

**Albert H. Blumenthal Oral History Interview – RFK #3, 10/10/1975**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Albert H. Blumenthal  
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**Biographical Note**

Blumenthal, a State Assemblyman from New York and campaign worker for Robert F. Kennedy's (RFK) 1964 and 1968 campaigns, discusses the 1966 debate over the New York State Medicaid bill, the 1966 New York State gubernatorial race, and Ronnie M. Eldridge's challenge to Tammany Hall's control of the New York County Democratic chairmanship, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Albert H. Blumenthal

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Albert H. Blumenthal—RFK#3

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
52	1966 Debate over the New York State Medicaid bill
57	Dr. Eugene G. McCarthy
58	Abortion
59	Robert F. Kennedy's (RFK) involvement in New York State legislation
62, 71	1966 New York State gubernatorial race
68	Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.
70	RFK's charisma
72	New York State constitutional convention
75	Ronnie M. Eldridge's challenge to Tammany Hall's leadership of New York County
80	RFK's staff

Third of Four Oral History Interviews

with

Albert H. Blumenthal

October 10, 1975  
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: Let's start with the health legislation, the Medicaid debate in the state legislature [New York State legislature] in 1966, and why don't you begin by just giving your own version of your association with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and his people on it. I guess that's the point of view we're most interested in.

BLUMENTHAL: At the time I was chairman of the standing committee on health in the New York State assembly, and when the Kennedy rider, Title XIX, was passed, the Senator spoke to me and asked me if I would be willing to carry the bill in the state legislature on enabling legislation for New York on Medicaid. He wanted New York to be the first state to do that. He asked Dr. McCarthy [Eugene G. McCarthy] and Frank Van Dyke to work with me in developing the state legislature side of it.

We had a minor problem because the Senator's relationship with the Speaker at the time were not of the highest—Travia [Anthony J. Travia]—nor were mine, and so there was at first some reticence on Travia's part about my playing *that* major a role in that major piece of legislation. I gather that was ironed out behind the scenes because the initial opposition to my carrying the bill was eliminated. Javits [Jacob K. Javits] was mildly helpful on the Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] side, and I think I'd have to say was cooperative in that initial effort. Not outstandingly cooperative, but in smoothing the way.

A number of drafts of the bill were prepared. There were some major confrontations between the legislature and Rockefeller. One was over which agency should supervise Medicaid, the other was over the eligibility levels. A third one developed later on, and that is the manner of reimbursement, and it's the last one which I think has ultimately ruined Medicaid, which was a determination that fee for service would be the rule of the day and what a doctor ordinarily charged would be what he would ordinarily be paid. The eligibility level ended up in a compromise, Rockefeller wanting a fifty.... First started off at forty-seven hundred, went to five thousand, then to fifty-seven hundred. We started at seventy-two hundred, came down to sixty-seven hundred, and we finally compromised at six thousand. On the supervisory agency, ultimately he really won because it ended up in the Welfare Department with the State Health Department playing a so-called quality control role, a role that never really played the way it should have. But the bill ended up as a compromise. Van Dyke and McCarthy, I remember, sat on the floor with me when I debated the bill, and it was a very exciting time.

GREENE: How much understanding and interest did Robert Kennedy have in the substance of what you're doing? Was it a matter of your telling him, and McCarthy and Van Dyke telling him, what you thought and his taking it on your word, or did he have definite ideas on the whole thing?

BLUMENTHAL: Oh, no. He had a framework in mind on Title XIX itself, and he had some definite opinions as to which way we ought to go on the major struggles.

GREENE: Was there any difference between you?

BLUMENTHAL: No. We both realized that there was going to have to be compromise with the Governor 'cause he could veto the bill.

GREENE: Wasn't there a problem even getting the Governor to present his version of the legislation to the legislature so that they could debate it? That was something I saw in the files.

BLUMENTHAL: That was where Javits played a very, very minor role, when Javits made a couple of statements and apparently spoke to the Governor...

[-53-]

GREENE: And got him to release...

BLUMENTHAL: ...and got him to, in Albany-ese, "take his thumb off the bill." And that was when the negotiations really began on the key questions.

GREENE: Did Kennedy have more interest in any particular aspect of these three issues? Did he seem more concerned on the eligibility, or on the....

BLUMENTHAL: I think his principle concern was on eligibility, number one, and that was, I think, his primary concern, that New York lead the way. I think he saw Medicaid, as I saw Medicaid, as the opening gambit for national health insurance, that the real design was national health insurance. While it was in a sense an afterthought to Medicare he saw the two Titles, XVIII and XIX, when you pad them, as the premise for ultimately arriving at national health insurance. And so eligibility was extremely important. He wanted it as high as possible.

GREENE: This was the opposite of what Rockefeller wanted, which was more or less to make an extension of the whole welfare system.

BLUMENTHAL: Rockefeller saw this solely as a welfare program for the impoverished. Kennedy saw this as a way to go to that blue-collar working class level that was just above the poverty line but nevertheless was unable to make it, that they didn't go to the doctor because they couldn't afford to pay the doctor's bill, too proud to take welfare. And his argument was, welfare, fine, I mean you take care of the very, very poor. But this was one of those times where Kennedy showed that universality of approach which today politicians mouth about the blue-collar worker, but it's why many blue-collar workers supported him even though they disagreed with a lot of the things he did, because he had that innate recognition of their problems. Maybe coming out of Boston the way he did, despite his rich background, understanding his own ethnicity as some of us tend to forget, he never forgot. And he wanted that level high enough to begin to reach into that category of people.

GREENE: Well, plus, that written into the legislation was protection of savings so that you shouldn't have to be forced to become destitute before you became eligible.

BLUMENTHAL: That is correct. That was another argument, as to how high a level it could be, could you continue to own a house, how much could you have

[-54-]

in the bank, how much insurance could you have. Major, major effort to try and include it in at least the lower level of moderate income family.

GREENE: You said an interesting thing at lunch, that as far as where the responsibility for the program lay, eventually they seem to say that the federal legislation determined that it had to be with the welfare department and all the health department could do was have a subsidiary responsibility, but you were saying that you think that that was not necessarily an accurate interpretation of the federal.

BLUMENTHAL: No, I was more affirmative than that.

GREENE: Okay.

BLUMENTHAL: I said I didn't think it was an accurate interpretation of what the federal legislation said. I think that was the condition that Rockefeller set, that it go to welfare and that the health's sole role would be that of quality control.

GREENE: But did you actually seek advice from Mrs. Winston [Ellen Winston], the HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] person....

BLUMENTHAL: We got a letter from Mrs. Winston.

GREENE: Right, in which she seemed to clarify the situation, and that seemed to resolve it, but not to your satisfaction.

BLUMENTHAL: Mrs. Winston wrote a letter which I am convinced was not Mrs. Winston's letter.

GREENE: From Rockefeller.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah.

GREENE: Why did you give up, then?

BLUMENTHAL: Because adoption of the program, in my view, was the key question. You never get everything you want when you start a new program, and I felt, and I think Kennedy felt, that once we had a fair eligibility level, once we'd gotten our foot in the door with respect to the health department at least with respect to quality control, that we could afford then to make some compromises. Our theory being that as we went the program would show that it was worthwhile, that the national government would proceed apace to make this in fact the beginnings of national health insurance, and they would provide the wherewithal, for

[-55-]

example, for neighborhood health care, which was another interest that he had and that I had, and the problem was, how do you pay for it. Well, Medicaid was an ideal reimbursement mechanism even for ambulatory care. So it was an essential tool for other programs.

GREENE: Just sort of laying the groundwork?

BLUMENTHAL: Laying the groundwork. And we felt at some point that, "Okay, this is the bill. We'll pass this one, and then next year we'll try for more."

GREENE: What about the suggestion that you resolve it by developing a Superagency? I think that was the term that was used. Do you remember where that came from or how seriously it was considered?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, it was talked about at one time. The suggestion came from a conversation that I had with Frank Van Dyke and McCarthy and Mary Anne Krupsak, interestingly enough, who was my counsel at that time—I was head of the Democratic Policy Committee, at the time—and several others as to why we had both a department of health and a department of welfare. The end result of that suggestion was not the creation of a superagency but a bill, which ultimately passed, changing the name of the Department of Welfare to the Department of Social Services. It happened to be a Blumenthal bill. And again I thought, naively, by changing the name....

GREENE: It would take some of the stigma out of it.

BLUMENTHAL: ...it would take some of the stigma out of it, and we'd begin to create that agency that would deal with social services in the same way that Health, Education, and Welfare did at the federal level. I didn't want education in it, but I wanted all social services under a single agency. It didn't work.

GREENE: No. Okay, and then on the third aspect of it, I haven't heard much about that.

BLUMENTHAL: Physicians complained bitterly, after we passed the bill, that they could not, and should not be required to accept Medicaid patients....

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: ...at specified fees, that they were entitled to usual and customary fees of wherever they practiced. The medical societies, the dental

[-56-]

societies, raised havoc with us on that issue and with the attacks that began in Syracuse, [Syracuse, New York], which is where...

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: ...the major attacks on the Medicaid program began, with the Syracuse newspapers and Senator Hughes [John H. Hughes], but particularly with the Syracuse newspapers. An administrative decision was made by the Rockefeller administration to finally give way on it. I personally believe that the reason that Medicaid has come into its present disrepute, and the abuses that have occurred in

hospitals, in nursing homes, in almost any medical care facilities you care to discuss, emanates from that decision to go to a fee-for-service program.

GREENE: Wasn't there also a debate over whether there should be freedom of choice among doctors?

BLUMENTHAL: Oh, that was the key thing.

GREENE: That was not clear to me, because it seemed like McCarthy was objecting to that, and it seemed like he would have been in favor of freedom of choice.

BLUMENTHAL: No.

GREENE: I guess I'm not....

BLUMENTHAL: We wanted to develop eventually towards the panel system, a la HIP [Hospital Insurance Plan] or the Kaiser Plan. Again, go back to my original comments as to how Kennedy envisioned Medicaid and as to how all of us began to envision this Medicare-Medicaid combination as the precursor to national health insurance. And we wanted to encourage physicians' panels. We wanted to encourage practice outside of hospitals, which we saw as cheaper for government. We saw the hospitals as the place of last resort, not first resort. And we believed that, while it is true that in many areas of the state that the sole practitioner, because there was nobody else around, in other areas of the state, panel practice would have been a much more efficient way of running the program. The physicians yelled, "Freedom of choice."

GREENE: Right, okay. I didn't feel that. You said at lunch that you thought very highly of Frank Van Dyke, but there were a few other problems with McCarthy. Do you want to....

[-57-]

BLUMENTHAL: Well, you said at lunch that there were a few other problems with McCarthy.

GREENE: Right. But I thought you sort of acknowledged that.

BLUMENTHAL: The problems with Dr. McCarthy didn't emanate out of his relationship, at least as far as I was concerned, with Senator Kennedy. When the Medicaid issue was being developed and debated and passed, we worked pretty much as a threesome. And Dr. McCarthy and Dr. Van Dyke had been.... Senator Kennedy had said to me that they were his people, and I should work with them on the legislation, which I did. Dr. McCarthy and I had differences of opinion later on, primarily emanating out of my sponsorship of the abortion law, and some disagreements over

how ghetto medicine money ought to be used, whether it should be used in the voluntary hospitals which included his own hospital, St. Vincent's [St. Vincent's Hospital], or whether it should be used, as it was originally intended, for municipal hospitals and clinics in poor neighborhoods. We had some disagreements about the Hospital Corporation Law. We had some disagreements about the affiliation contracts. None of our disagreements, first of all, were personal, and none of them emanated from our mutual relationship with senator Kennedy.

GREENE: Well, I had heard some criticism from Kennedy's people that McCarthy was misrepresenting himself, or at least over-representing himself, as Kennedy's health advisor, and that he was presenting himself as the chief spokesman for a number of groups that didn't regard him that way. I think that's really what I had in mind, as you were saying, that he was probably justified in representing himself that way.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, at least with respect to me, because Senator Kennedy had said to me that he was his representative along with Frank Van Dyke on the Medicaid question. On other issues, Dr. McCarthy never told me that he was opposing abortion because Kennedy told him to oppose abortion. Quite to the contrary, when I got in trouble over abortion, the Senator was good enough to back me in the hilt. He said even though he was not per se in favor of abortion he thought it was a matter of conscience. I remember when he was flying back—I think it was from Russia—when I got fired as chairman of the Democratic Policy Committee, and reporters asked him on the plane, “Do you support Blumenthal or don't you support Blumenthal?” and he really didn't even know what they were talking about at that point, and they off the record explained the issue to him, and that's when he said it was okay, and I sent him a

[-58-]

telegram when I read the story. I said, “Well, I guess I've learned that when you live by the sword you die by the sword.” And he sent me a telegram back. He said, “It's okay, I cleared it with Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] first.”

GREENE: [Laughter]. I was wondering if that was really matter of personal loyalty rather than...

BLUMENTHAL: Whichever it was, it was a very kind thing to do at the time because I was taking a great deal of criticism.

GREENE: I wondered if he had ever sent Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver] to see you, or sent you to see her, on that.

BLUMENTHAL: No. He saw to it that I was invited to Mrs. Shriver's conference where I got beat up rather badly.

GREENE: Was that the end of that issue? Did he take any further interest in it, or further discussions?

BLUMENTHAL: No, I think he tried to stay away from that issue as best he could. He never ever, that I'm aware of, opposed the efforts that I was making either publicly or privately. If it happened, I was unaware of it.

GREENE: And you never really knew if it was a matter of substance or just personal loyalty to you?

BLUMENTHAL: We had only one discussion on it, and I think he was very kind in that discussion, and the issue was never again discussed between us.

GREENE: Was it unusual not only for him, but for a United States senator to get involved this way at the state legislative level? Were there other occasions that you can think of when this happened?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, there were several things. He had very good relationships with a number of the unions in this state, and because of his interest in neighborhood health centers, a proposal which I don't think emanated from him but which he was interested in, was the creation of the Education Construction Fund which would permit the construction of public school facilities in tandem with other facilities on the same site, and other dual construction programs. There was a great fight between unions, because public construction under New York state law requires multiple bidding; that is, you don't have a general

[-59-]

contractor, you use separate contractors, like a plumbing contractor, and so forth. Private construction tends to use a general contractor. Well, where you were going to build a private building under a general contractor and a public building under multiple contracts all together, it made for a difficult problem. And the unions apparently turned to Kennedy to get some help on this multiple contract situation. He called me and, on at least two occasions that I can recall, he in Washington, and me in New York, both on the same phone, with the unions in the same room with me, managed to negotiate out the problems so that those programs would work. And there were occasions like that.

The ambulatory health center program in which he had a great interest, and David Burke [David W. Burke] from Ted Kennedy's [Edward Moore Kennedy] office had a great interest. We did some common work on that, and I went to Washington on at least two occasions to talk to Edelman [Peter B. Edelman] and to Burke to find out what they were doing down there, and to do my work here in New York in tandem with them.

GREENE: Would he be likely to follow your lead on something like this, like the dual construction? Would you be the one to bring him in...

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, on occasion. Yes.

GREENE: ...and would he pretty much go along with what you were...

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Yeah.

GREENE: Can you think of other people besides yourself that he would have had that kind of trust for in the state?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, he had his own staff.

GREENE: No, I mean right in the state, would he have worked the same way with...

BLUMENTHAL: I think Carey [Hugh Leo Carey] he used on occasion.

GREENE: Really?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't know how much. From Carey's people they tell me a great deal. I'm not sure. He certainly worked very closely with Ronnie Eldridge [Ronnie M. Eldridge] in certain areas, with Jerry Kretchmer [Jerome Kretchmer] in certain other areas. He liked Joe Crangle [Joseph F. Crangle] upstate. He worked with him. John English [John F. English] he worked with all the time.

GREENE: Yes. I was thinking really more in terms of the

[-60-]

assembly and...

BLUMENTHAL: No.

GREENE: No.

BLUMENTHAL: In the assembly I think it was two of us.

GREENE: Can you remember times when he ever turned down on something, where you went to something for support?

BLUMENTHAL: For support?

GREENE: Well, to back you up on it, or...

BLUMENTHAL: I didn't usually go to him to back me up.

GREENE: Maybe that's not good wording. But on an issue like the dual construction, where he could be useful to you, have you ever turned to him?

BLUMENTHAL: You mean in a substantive matter?

GREENE: Yeah, on a substantive...

BLUMENTHAL: No, I can't ever recall ever turning to him.

GREENE: One other question on the health thing before we move on to something else. How did you find working with Peter Edelman? How effective was he in the

BLUMENTHAL: Very bright. Extremely bright. Very effective. Good substantive person, I mean, really did his work, his homework.

GREENE: Did you suggest to Kennedy that he send somebody up to have someone in New York?

BLUMENTHAL: No. He did it on his own.

GREENE: And that was a useful way of working?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, I think it was, because I think although the people in the assembly knew that I was a Kennedy person—they really knew—and they also knew that Dr. McCarthy and Frank Van Dyke were there because Kennedy had sent them, I think when Edelman showed on the scene that put the.... I mean that made it clear...

GREENE: Official.

[-61-]

BLUMENTHAL: ...if anybody had any doubts about it.

GREENE: Yes. After the bill was decided upon there developed a tremendous outpouring of resentment, particularly again, as you say, in Syracuse over the eligibility level which, they were screaming, was preposterously high, and completely disagreed with you on the purpose of the program, etcetera. Do you remember any reluctance on Kennedy's part to stay in the battle at that point?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, the opposition developed slowly, first of all. It did not develop in '66 in the... There was an outcry in '66, but the outpouring didn't really

begin to reach major proportions until '67, and reached its fever pitch in '68. By the time it began to reach fever pitch in certain upstate areas the Senator was off on other things.

GREENE: Yes.

BLUMENTHAL: Excuse me. [Interruption]

GREENE: I'm trying to make track since you're intimidating me into thinking this is going to have to be the last one. Let's talk about the gubernatorial race in '66, and why don't you start with just recalling when your earliest discussions were and what he had in mind, and what your advice or counsel might have been at that point.

BLUMENTHAL: He didn't think much of the field, first of all

GREENE: [Laughter]. That was nothing new, was it?

BLUMENTHAL: He felt that, while he liked Gene Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson] personally, that Gene was not a strong enough candidate as a candidate, but he did like him personally. Jack English was pushing very, very, hard for Nickerson. I remember I was on vacation—I don't remember where—and I had talked to Jack on a number of occasions, and he had wanted me to endorse Gene (and I liked Gene personally) but it was very early on and I was busy with other things and had not wanted to get into the gubernatorial race that early in the game. And he called me, and I'm trying to remember where—my wife [Joel Marie Blumenthal] and I were, I think, on Easter recess or something—away, and he called me up someplace and said all he needed to get it going, because he had lined up a group of people, was if I would agree to let my name be used and that would push the Senator. And it is the last time that I've ever allowed anybody to tell me what somebody else would do.

[-62-]

GREENE: Without doing your own checking. Yes.

BLUMENTHAL: It taught me a lesson. So I finally said okay, and, of course, when I got back from vacation and I happened to see the Senator and he said, "How come you endorsed Nickerson?" I said, "Well, Jack called me"—I think we were in the Virgin Islands—"and said that he had support all lined up, and they wanted to use my last name and you were then going to come along," and I said, "We were on vacation, frankly, and I just did it automatically." And he said, no, that he didn't think Nickerson had a chance.

Ben Altman [Benjamin Altman] was supporting Howard Samuels [Howard J. Samuels] whom I had known from the '65 legislative fight. Howard had been very much involved in helping us try to draft a new set of assembly rules, and all of us were at that time

Steingut [Stanley Steingut] over Travia, and part of the Steingut platform was a change in the assembly rules which, by the way, we adopted this year.

GREENE: This year?

BLUMENTHAL: The rules were proposed in '65.

GREENE: Only ten....

BLUMENTHAL: Well, it took me ten years to do it. And apparently Ben brought Howard down to talk to Kennedy in Washington and the meeting was a real bust. Ben came back totally devastated, and to this day I really don't know what happened or why Samuels and Kennedy didn't hit it off. I mean, Howard is effervescent in a certain way, and I think that probably turned Kennedy off. But he had no candidate and having fought the organization on the surrogate's race, I think he was very reluctant to keep fighting the organization time and time again. He did not want to become a rebel, and I think he came to the conclusion that the only thing for him to do was to take a hands-off attitude, allow the candidate to be selected, and then he would do what he could for that candidate.

GREENE: He did agree to support the forum idea, though, didn't he?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, as a matter of fact, he did only agree to support it, but I think he really was one of the originators of the idea. I don't know from whence the actual germ came, but he really promoted it very hard.

GREENE: Do you think that he—some people have said this,

[-63-]

this is why I'm asking you—that he did it in the hopes that maybe Nickerson could drum up enough support that way to get something going?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think he thought Nickerson was the most substantive of the people, and I think he felt that maybe exposing all the candidates to public view would at least alert the public to the fact that Gene was one of the few people who really had a mind. Whatever it was, it didn't work. Just didn't work.

GREENE: What about FDR, junior [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] in the early part of the discussion of candidates? Do you remember what his initial reaction to that was?

BLUMENTHAL: My recollection is that it was totally negative at all times, and some of

it seemed to be personal, but I don't know what.

GREENE: Do you remember any talk, serious talk, of bringing in an outsider? I know he had discussed that at other times, too.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes they did a talent search. Watson [Thomas J. Watson, Jr.] was one...

GREENE: Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel].

BLUMENTHAL: Ted Kheel was another, Sol Linowitz [Sol M. Linowitz] was one...

GREENE: Gardner [John W. Gardner] and Perkins [James Alfred Perkins]?

BLUMENTHAL: I've heard Gardner, not Perkins. But we found, I think Watson lived in Connecticut, as his official residence. Linowitz, I don't know what was wrong with him, but he wasn't interested or...

GREENE: Or he wanted some...

BLUMENTHAL: He wanted another job. I don't remember.

GREENE: He wanted to be anointed. He didn't want to run without a guarantee of the nomination.

BLUMENTHAL: He didn't want to run for it, yeah. He went all over the place. I remember he used to have meeting after meeting with groups of people just to throw out names, and then he would set people loose calling them or checking them out or finding out what reactions were to them. None of it worked. I am firmly

[-64-]

convinced that any candidate with some charisma and a fairly decent intellect in 1966 would have beaten Nelson Rockefeller. And I happened to like Frank O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor], he's not a bad man, but he just wasn't up to that race.

GREENE: Well, and wasn't also the split where Roosevelt went off on his own...

BLUMENTHAL: No.

GREENE: That wasn't what really did it?

BLUMENTHAL: No, I don't really think that did it at all. I know a lot of people have said that the Liberal Party destroyed the Democratic Party's chance to

win.

GREENE: I don't remember what the votes were, but...

BLUMENTHAL: Roosevelt got six hundred thousand votes. It didn't make the difference and it wasn't the issue. The fact was that O'Connor was not a candidate. He just physically was incapable of keeping up a schedule, and mentally wore out very early on.

GREENE: Do you remember criticism from the O'Connor people that Kennedy had put so much pressure on him to become a substantive candidate, and to have to show that he had something to say, and that he had destroyed his style of easygoing Irish candidacy and that he was left with nothing? Does that sound familiar?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, I think some of the people in the O'Connor camp felt that way. I think they condemned Kennedy for trying to convert O'Connor into a liberal. They condemned a lot of the reformers for trying to convert O'Connor into a reformer. We never were successful in converting him either into a liberal or reformer. The one courageous thing he did do was to say that Rockefeller's drug program of that time—he had so many—was a phony program. There are those on the O'Connor staff who said that that one speech—I guess it was in Grossinger's—destroyed his candidacy. I don't think any of those things destroyed his candidacy. I think Frank O'Connor, again a very decent human being, a kindly man, was just not up to that candidacy and that's what destroyed him. You can only do so much for a candidate, and at that point it's really him.

GREENE: Yes, I think that seems to be a generally acknowledged thing.

BLUMENTHAL: You know, I had originally supported Samuels, I

[-65-]

nominated him even though Kennedy didn't like him. But when the convention was over I went to work in the O'Connor headquarters. I managed the statewide candidacy of the delegates-at-large for the constitutional convention, and I worked with the O'Connor people simultaneously because they did the thing together, and I watched the O'Connor campaign. It was just a very badly run campaign, and what I don't understand is how we won the statewide delegates race and lost the gubernatorial race. It tells me it was a really Democratic year, but the Democratic candidate couldn't make it.

GREENE: Well, it's been consistently that way in New York, really with Rockefeller. He so many times has been way down in the poll, and at the end he pulls out that endless....

BLUMENTHAL: Only because we never gave him any real competition. I am firmly

convinced that he won his first race on his own on the merits. He ran against Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman], a good man, but a terrible candidate. Rockefeller was a new, fresh face. He ran as part of the Republican liberal establishment, and he won when Dorothy Schiff changed her mind at the last minute and endorsed him. I personally believe that Rockefeller was downhill from that time on, but we never opposed him with a topflight candidate. All our candidates had such serious drawbacks that they were never able to mount an effective campaign. The divisiveness, of which I was a part, hurt; lack of money hurt. Rockefeller's control of money was unbelievable. I remember when Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] ran, Goldberg's absolute astonishment at Rockefeller's ability to capture all of his former friends because they were all indebted to Rockefeller for one reason or another. It's a mark of the Rockefeller work ethic. He has made great speeches about how people don't want to work today, and as Alan King said last night at the Liberal party dinner, those are very notable speeches for a man who never worked a day in his life for his money.

GREENE: Do you remember at the convention the fight over the rest of the ticket? Did you get involved in that?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, I certainly did.

GREENE: What do you remember about that?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I remember that there was a great revolt, a feeling that the gubernatorial selection had been rigged. The Samuels people were really outraged.

[-66-]

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: The blacks were very unhappy for other reasons. Even Ray Jones [J. Raymond Jones] was unhappy. There were a lot of people who just didn't like the way the whole thing had been done. A lot of promises had been made with respect to delegates-at-large to the constitutional convention which were broken, and there began a ground swell. There was actually a revolt. Howard Samuels was not intended to be O'Connor's running mate, it was supposed to be Sedita [Frank A. Sedita] who was supposed to run.

GREENE: Right, right.

BLUMENTHAL: And all of a sudden the convention got out of control. It was really a beautiful sight to watch, because they just insisted that it be Samuels, and it was.

GREENE: And Ray Jones was...

BLUMENTHAL: ...for Samuels. He was sufficiently aggravated over the way things had gone.

GREENE: Was that 'cause O'Connor just couldn't control the situation?

BLUMENTHAL: Couldn't control himself, couldn't control his people, and couldn't control the situation.

GREENE: And Kennedy withdrew from the whole thing?

BLUMENTHAL: He had withdrawn....Once the whole thing got underway, other than watching it on television...

GREENE: Well, he did make an effort to get Jack Weinstein [Jack B. Weinstein] on the ticket and that....

BLUMENTHAL: But, in terms of the major efforts, other than keeping informed and a variety of people claiming to speak in the name of Robert Kennedy, as they frequently did, Kennedy himself watched it from a television in a hotel room in Buffalo [Buffalo, New York].

GREENE: Do you figure that's because he knew it was lost and it was very hard to get any interest in it?

BLUMENTHAL: I figure it was because he felt that there was nothing he could accomplish affirmatively, and

[-67-]

since he couldn't be affirmative about it, he'd just as soon do nothing about it.

GREENE: But did he lend them Smith [Stephen E. Smith] and his whole apparatus at that point?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, absolutely. He gave them everybody.

GREENE: And did you go into it yourself mainly because of him?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. He asked me.

GREENE: Personally.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: That was really the only reason you went in.

BLUMENTHAL: The only reason. I didn't need to give up those moments of my life like I...

GREENE: I was going to say, how do you feel about.... I mean, that wasn't the only time things like that happened. How do you feel when philosophically you're not really in agreement with it, and it's really a matter of strictly personal loyalty?

BLUMENTHAL: I believe in personal loyalty. I believe you when you have somebody who's, on the merits, a worthy friend and somebody who's worth public life, that when they ask you to do something you do it, unless it goes so against your grain that you can't do it.

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: And he never asked me to do anything that went against my grain.

GREENE: Do you know of people who, in this case or similar instances, turned him down and said they just....

BLUMENTHAL: I know people who just didn't bother. Too many people told him yes and never showed up. I don't want to get into that.

GREENE: Okay. Do you have any thing to add—this is sort of backing up a little bit—about FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] memo on the deal that was cut, supposedly the year before, which there are disagreements about why FDR used this, and assuming he was using it to his own advantage, that

[-68-]

Kennedy was naive in thinking that it would really have as great an impact as it did?

BLUMENTHAL: I'm not familiar with the memo.

GREENE: Okay. Do you want me to remind you, or doesn't it sound familiar?

BLUMENTHAL: Remind me.

GREENE: All right.

BLUMENTHAL: What did he claim?

GREENE: He claimed that he had a memo that proves that there was a deal cut two years before that if O'Connor....

BLUMENTHAL: In the mayoral race, you mean, between Beame [Abraham D. Beame] and O'Connor?

GREENE: Yes, right. And that then he would have the gubernatorial nomination in '66.

BLUMENTHAL: He made that claim that Kennedy was part of that deal?

GREENE: No, no. He went to Kennedy and wanted Kennedy to use this memo to get O'Connor out of the race and therefore throw the nomination to him.

BLUMENTHAL: Oh, oh. Well, I think it's been fairly well established that there was such a deal.

GREENE: Right. Oh, yes.

BLUMENTHAL: I don't think anybody seriously questions that.

GREENE: But Kennedy seem to have thought that that would have a big impact on the campaign, and actually New Yorkers seemed to just shrug their shoulders at it, you know.

BLUMENTHAL: I guess the amount of the impact is the fact that I really didn't even remember the memo.

GREENE: Okay.

BLUMENTHAL: It all goes back to what I said originally. It's got nothing to do with anything. Either the candidate can make it or he can't. I mean, they certainly threw plenty of stuff at Carey in the primary.

[-69-]

Howard in the last couple of weeks talked about oil all day long. Once a candidate catches on, that kind of thing really just runs off your back. And if you can't catch on, nothing you do is going to help you.

GREENE: Also people said—O'Connor himself has said this, and I've read that Beame has said it—that having Robert Kennedy on your side is really a mixed blessing, especially when he's out actually campaigning for you, that you either capture people on your own merits, or the only thing he can really do is

draw a crowd for you, and in some cases he actually takes the attention away from the candidate himself.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think it is true that he does attract a great deal of attention, and if the candidate himself doesn't have some attractiveness, he's going to get submerged into the Kennedy presence. I think that's true. And Beame got submerged in the Kennedy presence every time they went out campaigning together. Beame got submerged in the campaign, too. An endorsement, per se, cannot win an election for you over a superior rival. If you're superior, you're going to win. An endorsement can help you. If you're inferior to your rival, it's hard for anybody to endorse you to the point where you're going to win. What endorsements do are help you gain public recognition where you lack it for yourself, help you raise money when you lack the resources...

GREENE: Draw crowds.

BLUMENTHAL: ...draw crowds. In the final analysis either you've got the capacity to win it or not, and the endorsements alone will not do it for you.

GREENE: I think that's something that is not widely understood.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, more people ought to think about it, because if they go back in political history they'll find that every time they attempt to track a winner to somebody's endorsement, it really is only half true. I suppose there are occasional exceptions, but as a basic rule it's half true.

GREENE: They'd have to be very close races, probably.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: That's where it could make a difference. Let me sort of try this on you. Some people have said this and others...

[-70-]

BLUMENTHAL: Can I interrupt you...

GREENE: Sure, of course. [Interruption] There's been some debate, I don't know if you've heard it, but some people say that Robert Kennedy really didn't want anybody else of any charisma, any other leadership in the state, and that one of the reasons that perhaps he wasn't working harder for O'Connor—and this of course disagrees with what you say, but I'm interested in your response to it—was that O'Connor had already shown that he was partial to LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] and Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], and that in '68 or potentially '72, where Kennedy was a potential rival of Johnson and/or Humphrey, that he was not likely to be an ally of his

because he had already established himself in the LBJ camp, that this was one reason he may not have been more enthusiastic about the O'Connor candidacy. Does that make any sense?

BLUMENTHAL: No, because he would not have sent as many of his people over to the O'Connor campaign if that was his motivation. It wasn't just Smith, Haddad [William Frederick Haddad] was over there. A whole group of people were over there who came strictly out of the Kennedy apparatus and who worked very, very, hard. I don't accept that as a reason. And in '66, Kennedy's perceptions about the White House for himself were very imprecise. As late as December of '67, they were still very imprecise

GREENE: Well, imprecise, but none the less weren't they sort of an assumption as well as an eventuality?

BLUMENTHAL: Only by some people around him, not by him.

GREENE: You don't feel...

BLUMENTHAL: No. I am firmly convinced that he really had such mixed feelings about the whole issue that it was almost an accident. As a matter of fact, I'll go further. I'm not sure but that if Gene McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] hadn't gone into New Hampshire, I can't swear to you that Kennedy would have run. I think Kennedy felt that he had a way to go, that he was developing himself and issues and a constituency around which he saw his future.

GREENE: Okay, but in his future don't you think he always saw—or I don't mean always, but certainly since the assassination—he always saw a presidential race. Not in terms of '68.

BLUMENTHAL: Perhaps, but I don't think he saw.... But

[-71-]

then why would you worry about who was governor in 1966?

GREENE: Well, just in terms of Humphrey as his future rival, after Johnson. Of course, everybody assumed that Johnson would run in '68, and that would leave Humphrey for '72. Do you think that's all really too Machiavellian?

BLUMENTHAL: Kennedy's constant statement was "You live each day, that day." I never saw him that way. I saw a lot of people around him that way, but I never saw him that way.

GREENE: Maybe then the question becomes whether people like O'Connor

perceive this and read that type of motivation or lack of it into the whole pattern of things and rationalize it.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think losers tend to read a lot of things into why they lose, and particularly the supporters of losers tend to read in a lot of things. I know that from personal experience, and I keep explaining and re-explaining to people who worked with me and for me when I ran for mayor that you can rationalize and blame all you want, the facts remain that candidates win or lose because they're able to mount the effort, and if they don't make it it's because something went wrong for them, and passing blame or assorted motives is not going to answer the question.

GREENE: Okay. That takes care of '66. Is there anything else in '66 you can think of that we haven't talked about?

BLUMENTHAL: No.

GREENE: Okay. The Constitutional Convention which really starts at the same time in terms of the delegate selection, you said you said you didn't really take that active an interest in it, but....

BLUMENTHAL: No, I wasn't a delegate, and there were a lot of people up there who were almost all of whom claimed to speak in Kennedy's name and....

GREENE: In being the campaign chairman for the Committee to Elect Delegates—is that the correct title?

BLUMENTHAL: Something like that.

GREENE: Was that a position that you sought on your own?

[-72-]

Did Kennedy help you get it, or...

BLUMENTHAL: When Kennedy had asked me to take a role in the O'Connor campaign, I was reluctant, other than on an advisory basis on state issues, to get involved on a daily basis, and so I think I became a member of the Tuesday Morning Club—or whatever the hell they called it—and then I think he followed up by asking.... Apparently they were having trouble finding somebody to run the “con-con” part of it, and that would not be a full-time effort. It was something that I could do consistent with the other things I had to do. And he asked me if I would do that and sort of coordinate their campaign with the O'Connor campaign, and try to develop a modest budget for them and try to get some modest advertising for them. I never knew ten more disinterested candidates in my entire life. It was hard to get them to go anywhere. That was all.

GREENE: Do you remember conversations with him, then or subsequently, about what he hoped would come out of the convention...

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: ...and how he saw his role in it?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't think I remember any conversations with him other than general conversations on some of the issues. One place where he did agree with Rockefeller was the community development article which we did talk about, I think, on at least one and maybe two occasions, where he saw that as a way to get out of the indirect financing business and allow the state some leverage with full faith and credit obligations for something, for full faith and credit development. I don't remember discussing any other issues with him.

GREENE: What about the composition of the delegation? Do you remember? There was a discussion that there were too many legislators and judges and established interests in that...

BLUMENTHAL: That's one of the reasons I didn't run.

GREENE: Did he have strong reasons on that, one way or the other, that you remember? Did he make any real effort to change the composition?

BLUMENTHAL: Excuse me. [Interruption]

GREENE: Of course, what happened is that he ended up on the conservative side of the whole issue because

[-73-]

the more liberal people were all opposing the adoption of the constitution as it was finally drafted.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, they were opposed to the repeal of the Blaine Amendment.

GREENE: Right. And therefore they had to oppose the whole thing because it was delivered as one...

BLUMENTHAL: ...As a single package.

GREENE: ...package. Right. Well, first of all, do you remember any discussions with him about what he might do to prevent it from being delivered as a single package, or was that out of his hands?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, my recollection which is very vague—and you prompted it at lunch, frankly, and I'm not even sure it's a correct recollection—is that some of us.... And I believe he had recommended that the thing be broken up in parts. Not just the Blaine Amendment part, but several other questions be put to the public separately. But Travia had come to the conclusion that he could ram through the Blaine Amendment by putting the whole thing in a package. He was under the opinion that every parochial school parent would just come out and automatically vote for it, and we pointed out that there were some provisions in there which would take conservatives aback, particularly some of the debt provisions, and that it was just going to be wrong, and he listened to nobody. I do not know whether Kennedy went to the mat with him on that or not, frankly.

GREENE: What was interesting is, every other major figure—Javits, Lindsay [John V. Lindsay], Kennedy—they all came out against the constitution as it was finally presented. The only one who came out for it, along with Kennedy, was Rockefeller. Do you know if he had anything to do with that? Did he go to Rockefeller on it at all...

BLUMENTHAL: I have no idea.

GREENE: ...to get enough support from him? You don't? Okay, and as far as the substance of the Blaine Amendment, did you ever discuss that with him? The actual issue involved?

BLUMENTHAL: We had once had a discussion. My recollection of my impression was that while he thought public funds should help the nonpublic schools, it wasn't a blazing issue with him. He seemed relatively calm

[-74-]

about it.

GREENE: Okay. Anything else on that? That doesn't seem to be a major issue in your mind.

BLUMENTHAL: No.

GREENE: Okay. And we've discussed the abortion thing.... Okay. The next thing is Ronnie Eldridge and the Tammany leadership fight, which I guess is a sort of sad but fun kind of thing at the same time, from what she has said. I guess it ended up more sad than fun, but the challenge was...

BLUMENTHAL: Wasn't much fun.

GREENE: ...the idea of a challenge.... Do you remember how the whole thing

started, and how Kennedy got involved, and how much you counted on his support?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, I remember exactly how he got involved. We flew with Kennedy once to Syracuse University, and he was moaning and groaning terribly about the shape of the New York county organization, and he took me aside on one portion of the trip and said, “Do you want to be a county leader?”, and I said, “No.” I said, “Why don't you talk to Jerry Kretchmer? He's much more the county leader type.” So he took Jerry aside, and Jerry said, “No.” And then when we got back we were talking to Ronnie—this was after we left Kennedy, as I recall it—and Ronnie said, “How about me?” And we said, “That's great.”

GREENE: He had never mentioned her though?

BLUMENTHAL: Not originally. And we went to Kennedy with the idea of Ronnie being county leader, and he was kind of intrigued with the idea because he liked Ronnie but didn't believe it was do-able, and he set some very high levels of conditions which we would have to establish, the three of us, to produce this climate in which he would be willing to intervene.

GREENE: Do you remember what they were?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, just about produce the entire county and he would come in to bless it. And unfortunately he was away when we were trying to put these things together; and we called him in when he got back. I mean, he just didn't understand until too late that it was do-able. And it was too late. By then we had lost the pieces.

[-75-]

GREENE: When he laid down these conditions, which you make sound rather unrealistic, you must have decided that it was worth trying even without the support.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, we did, because we felt it was really doable. We felt that this was a fight we could win, that the county was in bad shape.

GREENE: It wasn't a matter of counting on him coming in perhaps short of what he specified?

BLUMENTHAL: It was a hope that if we could put enough pieces together, so that we were near the vote, to demonstrate to him that we weren't whistling Dixie, that in fact this was something that was do-able. We felt Ronnie, by the way, was uniquely well-qualified. It was something she really wanted to do. It would be great to have a woman as county chairman of New York County particularly. What

better place to have this all start, it's supposed to be the most enlightened county in the country. It all just seemed the right thing to do—the right candidate, the right circumstances, and the right guy with the leverage at the end to help us put the few pieces together that we might not on our own be able to do.

GREENE: I have that his actual offer—and this is according to Jack Newfield—that he would get two reform votes if you could round up six. Does that sound about like what you remember?

BLUMENTHAL: That he, Kennedy, would get two reform votes?

GREENE: Yes.

BLUMENTHAL: We got all the...

GREENE: No this was his initial offer, that he felt he could get you two votes if you could get six.

BLUMENTHAL: We all got the reform votes. We had all the reform votes ready.

GREENE: But this is initially. Did you realize you could get them all?

BLUMENTHAL: No, that wasn't his offer at all. That's about as accurate as most everything else Newfield writes.

GREENE: Okay, good. I mean that's good....

[-76-]

BLUMENTHAL: That wasn't his offer at all. The conditions were that we had to.... First of all, reformers alone could not win, which was true because there were many people who said they were reformers who in fact were not reformers. So reformers could not win. It meant that there had to be a coalition. That was the first condition.

GREENE: Right, right.

BLUMENTHAL: That meant that we had to have support out of the black delegation and we had to find some regular or quasi-regular support. So it meant we'd need either all or almost all of the reform support, and we had to add pieces from the other elements and get sufficiently close so that if he were to come in he could produce...

GREENE: ...Just a little.

BLUMENTHAL: ...a little bit. That may be where Jack remembers two votes. It had nothing to do with the initial proposition. The initial proposition was, we had to demonstrate that Ronnie could be a coalition candidate. That was what he wanted out of us. That was the one time that Percy [Percy E. Sutton] didn't return Kennedy's phone call—it was on the morning of the vote—because he was back too late. Had Kennedy been back a day earlier I think we would have gotten Percy Sutton.

GREENE: Yes. I didn't understand that, why you didn't get Sutton. He kept trying him and couldn't reach him. Was he making...

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, because it was the morning of the vote, and Percy had waited and waited for Kennedy to call him...

GREENE: And then he was deliberately out.

BLUMENTHAL: ...and the day before, having not had that crucial call, he felt he had an obligation to some other people, and he went on with his obligation, and I understand what Percy is saying. I was disappointed, but I understood what he was saying. You don't call a guy at eleven o'clock, which is two hours before the vote.

GREENE: 'Cause as I remember, he wouldn't even answer Kennedy's calls.

BLUMENTHAL: No, he was furious, as well as he might be. Kennedy never believed us when we said we could

[-77-]

put together the coalition. All we would need would be the help at the crucial time, so that he would certify that we had the coalition. And he knew we wouldn't tell him something that wasn't true. I mean, the one premise we had going for us with Kennedy always was if we said we had, he knew we had.

GREENE: Right. What about Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan]?

BLUMENTHAL Joe?

GREENE: Yes. Because he was really the one that was representing Kennedy through the whole thing til the last minute. Kennedy was off skiing as I recall.

BLUMENTHAL: That's right. He was having a good time.

GREENE: Do you think part of the problem might have been that Dolan wasn't keeping him accurately appraised of the situation?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't know. I wasn't there when they were talking on the phone.

GREENE: Wasn't this when he came back, too, and he got real angry for one of the few times he got real angry? They brought him all the way back from the skiing vacation, and he said, "What do you want me to do?" And nobody really had any very precise details on how they wanted him to proceed.

BLUMENTHAL: We knew what we wanted him to do. His staff didn't know what they wanted him to do, but we knew.

GREENE: Well maybe that was where the problem lay.

BLUMENTHAL: We knew what we wanted him to do.

GREENE: Okay, why was there that discrepancy? [Interruption] What might have accounted for the discrepancy between what you had in mind and what his staff was telling him? Because I remember hearing from a number of people that he was just irate. They dragged him back from the skiing vacation, and nobody really knew what they wanted him to do, how they wanted him to proceed.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, you know, I don't want to point fingers

[-78-]

'cause I'm not sure who was responsible. I don't mind pointing a finger if I'm certain. All I know is that his staff had been thoroughly briefed by us, and we knew exactly what we needed. We heard afterwards that they had not set up.... I mean, when the man arrived they had not set up the telephone list, they didn't know where anybody was, they had not advanced what he was supposed to do. I think, in part, his anger was due to the fact that maybe he realized that had he given a little more a little sooner, it just might have worked. And, we were pretty angry.

GREENE: That's what I was going to ask you.

BLUMENTHAL: It was the one time, it was the one time that I can recall—I think it was the only time—when Ronnie cried, and Jerry and I almost cried because we had come very close and somebody screwed it up. We didn't know who to point the finger at.

GREENE: You didn't really point it at him though?

BLUMENTHAL: Mad at him. Very angry at him. I was angry at him for quite some time.

GREENE: Was there discussion of that?

BLUMENTHAL: I told him I was.

GREENE: Did he apologize or say he was sorry, or anything like that?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah.

GREENE: He did.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, but I told him he'd fucked up.

GREENE: Yes. I wondered about that, how much bitterness. Ronnie didn't seem in my talking to her....

BLUMENTHAL: She's not bitter. Nobody was bitter. We were angry. There's a difference between anger and bitterness. Nobody was embittered. It was a lost opportunity which would have been a good one, and we were angry because we came so close, and we believed we could have won. But no bitterness. But a lot of anger.

GREENE: The other one that I'm thinking of besides Percy Sutton that's sort of surprising was Zaretski [Joseph L. Zaretski], he was not a surprise, the fact that you couldn't get him?

[-79-]

BLUMENTHAL: No. We always knew where Joe was. We would have gotten Joe had we had the votes. Then Joe would have voted....

GREENE: He was looking for the winner?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, Joe always played it safe. Joe was a minority leader. Once in his life he was a majority leader. All he cared about was being minority leader of the senate, and he was not going to do anything or....

GREENE: Nothing daring.

BLUMENTHAL: Nothing daring. That was not Joe Zaretski.

GREENE: Okay. We don't have much time, but is there anything else in '67 that comes to mind that we should talk about that I might not have in ....

BLUMENTHAL: The only thing would be the late '67 conversations, back and forth, about whether he should or shouldn't run him.

GREENE: Okay, that was the next topic.

BLUMENTHAL: But that opens up the whole area of the presidential race.

GREENE: Okay. Why don't we save that for next time, and just let me ask you briefly about his staff, and how you found working with them, and who you might have found particularly helpful, cooperative, and those you might have had some difficulties with. Do you have any....

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I won't discuss the latter. I found substantively the guy that was the greatest pleasure to work with was Peter Edelman. With respect to the rest of his staff, there were people I didn't like but I don't think there's any point in going into that.

GREENE: Well, what about the New York office, in general? For instance Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston]. Did you have much contact with him?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, frequent contact. Bright, capable guy.

GREENE: Generally cooperative and....

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, on most matters.

[-80-]

GREENE: You seem reticent. Much contact with Adam Walinsky?

BLUMENTHAL: Adam? Yes, a great deal. Earl Graves [Earl G. Graves], yeah.

GREENE: How were they?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think by and large, he had a staff that was more competent than most.

GREENE: Okay, that doesn't look like a very fruitful avenue of discussion. Do we have another couple of minutes? Should we go on or stop for today?

BLUMENTHAL: If we're going to start a whole new subject area that's going to take a lot of time to talk about, I hate to say it but I think we ought to quit.

GREENE: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW #3]

[-81-]

Albert H. Blumenthal Oral History Transcript – RFK #3  
Name Index

**A**

Altman, Benjamin, 63

**B**

Beame, Abraham D., 69, 70  
Blumenthal, Joel Marie, 62  
Burke, David W., 60

**C**

Carey, Hugh Leo, 60, 69  
Crangle, Joseph F., 60

**D**

Dolan, Joseph F., 78

**E**

Edelman, Peter B., 60, 61  
Eldridge, Ronnie M., 60, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80  
English, John F., 60, 62, 63

**G**

Gardner, John W., 64  
Goldberg, Arthur J., 66  
Graves, Earl G., 81

**H**

Haddad, William Frederick, 71  
Harriman, William Averell, 66  
Hughes, John H., 57  
Humphrey, Hubert H., 71, 72

**J**

Javits, Jacob K., 52, 53, 74  
Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 71, 72  
Johnston, Thomas M.C., 80  
Jones, J. Raymond, 67

**K**

Kennedy, Edward Moore, 60  
Kennedy, Ethel Skakel, 59

Kennedy, Robert F., 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 58, 60, 61,  
62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74,  
75, 76, 77, 78

Kheel, Theodore Woodrow, 64

King, Alan, 66

Kretchmer, Jerome, 60, 75, 79

Krupsak, Mary Anne, 56

**L**

Lindsay, John V., 74

Linowitz, Sol M., 64

**M**

McCarthy, Eugene G., 52, 53, 56, 57, 58, 61

McCarthy, Eugene J., 71

**N**

Newfield, Jack, 76, 77

Nickerson, Eugene H., 62, 63, 64

**O**

O'Connor, Frank D., 65, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73

**P**

Perkins, James Alfred, 64

**R**

Rockefeller, Nelson A., 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 65, 66,  
73, 74

Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr., 64, 68

**S**

Samuels, Howard J., 63, 65, 66, 67, 70

Sedita, Frank A., 67

Schiff, Dorothy, 66

Shriver, Eunice Kennedy, 59

Smith, Stephen E., 68, 71

Steingut, Stanley, 63

Sutton, Percy E., 77, 79

## **T**

Travia, Anthony J., 52, 63, 74

## **V**

Van Dyke, Frank, 52, 53, 56, 57, 58, 61

## **W**

Walinsky, Adam, 81

Watson, Thomas J., Jr., 64

Weinstein, Jack B., 67

Winston, Ellen, 55

## **Z**

Zaretzki, Joseph L., 79, 80