing a book myself so that, you know, the Archives, the libraries et cetera, will presumably have that available. There's not much point in my just repeating all of that. It may well be that some questions by you will stimulate my memory or elicit the facts that I have not included.

HACKMAN: In the reading I have done so far, primarily the Witcover [Jules J. Witcover] and Halberstam [David Halberstam] books, both of them mention a meeting at Salinger's [Pierre E.G. Salinger] suite here in late October of '67, a sort of general meeting to discuss I'm not sure what – both of them say the possibility of running in '68. Can you remember anything coming up before that?

SORENSEN: The Senator and I used to discuss it periodically, yes.

HACKMAN: Did you ever discuss with him the possibility of going on the vice presidential ticket in '68?

SORENSEN: No. I was never for that. I don't believe he was ever interested in it. It was mentioned at the Salinger meeting by, I think, vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel]. He thought it might be a good idea, but no one else agreed with him.

HACKMAN: I think one of the points that Witcover makes is it was surprising to see Ivan Nestingen [Ivan A. Nestingen] there. Can you remember how he got into this?

SORENSEN: There was a mistake, in my opinion.

HACKMAN: Whose mistake? Who organized it?

SORENSEN: Pierre. Pierre more or less did it. And there was really no point at all in having Ivan Nestingen there, but he was involved in a business venture with Pierre and with some of the others there. So Pierre, who was really not that familiar with the political operations in 1960, or, for that matter, '68, thought, you know, having somebody there from a primary state would be a good idea.

HACKMAN: And again, Witcover writes that at that point Nestingen was the only one who was supporting going in. Is that your impression?

SORENSEN: Certainly he's the only one who was all out for it, that's correct.

HACKMAN: Can you remember – were you at that point clearly opposed?

SORENSEN: Well, no. I was at that point in favor of exploring what the possibilities were. I was clearly opposed to his announcing at that time he was going to go into the primaries against Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], yes.

HACKMAN: Was the organization of the meeting primarily Salinger's idea, or how did this come up, do you know?

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SORENSEN: The Senator and I had talked about having such a meeting back in the summer. But the question was whether it could be done without it getting into the press. Salinger then saw him in the fall, and the meeting followed more or less at Salinger's initiative, although certainly the Senator knew about it and gave his consent to it. Whether he actually requested it, I don't know.

HACKMAN: Did you have an opinion at that time as to why he didn't come, or was there a clear decision on his part that he didn't want to come?

SORENSEN: I think he did not want to come because of the concern that there would be a news leak, and it would appear that he was organizing his campaign for the presidency.

HACKMAN: There was a report of that meeting then in Evans [Rowland Evans] and Novak [Robert D. Novak]. Do you know how it got out?

SORENSEN: No, but I'd love to know. The Senator was very upset when it appeared. He said to me, "Imagine this! A group of my close friends, and you can't even trust them not to talk about it." That was one of the reasons why, in December, the meeting was divided into two groups, of which, I think, I was the only overlapping member. I can't remember.

HACKMAN: At the time of the October meeting – or even before, in August and September – from the things I have read Lowenstein [Allard K. Lowenstein] certainly was urging him to support a challenge of Johnson, or maybe even to make it himself. Did he talk to you about what Lowenstein and people like this were trying to do in that period?

SORENSEN: Not specifically, no.

HACKMAN: During '67, on what type of occasions would you be talking with him normally?

SORENSEN: Well, I'd see him in Washington on business, politics, or pleasure, irregularly. Sometimes he

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would telephone me here.

HACKMAN: Was it usually personally, between the two of you, or did his staff usually...

SORENSEN: I'd say it was usually personally between the two of us.

HACKMAN: After that October meeting at Salinger's suite, can you remember then at that point taking any action after that meeting to reassess the situation or check around the country on...

SORENSEN: Yes. There were many such recommendations, most of which were conveyed to the Senator and his staff for implementation, but one of which

was to have that poll taken in New Hampshire, which assignment was given to me, which I arranged for.

HACKMAN: Who did the poll, can you recall, at that time?

SORENSEN: It was done by John Kraft [John F. Kraft], but it was done by an affiliate of his in Oregon because they felt that if John Kraft was taking a poll in New Hampshire, it would again be traced back to the Kennedys.

HACKMAN: Can you remember the results of that when it came out?

SORENSEN: Yes. The results.... Of course, it was very early, and it doesn't tell you very much, but it showed Kennedy running much better than McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy], but Johnson running much better than both of them.

HACKMAN: Were there any other contacts around the country with leading political figures on your part?

SORENSEN: Well, I believe I also, then or later, talked with George McGovern [George S. McGovern] and asked him to sound out some of the Senate doves. And I talked with Pat Lucey [Patrick J. Lucey] and Cudahy [Richard D. Cudahy] in Wisconsin. A little general talk here and there. Not much.

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HACKMAN: This is in terms of possible support for Robert Kennedy's candidacy?

SORENSEN: Well, this is in terms of, again, not so much support for his candidacy, because these were friendly people, but advice as to whether there should be a candidacy, and how he should go about it.

HACKMAN: Can you remember Lucey's feedback at that point?

SORENSEN: Well, Lucey felt that it would be foolish to run against Johnson in the Wisconsin primary, as I recall. He was very anxious to have Robert Kennedy elected President and wanted to see that happen, but did not feel that was the time or the way to go about it. And we talked in terms of his friends getting to be delegates to the Convention, so that if Johnson changed his mind, or stepped out, or anything happened to him, we would be in a position to have the Kennedy force installed at Chicago and not simply turn it all over to the forces that Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] would inherit from Johnson.

HACKMAN: Can you remember talking to Senator Kennedy about his conversations with Lowenstein as to who might run against Johnson other than himself

and this whole round of talks with McGovern or any of these people?

SORENSEN: No. I do know he recommended McGovern.

HACKMAN: Do you know if he recommended McCarthy at that point?

SORENSEN: He couldn't possibly have recommended McCarthy.

HACKMAN: Maybe you can just recall some of the things over the years about the Robert Kennedy and John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] relationship with McCarthy and how it got to where it was before McCarthy announced; and what his opinion was.

SORENSEN: What few incidents I remember are all set forth in my book. But it was an antipathy on McCarthy's part that none of us ever understood. John Kennedy had contributed to McCarthy's campaign to the Senate

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in '58, but began hearing almost immediately in '59 and '60 that McCarthy was around Washington making adverse and nasty comments about John Kennedy. He continued that even after Kennedy was President. His votes on the Tax Reform Bill led some in the Treasury and elsewhere to feel that McCarthy really had some arrangements with some of the special interests. He opposed Ted Kennedy's [Edward M. Kennedy] bill on the poll tax, which certainly made no sense from the civil rights point of view. I think there were other instances.

In 1964 when Johnson dumped Bob Kennedy for the vice presidency, they talked about his possibly doing two things. One was being his campaign manager, which never came about, and Bob never heard about it again. And the other was that he would place in nomination Johnson's choice for the vice presidency. So Bob called me up on the telephone and asked me about that – whether he should do it, what it would be like – and we talked about it a little bit, and I said: “You know, it might be McCarthy.” And he said, “If it's McCarthy, I can't do it. I just don't have any respect for that man at all.”

HACKMAN: At that point his feeling about Humphrey wouldn't have been at all like that?

SORENSEN: No. If it was Humphrey, he would have been glad to do it. In fact, he so said, but he was never asked by Johnson to do it.

HACKMAN: You were talking about suspicions of McCarthy's ties to special interests. During the '68 campaign, was there ever any attempt to investigate this part of any of the people around Robert Kennedy?

SORENSEN: No, because he felt very strongly that you can't do that sort of thing

without it getting out, and that the only chance he had was to get McCarthy's people. Therefore, he had to keep the antagonism down to a minimum despite what McCarthy was saying about him.

HACKMAN: Going back to that Salinger meeting again, I think it as October 29th – was this in any way an effort by some of the people who had been close to President Kennedy to counter any pressures that, for instance, Robert Kennedy's own Senate staff were putting on him to run? Halberstam plays up this split all the time?

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SORENSEN: No, there wasn't. That's just a rumor.

HACKMAN: Can you recall talking to Senator Kennedy immediately after McCarthy announced, and what he felt McCarthy's prospects might be in New Hampshire, and what your own were at that point?

SORENSEN: Well, I think we all thought his prospects were poor. But there was no question about the fact that it greatly complicated the situation for Robert Kennedy. First, to have another Democrat challenging Johnson; secondly, to have another dove challenging Johnson; and third, that it was McCarthy, given his relationship over the years with Kennedy.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any initial moves to talk with McCarthy that you were involved in?

SORENSEN: I wasn't involved in any.

HACKMAN: Did Robert Kennedy ever talk about any understandings reached either before McCarthy went in or in the immediate period after he announced?

SORENSEN: Well, he made vague references to them, but I think Witcover actually has as much as I can give you on that.

HACKMAN: You were talking about the December meetings when there were two split sessions. Was there any other reason other than what you've previously mentioned why there were two sessions?

SORENSEN: Not to my knowledge, no.

HACKMAN: I was just trying to think of the people who were at the second session.

SORENSEN: The second session was in some ways similar to the first, that is, to the October meeting. He had vanden Heuvel and Schlesinger [Arthur M.

Schlesinger, Jr.] and Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin], I think, at the first of the December sessions, but not at the second.

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HACKMAN: But then in December there were two sections of that session.

SORENSEN: That's what I'm talking about. Schlesinger, Goodwin, and vanden Heuvel, I believe, were at the first section of the December meeting, but not at the second section of that meeting. The first was a lunch at Bill's apartment, and the second was after.

HACKMAN: Well, in that first section, can you remember what changes had taken place since the October meeting?

SORENSEN: Well, I don't believe Arthur Schlesinger was at the October meeting. He had, in any event, become a strong advocate of...

HACKMAN: Witcover says he was.

SORENSEN: At the October meeting?

HACKMAN: Now, that may be inaccurate, but Witcover lists the people who were there, and says: Edward Kennedy, Salinger, Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton], O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], Goodwin, Schlesinger, Burns [John Burns]. It could be Halberstam, but I think it's Witcover.

SORENSEN: Well, I have the list.

HACKMAN: Nestingen, and Charles Daly is another one. Was that at all extraordinary that he was at this meeting?

SORENSEN: Well, no, not at all. He was in the White House, and he's got a good political head on his shoulders. He, again, was there partly because he's also involved in this same business deal with Pierre. But, nevertheless, I think it made sense to have him there.

HACKMAN: Well, getting back then.... [Interruption – Mr. Sorensen consults his notes] But the October meeting was October eighth?

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SORENSEN: Yes.

HACKMAN: And you don't have anything on an October 29th meeting?

SORENSEN: No. There wasn't one of any importance. Here we are. October eighth. Present: Senator Edward Kennedy, Salinger, Sorensen, O'Donnell, John Burns, Chuck Daly, Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan], Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston], Fred Dutton, Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith], Dick Goodwin, Ivan Nestingen, Bill vanden Heuvel. Do you want to know who was at the two December 10 meetings?

HACKMAN: If Witcover's right, I think I've got that.

SORENSEN: I see that I was wrong in saying that vanden Heuvel was not at the second one; he was.

HACKMAN: You were talking about people who had changed their minds by that mid-December meeting.

SORENSEN: That's right. Well, I think Goodwin had not been as – I don't remember him in the October meeting as having been as hawkish, shall we say, and at the vanden Heuvel lunch, he was. I don't remember Salinger's position at that lunch. I think it was a little of both.

HACKMAN: What about Schlesinger by the time of the second meeting?

SORENSEN: Well, as I say, he was not at the first meeting, but at the second meeting he definitely was in favor. I have to also say that these weren't very good meetings. Even as meetings go, they were very unstructured and disorganized. Pierre sort of served as chairman in the October meeting, and that wasn't really Pierre's forte. And it was really too early, and nobody had any sort of specific proposals. I made a few which were worth at least discussing out loud, but otherwise it was pretty disorganized. That, however, was satisfactory as an opening meeting.

The luncheon was very informal. There was sort of a debate back and forth – should he or shouldn't he. The meeting later in that day – the lunch had been set for 12:30, and the meeting was set for 3:30 over this shipping firm or whatever it was – was a really poor meeting. I remember that Teddy and Steve and

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I walked away from that – Bobby did not attend the second session. Teddy and Steve and I walked away, you know, really feeling it had been sort of a mishmash, maybe not a complete waste of time, but there were some hostilities that Kenny O'Donnell had toward Teddy and toward Steve. There was, you know, sort of a reluctance to speak frankly, and an inability to speak concretely about what had to be done. So it really wasn't much of a meeting.

HACKMAN: You said Salinger wasn't doing that good a job at the first meeting, but what about the first section of the second meeting when Robert Kennedy

was there?

SORENSEN: That, as I say, was really an informal debate as to whether he should or whether he should not. It was not a practical political planning session. So in that sense that was desirable, I think, because there was a pretty good debate on the reasons.

HACKMAN: How would he differ in the way he ran something like this, or reacted to something like this, as compared to President Kennedy in conducting a meeting of this type? Was there anything that sticks out there?

SORENSEN: No, I think that in many ways, probably, and under the similar circumstances, President Kennedy would have acted about the same.

HACKMAN: Any differences in quickness to grasp things, points made?

SORENSEN: No, they were both very quick to grasp. Robert Kennedy used to be much quicker in making his judgments and making snap judgments. But that was a trait he had outgrown by 1968.

HACKMAN: Was it a long, drawn out process, or can you attribute that to the whole Administration experience?

SORENSEN: Yes, I think it was a growth process that both he and his brother had – the Administration experience, and his brother's death, and his own new responsibilities. That all changed him in many ways.

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HACKMAN: At that meeting in December that Robert Kennedy did attend, can you remember after that loose discussion what, if any, kind of decision was made about what should be done in the second session?

SORENSEN: No. In fact, he was careful in the first meeting not to talk about the second meeting.

HACKMAN: How do you account for the friction that you've indicated between O'Donnell and Edward Kennedy and Steve Smith?

SORENSEN: Well, with Edward Kennedy I suppose it goes back to the 1966 gubernatorial race in Massachusetts when Ted resented Kenny's entering without his knowledge or consent. Kenny resented Ted not lining up behind him. They are very different types of personalities. They've got different kinds of political allies in the state. They work together, but it's not what I would call warm and friendly. And I don't know why toward Steve. Steve, of course, played a role in

Massachusetts politics in the JFK '58 senatorial campaign, and then in Teddy's campaign. Maybe Kenny resented an outsider as most professional politicians resent outsiders. I don't know.

HACKMAN: BY the time of this meeting in mid-December what had changed Robert Kennedy's attitude, if he's willing by then to come to a meeting and discuss, and he wasn't earlier? Can you remember anything?

SORENSEN: Well, he was always willing to discuss, but I think he was careful of whom he should discuss it with. The larger meeting in October he was afraid might get into the papers, and it did. He was still unwilling to go to the second session on December tenth, primarily for that reason, in my opinion. But the first was not much of a newspaper story, to simply say that a group of his friends met for lunch and debated whether he should run or not. People were doing that all over the country.

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HACKMAN: When this second session came up then, did the people there, any of them, know that there had been a first session, or how was it handled?

SORENSEN: I don't think so, because vanden Heuvel, and Teddy and I, and I guess Pierre, were all at the first session and at the second session, and sort of pretended at the second session that we were meeting each other for the first time.

HACKMAN: Were most of the people, then, who came into that second session clearly for going at that point?

SORENSEN: No.

HACKMAN: Walinsky [Adam Walinsky], and Edelman [Peter B. Edelman], and these....

SORENSEN: They were not at the second session. Here's the list of who was at the second session: Bruno [Jerry Bruno], Gwartzman [Milton Gwartzman], Burns, Dave Burke [David W. Burke], Joe Dolan, Sorensen, Smith, Ted Kennedy, Salinger, Daly, vanden Heuvel, Tom Johnston, Kenny O'Donnell. I think that's it. Maybe Jack English [John F. English] came in later.

HACKMAN: Can you remember at this point what your own basic point of view was that you were arguing?

SORENSEN: Yes. My basic point of view was that for Robert Kennedy to run against Lyndon Johnson in the presidential primaries would not help Robert Kennedy to become President, or the Vietnam war to be settled.

HACKMAN: Who was like-minded in the group?

SORENSEN: Ted Kennedy, strongly so. And I would say Steve and vanden Heuvel, strongly so. And I think Fred Dutton. I remember they tried to get Kenny in one position or another, and Kenny wouldn't take one position or another. And to the extent the others spoke out, I just don't remember.

HACKMAN: You don't remember anyone, including Robert Kennedy who marshaled any solid arguments, when you were talking specifically in terms of delegates, and political support around the country,

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in opposition to your view?

SORENSEN: No. No one knew of any political support around the country at all.

HACKMAN: How would he answer then, or how did he even justify the discussion if there was no political support? What was making him consider?

SORENSEN: The desire to be in the action, and to speak out on matter on which he felt strongly. And, of course, we all knew that if he announced, a great many rank and file voters would rally to his stand.

HACKMAN: Did the McCarthy announcement, event in the early days when the polls weren't favorable to McCarthy, push him in this direction a great deal, of wanting to be in?

SORENSEN: Well, I suppose that had some slight effect, but really it was not a major consideration, and he almost never mentioned it. As I say, it complicated his life and his decision.

HACKMAN: Was there anyone else at all supporting vanden Heuvel's idea on the vice presidential thing?

SORENSEN: No.

HACKMAN: How did people regard vanden Heuvel? I think several of the people who have written said a lot of people regarded him as a lightweight at that point. Is that so, or how did he get in?

SORENSEN: I think that's right, but he is very loyal to the Kennedys and he's a good personal friend of Bob's and Ted's. And he's a nice guy, so that....

HACKMAN: Was Robert Kennedy – if you can conclude something on this – more likely to bring in friends than President Kennedy would have been in a situation like this?

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SORENSEN: Yes, I think that's probably true.

HACKMAN: Other examples?

SORENSEN: I can remember a meeting at which Jim Whittaker [James W. Whittaker] was present. Jim, again was a good fellow, and he worked hard for us in Washington once we got into the race, but up to that time he really had no political background to make his judgment one that John Kennedy would have been interested in at that stage.

HACKMAN: What about Hackett [David Hackett], who'd been around a long time?

SORENSEN: Well, Hackett knew something about politics.

HACKMAN: At that second meeting at the shipping firm, who was running that meeting, or was anybody?

SORENSEN: Well, again, that was difficult. I suppose to some extent, Ted and Steve were.

HACKMAN: What did you get involved in after those December meetings, any assignments that came to you at that point from Robert Kennedy?

SORENSEN: After that there were no large meetings to my knowledge. Steve and Dolan and Bruno and I met in Steve's office, I believe, in January to talk about what should be done by way of preparation, contact work and so on. To my way of thinking, that made sense – to be prepared for any contingency. We went over lists of names in the different states and made suggestions as to whom Bob should be calling, and whom Dolan should be going to see, and that sort of thing, but also, taking again a last look at it. And our recommendation to Bob at that time was that if he had to make a decision then – and he did as far as the early primaries were concerned – the decision should be negative. We had a very brief meeting with him, and he agreed with that, and that was shortly before his statement at the Nation Press Club off-the-record breakfast.

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HACKMAN: Was he reluctant to make these calls? Was there great concern that the rumor mill would start grinding?

SORENSEN: I don't know that he ever said that specifically in connection with the calls, but he had a reluctance that he had shown for that whole year of not trying to appear to be a candidate for president. I represented him in connection with his book *To Seek A Newer World*, and one of the points that we really had to press upon prospective publishers was that it had to come out in 1967 simply because he felt that if he issued a book in 1968, people would say this is obviously for presidential campaign purposes.

HACKMAN: Were there any other polls commissioned in this period after the December meeting?

SORENSEN: Well, Steve would know. I seem to have a vague recollection that there were one or two, yes. But my memory's hazy.

HACKMAN: Were you at that point staying on top of the New Hampshire situation, getting anyone feeding reports back from that?

SORENSEN: No. But I believe it was in the January meetings that the Senator said that.... Was it January? Possibly later. I guess late January. He said that he wanted me to go up and get him out of the New Hampshire primary.

HACKMAN: What did that involve?

SORENSEN: In February sometime I called the fellow who was the chairman up there, whose name escapes me for this moment.

HACKMAN: Daniell [Eugene S. Daniell, Jr.]? Daniell?

SORENSEN: Yes, Daniell, that's right. Gene Daniell. I told him I wanted to come up and see him. And, of course, he was all hopeful and excited, thinking I was bringing up a pile of money and going to tell him

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how to have an effective campaign. And so I came up, and he had I guess two or three of his leaders with him, and I told them that the Senator wanted out, did not want any votes from New Hampshire at all, and all the rest. And then I held a press conference and said to the voters, so to speak, that the Senator did not want any votes at all, and he was not telling them how they should vote. Daniell was very mad at me that day, but a few days later he came around and he pulled out.

HACKMAN: Someone has written, and I can't remember if it's Halberstam or that English book [*Divided They Stand*] or Witcover, that Criswell [John Criswell] had talked to you about trying to prevent the New Hampshire movement, and one of the reasons then that you were invited to see the President when the

Vietnam commission idea was discussed was in thanks for your role up there.

SORENSEN: Yes, that's true. It had a slight Machiavellian air to it all. But I was having lunch with DeVier Pierson [W. DeVeir Pierson], in the White House. And he and Criswell were old Oklahoma friends from my days in the 1960 campaign with JFK, when they were strong for JFK. And they knew I was against Bob Kennedy running. That had appeared in the press often enough, not due to my saying so. But they were talking about New Hampshire. And we agreed at the lunch that it was unfortunate from every point of view for Bob to be in the New Hampshire primary. So I said, "Well, I'll try to do something about that." And they thought that was great – I suppose, thinking maybe that they had something to do with it.

HACKMAN: This was after you talked to Robert Kennedy about it?

SORENSEN: Exactly. This was just a few days before – I had already made my reservations to go up, and all the rest. At any rate, when the word appeared on the ticker that I'd been up there, gotten him out, et cetera, Criswell or Pierson called up and said how pleased they were, and how pleased the President was, and, "The President said sometime when you're in Washington, stop by."

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HACKMAN: You said that the fact that you were opposed to Robert Kennedy going in was well-known in the press, not due to anything you'd said. How did this get out, do you think?

SORENSEN: I don't know. I never mentioned it to anybody. Robert Kennedy told quite a few people, I've since heard.

HACKMAN: Oh, really? Press people, or just....

SORENSEN: Both. In other words, you know, this would be all sort of off the record. He would indicate to them what the arguments were and who was making them.

HACKMAN: Was this a frequent problem in your dealings with him – that he had a lot of friends in the press, and things would get out just simply because he'd chat with them, and....

SORENSEN: It wasn't a problem for me.

HACKMAN: Who in New Hampshire, as the McCarthy thing was developing, did you, and from what you know, Robert Kennedy, look to for information on that situation – how well McCarthy was doing, or....

SORENSEN: Well, I assume he was in touch with Goodwin and Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith], particularly Goodwin. And then Bill Dunfy [William L. Dunfy], who was a friend of ours in New Hampshire in the sixties was not, I don't believe, involved in the McCarthy campaign, as such, but was a very astute observer of the New Hampshire political scene.

HACKMAN: Can you remember what kind of reports Goodwin and Galbraith were putting out in that period?

SORENSEN: No.

HACKMAN: Were there any other states in which you moved to slow down Robert Kennedy groups?

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SORENSEN: No, I don't believe it was necessary in any other state.

HACKMAN: Were there other things you were checking out in January and February that you can recall specifically, that were you areas?

SORENSEN: No. I think that was about it.

HACKMAN: What were your relationships to his Senate staff people in that period? Is there anybody you were particularly compatible with, or just the opposite?

SORENSEN: Well, until I read Halberstam – which, as a matter of fact, I haven't read – I felt that I was very compatible with all of them. I got along very well with them, worked with them whenever the occasion required it. I liked Peter Edelman particularly, and Joe Dolan and I have known each other much longer than anyone else had known Joe Dolan. And Frank Mankiewicz and I got along very well. Adam Walinsky, I suppose, looked upon me with some slight resentment, but, you know, I expected that, and I didn't mind it at all.

HACKMAN: There'd been no real problems to that point?

SORENSEN: None at all. But there were no real problems after that point, I should add. I really was surprised to hear about all the problems.

HACKMAN: Maybe I can find out where they come from.

SORENSEN: Please do.

HACKMAN: Can you recall in January and February, there's this whole series of events – the Tet Offensive, the Kerner Commission report leaked, all of these.

Can you remember Robert Kennedy's reaction to any of these, and what you considered to be their importance to the eventual decision? I would think, first, the Tet Offensive.

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SORENSEN: I would say the Tet Offensive was by far number one – not so much the offensive. Well, you divide that in two parts. One is that the Tet Offensive, as he pointed out, exploded many of the illusions of American foreign policy in Vietnam. But secondly, it was the Administration's reaction to the Tet Offensive. He called me one day here just to talk and to say that he understood that the recommendation was two hundred and six thousand more men, that he just didn't see how they could be that stupid, and that brutal really, and that all this made it much more difficult for him to stay on the sidelines.

HACKMAN: From what I've read, I think that was the call while he was in California. It was on that trip – I think he saw Cesar Chavez while he was out there. March tenth is the date I have for that phone call.

SORENSEN: Really? I thought he was in Washington.

HACKMAN: Well, I've been wrong on everything else so far, so maybe it's so.

SORENSEN: Well, I have no idea. He called me, and I don't ask where he's calling from.

HACKMAN: I was just going to ask if you can recall anything else on the California political situation that came out of that trip he took out there – what his report was.

SORENSEN: No, but, you know, we had the meeting at Hickory Hill one Saturday morning with Jess Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh]. But March tenth, no. I'd say March tenth is probably too late for the meeting with Unruh. You must know what the date of that was.

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HACKMAN: I've got it here somewhere. Then you've got an Unruh poll on California on March second. Can you remember that having any particular impact? It was on how he would run in California.

SORENSEN: No, because there was a Field [John Field] poll about the same time that showed him running well behind in California. That is published in the California papers.

HACKMAN: Following the events of the Tet Offensive, or I guess while it was still going on, February eighth, he gave that speech out in Chicago at the *Sun-Times* book luncheon. Did you get involved in writing that speech at all?

SORENSEN: No, not at all. He spoke to me about it, but I wasn't involved.

HACKMAN: Were you doing much speechwriting throughout this period?

SORENSEN: No. I almost never wrote any speeches for him ever.

HACKMAN: Did you go along on that Chicago trip with him?

SORENSEN: I never went with him on any trips either.

HACKMAN: I think in this same time period Edward Kennedy had taken a trip to Vietnam. Can you remember this having any impact on his thinking, and on Robert Kennedy's thinking or was that....

SORENSEN: I have read that, but I don't believe that really had much effect.

HACKMAN: Were you down at that time of the telethon in Washington that weekend, 17....

SORENSEN: I was down just Friday night for the party.

HACKMAN: Did anything happen that night – phone calls around the country?

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SORENSEN: No.

HACKMAN: On February 28th Romney [George W. Romney] withdrew. Can you remember this having any major impact? Did the Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] spectre....

SORENSEN: No.

HACKMAN: Kerner Commission report?

SORENSEN: Well, again, the Kerner Commission report was one of many secondary things that sort of added up to his frustration and despair.

HACKMAN: Any other factors that you can recall, the Tet Offensive being the major one, but any....

SORENSEN: Well, an earlier factor, even though it occurred long before he made his decision, nevertheless was something that was added in. That was he felt that McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] had been shuffled out of the Cabinet in an undeserving way. He also felt that the Administration's program on housing in the cities was inadequate, and that it was trying to shoot down his program – through Administration witnesses and through the cross-examination of Robert Kennedy when he appeared to present his bill.

HACKMAN: Were you doing much talking in this period to McNamara, or do you know if Robert Kennedy was, about how things were working within the Administration?

SORENSEN: Robert Kennedy was.

HACKMAN: Can you recall any times during January and February when Robert Kennedy was ready to announce, or almost ready to announce?

SORENSEN: No. I'd be surprised if there were any such moments.

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HACKMAN: Was the fact that McCarthy was getting increasing support among young people in New Hampshire very important to him? Did he speak about this?

SORENSEN: Yes. It bothered him a great deal. And it bothered him that the young people felt that he was deserting them by not running himself and not working hard for McCarthy.

HACKMAN: Any consideration ever to doing anything on McCarthy's behalf?

SORENSEN: He just couldn't.

HACKMAN: Okay. Can you remember any of his comments about the kind of campaign that McCarthy was running in New Hampshire?

SORENSEN: No. There were comments to the effect that Johnson was making it very easy for McCarthy by the kind of campaign he was running in New Hampshire.

HACKMAN: Had Boutin [Bernard L. Boutin] and the other people involved had a reputation very clearly established with Robert Kennedy, so that he didn't expect much from them – McIntyre [Thomas J. McIntyre]?

SORENSEN: Well, no, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say that. Actually, he was friendly with McIntyre, and Boutin had been a very strong JFK supporter.

But he felt that the attacks made on McCarthy, particularly by the Governor, were not helping.

HACKMAN: Do you think he would have more seriously considered announcing in this period if McCarthy wouldn't have been in?

SORENSEN: Yes.

HACKMAN: Did he talk frequently about undercutting McCarthy if he would announce at this point? Was this much in his conscience or his mind?

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SORENSEN: I gather that it was, although I don't recall any specific conversations he had with me to that effect.

HACKMAN: How much thought was given to this possibility of you running against Javits [Jacob K. Javits] here for the Senate?

SORENSEN: I was never for it. But I was called to a meeting of his people, so to speak, and they asked me if I would. And I explained to them the personal circumstances that made it impossible for me to do so. I was in the middle of a divorce.

HACKMAN: These were all New York political people, or were any of Robert Kennedy's staff up or anything?

SORENSEN: Dolan and Bruno, and John Burns, and John English, and vanden Heuvel. I can't remember who else.

HACKMAN: Any opposition of the people at that meeting to your running, that came out?

SORENSEN: Not to my knowledge.

HACKMAN: Did you discuss this with him, first your own potential candidacy? Did you talk to him about who else he might support?

SORENSEN: Well, I think he discussed it with me occasionally. I can't recall now ever suggesting any alternative names.

HACKMAN: Ted Kheel [Theodore W. Kheel] was one that was floating around at that point. What did he think of Ted Kheel, do you know?

SORENSEN: Well, he liked him, but I don't recall his name ever coming up in that

connection.

HACKMAN: And I've read that there was even some consideration to Lowenstein as a Senate candidate, which I found surprising. Do you remember that?

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SORENSEN: Again, I think that talk was around, but I'm not sure it was Bob's talk.

HACKMAN: How did Robert Kennedy react to people like Lowenstein, or many of the other New York reform groups, as compared to President Kennedy – the personality type?

SORENSEN: Well, it was different, you see. President Kennedy could be aloof from them, you know, and never was too involved with them. His concern with internal politics in New York came only in the course of getting the nomination, and that meant, primarily, dealing with the county chairmen and the big leaders. And most of the reformers were for Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] and were very much against him. And after he was nominated, then it was not a matter of dealing with individual political leaders of that sort as far as the candidate himself was concerned. He was more concerned with making speeches and all the rest. While he had his troubles in New York, I don't know that he became that much involved with individual reform leaders. Bob had to become involved with them because he was involved in New York Democratic Party politics constantly. There were some that he liked, usually if it was reciprocated. On the while, even as he became more liberal philosophically, he had grave difficulties getting along with them.

HACKMAN: Did he have trouble understanding their attraction for somebody like McCarthy, as this thing developed and many of them were for McCarthy in New York?

SORENSEN: Well, there were different reasons. Some of them were for McCarthy because it was a way of being against Kennedy; some of them were for McCarthy because he had gone in, and they had committed themselves to him because they were against the war and against Johnson.

HACKMAN: Did he ever talk about his relationship with Lowenstein? Supposedly, there was a series of meetings in the fall of '67 between the two of them.

SORENSEN: No. So I've read, but he never mentioned them to me.

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HACKMAN: Can you remember a meeting on March ninth – I think when he went out to a dinner for Hughes [Harold E. Hughes], in Iowa, and met with some of the Mid-western governors – getting any reaction?

SORENSEN: He told me about that afterward, that he had been surprised at how anti-Johnson they had all been, and how encouraging to his candidacy they had all been. They weren't quite that encouraging once he got into the race.

HACKMAN: As this thing developed, how were you keeping informed on what was going on on a day-to-day basis? Who were you calling?

SORENSEN: I wasn't up on it on a day-to-day basis. You just can't do that.

HACKMAN: Can you recall writing many memos, or feeding in new information in this period, say, in early March?

SORENSEN: No.

HACKMAN: I think Witcover writes that there were very serious discussions, and he doesn't mention you being involved, on March seventh, particularly between Dutton, Edward Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy. Can you remember hearing anything about this?

SORENSEN: No, but that's consistent with my conversation with Bob on the following Monday, the day I went in to see Johnson. He indicated that he was much closer to a decision to run than he had been previously, and I assume it stemmed from that meeting on the seventh.

HACKMAN: Do you know anything about contacts made with McCarthy in this period as to whether Robert Kennedy was reconsidering, how seriously he was reconsidering, what might happen?

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SORENSEN: Well, again, as Witcover mentions, he sent word through Goodwin to McCarthy that this was what he was contemplating doing. But it was not quite clear whether the message was delivered as intended. I'm not even sure the message was that clear.

HACKMAN: Did you ever talk to Goodwin about that?

SORENSEN: I never did.

HACKMAN: What might you question whether the message was that clear to Goodwin?

SORENSEN: I question two things: first of all, whether the message was really delivered in a clear-cut way because Robert Kennedy indicated to me he wasn't sure that it had been. I question how clear the message was because

it does seem as though Robert was not altogether clear in his own mind what it was he was thinking of and saying. And he had said to Goodwin, "Tell McCarthy that I am running," that would have been very clear. But Goodwin would have been justified in wondering whether the decision was all that firm if he said, "Tell McCarthy that I am contemplating running." That means two different things. One is: I'm planning to make an announcement. And the other is: I'm thinking about it, which is not news, since he'd been thinking about it. So I don't know what the message was: I wanted to let McCarthy know in advance of the primary that I am going to run. Inasmuch as he sent that message before he told me that he had made up his mind that he was going to run, it's pretty tough to have any assurance that the message was all that clear cut.

HACKMAN: Someone writes that he'd called his wife [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] that day and had asked her to pass on the word through Galbraith and Schlesinger to McCarthy that he was considering. Do you know if anything went that route?

SORENSEN: I never heard of that before.

HACKMAN: We might talk about the Vietnam commission idea then. How did you first come to this idea?

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[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

SORENSEN: I don't know how I came upon this idea. I was told afterwards that there had been an editorial advocating it in the *New York Times*. As a faithful and loyal reader, no doubt I read it, thought it was a good idea, and it entered into my brain, and I did not know what the source was. Back in early '66, at the time the bombing pause was going on, Robert Kennedy had suggested through McNamara that some kind of independent commission be set up to take a look at what we were doing in Vietnam. And I'd known about that also. So that may have been in the back of my mind. I did not know, prior to that Monday, that Mayor Daley [Richard J. Daley] had talked of such an idea.

HACKMAN: Any recollection of the '66 proposal, and what reaction McNamara got?

SORENSEN: Well, whether McNamara passed it on to the President, I don't know.

HACKMAN: I see. Had you discussed this idea with anyone else before you talked to Robert Kennedy about it?

SORENSEN: No. I had no idea what the meeting with the President was going to be like – whether I would have any chance to discuss Vietnam in any substance, or not. My own guess is the President had no such meeting in mind either.

It was simply.... He looked upon it as a courtesy call, five, ten minutes.

HACKMAN: I think it's Witcover, maybe someone else, who suggests that you talked by phone – what I called the California call on March tenth, what you said you thought was a call from Washington – and that you discussed, maybe it was just that you discussed that you had a meeting with the President the next day. Can you remember at that time

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Robert Kennedy communicating anything to you on what he might hope you'd say?

SORENSEN: Not on the telephone. I think it's very possible that he called me from California on March tenth, and I made an appointment to see him in his office on that Monday.

HACKMAN: Your conclusion, at the time, about the meeting with the President was that it was strictly social, before you went in, just routine?

SORENSEN: Yes, definitely.

HACKMAN: Who had set up the meeting?

SORENSEN: The President set it up through DeVier Pierson.

HACKMAN: Any suggestion from you for the meeting? A couple people have implied that you'd suggested the meeting. But this was all from the White House?

SORENSEN: Yes.

HACKMAN: Can you recall that discussion with Robert Kennedy, then, before going in, on the Vietnam commission idea, and on anything else? He'd just come back from California.

SORENSEN: He said that, you know, he was now much closer to the decision to run, and he was really moving in that direction, unless there was a change in the direction of our Vietnam policy. I told him that I was still against his running, for the reasons previously indicated; that it wouldn't help our Vietnam policy; it might only hurt it; it certainly would hurt some of the doves up for reelection in the Senate, and I thought it would hurt Robert Kennedy; and that I was going to suggest a commission on Vietnam. He told me that Dick Daley had told him that he, Daley, had made the same suggestion to Johnson. Then I said, "Well, it seems to me how else can you really signify a change in policy?" And he said, "Well,

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the other way is to change Secretaries of State [Dean Rusk].” That was about all.

HACKMAN: What was his response to the idea? Did he say what he thought of it when Daley had mentioned it, and then at that point, to your suggestion of it?

SORENSEN: He liked the idea.

HACKMAN: Did he anticipate, and did you anticipate, what the President’s reaction might be?

SORENSEN: Not at that time, no.

HACKMAN: What did he say at that point that pushed him closer to going in?

SORENSEN: Well, I don’t know that he went through the reasons then, or needed to, because the various contacts we’d had over the previous two months, because of the Tet Offensive and the Administration’s response and all the rest, had indicated that he was.

Unfortunately, we’re going to have a time problem.

HACKMAN: Okay. How much have we got?

SORENSEN: Oh, maybe five more minutes.

HACKMAN: At that time did you have anything down in writing on the Vietnam commission idea?

SORENSEN: No, nothing at all.

HACKMAN: Did you discuss the impact that the proposal might have at that point on his going in or staying out, if the President accepted it?

SORENSEN: No. As I said, I think probably he was hopeful that there would be a change in our Vietnam policy, which might make it unnecessary for him to run. But I don’t even know on that day that he even said that.

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HACKMAN: Did he make any comments on how you might propose this to the President, what terms you might put it in?

SORENSEN: Not at all.

HACKMAN: What about the Secretary of State? Did he [Robert F. Kennedy] encourage

this as a suggestion to the President, as something he might do?

SORENSEN: Yes.

HACKMAN: Did you raise it then in the meeting?

SORENSEN: Yes.

HACKMAN: What was his response?

SORENSEN: You mean with Johnson?

HACKMAN: Yes.

SORENSEN: I raised it in a very tentative way, and did not mention it as having come from Bob Kennedy at all but just as a way of signifying a change in policy. And his response was that he had not requested the resignation of any Cabinet member, and it had been his policy not to, and particularly those he had inherited from Kennedy, that the only time Rusk had offered to resign was in connection with his daughter marrying a Negro, and he did not feel that it was appropriate for him to accept it on that occasion. Then he went off into a long story about McNamara's resignation. That was it.

HACKMAN: How did that meeting go? I mean, just carrying it from the point you came in, what did the President focus on?

SORENSEN: Well, it started out really as a five minute thing. I was convinced it was sort of a social meeting. He got to talking. I was listening. And he continued to talk, and I continued to listen. Then I would nod my

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head sympathetically, because he really was at his best. You know, he was giving me the full treatment of the burdens of the presidency, the mistakes he had made in Vietnam, that he didn't know what was the right way in Vietnam, these doves were all good men, he wasn't opposing any of them for reelection, and so on down a long line of.... It was a fascinating conversation. It stretched out into two hours, and it ranged into his frank opinions of various Cabinet members, and newspapermen, and politicians around the country.

HACKMAN: What kind of relationship had you had with him from '64 on? Had there been much contact, or how do you think he regarded you?

SORENSEN: Well, that came up in the conversation actually. We'd had almost no contact. When I left in '64, he was going to undertake to get me the job that Jack Valenti now has in order that I would be available to him for special projects. But, of course, he didn't. And I saw him very, very rarely. I visited him in

'65, just to see if anything had happened on this job front. We had occasional letters. And I think I saw him in a receiving line in '67. That was about it.

HACKMAN: You said he admitted that mistakes had been made in Vietnam. How did he discuss this? Did he attribute it to anything in particular – himself or advisors?

SORENSEN: No, just, you know, it was a very difficult problem, and things didn't seem to be working, and no one knew what the right solution was, and so forth. It was a very humble approach

HACKMAN: How did the discussion of the commission come up then?

SORENSEN: You see, everything was tied together. That is, the discussion on Vietnam, and the discussion of the division in the Democratic Party; the discussion of Bob running; the division in the country – what could he do about it; did I have any ideas about it. And I said, "Yes, I think you really have to signify

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a change in your Vietnam policy." And I said, "I can only think of two ways to do that. And I'm very reluctant to mention one of them because I'm an admirer of the man personally, but a change in Secretary of State would certainly signify such a change." Then he gave me the answer he gave on Rusk. And, as I say, then he went off into the whole McNamara thing. Then he said, "You said there were two." I said, "Yes, and the second one would be a commission." And I just very briefly outlined the idea. And then he said to me, "Well," he said "Dick Daley made the same suggestion." And he said, "If it could be done without looking to the Communists as though we're just throwing in our hand, that might be useful." He said, "I'll think about that." And he said, "You think about names for the commission." And we talked a little bit about names.

HACKMAN: Time?

SORENSEN: Time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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