

Donald M. Wilson Oral History Interview –RFK #1, 6/19/1970
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Biographical Note

Wilson, Donald M.; Chief Washington correspondent Life magazine (1956-1960); member, John F. Kennedy's Presidential campaign staff (1960); Deputy Director, U.S. Information Agency (1961-1965). Wilson briefly discusses Robert F. Kennedy's [RFK] senatorial campaign in New York (1965) and presidential campaign (1968). He discusses RFK's contentions with the media and advertising agencies, among other issues.

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page 20 line 37 through line 38
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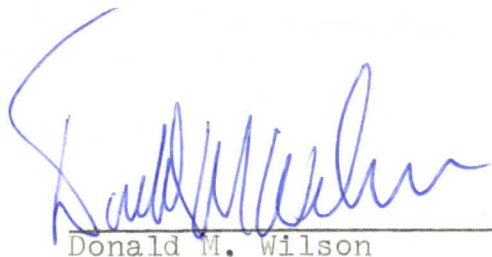
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Donald M. Wilson – RFK #1

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First Oral History Interview

with

DONALD M. WILSON

June 19, 1970
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: I'll start by asking you how much you saw of Robert Kennedy in the months following the president's (John F. Kennedy) death and, particularly, conversations about what he was going to do.

WILSON: Well, I saw a great deal of him in that period. I would say maybe we were over at Hickory Hill two or three times a week. And that summer, when he was debating whether to run for the Senate or not, we went sailing with him up the coast of Maine, which was the period just before the actual race was made. So there was a lot of talk about the New York campaign at that time.

GREENE: That was on (Thomas J., Jr.) Watson's boat?

WILSON: Yes.

GREENE: What are your recollections of that discussion; what was his thinking at the time?

WILSON: He had a funny kind of approach to it, I thought. There was a lot of sort of black humor about running in New York. He constantly made jokes about how little he knew about New York. He was carrying a history of New York, a book on the history of New York, which he read assiduously on that trip and would throw questions out at us. And of course he made a lot of jokes because he really didn't know much about it. But I think what was

happening was he was really clearly started to get interested in New York as a state and in its problems. I think the reading of the history helped him and I thought it was. . . . I could clearly see that this was what I thought was the beginning of a very healthy development in his attitude, because he was finally becoming seized with something new after those months of real desolation.

GREENE: But the decision hadn't actually been made at that time or . . .

WILSON: Yes, the decision really had been made. I'm trying to put the time frame there. I think the trip was made just before he came back and actually announced.

GREENE: It was.

WILSON: Is that right?

GREENE: It was right after he had made the statement that he would only run with Mayor (Robert F., Jr.) Wagner's support.

WILSON: Right. Okay, yes. In effect, he had decided to run though. On the boat, where of course everything was confidential and relaxed, why, there was no doubt that he was going to do it. And I didn't. . . . As I recall, really, there wasn't any agonizing or any particular hesitation by then about the decision.

GREENE: Do you have knowledge of some of the other things he had considered earlier and especially the vice presidential nomination, whether that was of real interest to him?

WILSON: Oh, yes, he surely wanted that. There was no question about it. He talked about that very openly and was very interested in it. And I don't really think he was terribly surprised when he got X'ed out of it by President (Lyndon B.) Johnson. I think of all the jobs he wanted after his brother's death, that was the one he wanted most.

GREENE: Did he ever reason it out with you? Do you know why he wanted it when he'd always viewed it as a really powerless and degrading position?

WILSON: Yes, I think at first he wanted it because when he looked at other alternatives, none of them seemed to be as good as that. And I think that he thought because of who he was and what kind of a person he was, I think he really believed he could be different

as vice president, and I think he wanted to be president even then. And I think he really believed that that was the best route to becoming president. Oddly enough, I don't remember him making the kind of comments you might normally associate with the vice-presidency--as a sort of a nothing office. I think he very strongly thought that he could be much more active and effective in it than others had been.

GREENE: Just to back up a bit, did you get into conversations with him in this whole period, up to the time he started to run, about other matters that you were involved in that he was interested in, specifically at USIA (United States Information Agency)? How much of a continuing interest did he have in these things?

WILSON: Very much so. He always was interested in what was going on at USIA. Whenever I saw him, he'd ask me what was going on there. And as the months went by, he became, well, somewhat bitter on some of the reports I gave him. Because, of course, USIA's job was to project the best side of American foreign policy, and part of the way of doing this, obviously, was through the personality of the president. So, in a sense, we were in a very sensitive kind of a position because we had to make films and books and things on President Johnson, all of which had to be very positive. I think he understood the need for that, but, nevertheless, he found it, I think he found it, a rather bitter pill to take at that time.

And also there was a . . . President Johnson was very sensitive always about his comparison with President Kennedy. And being in USIA, you got into the comparison thing all the time. And I used to report everything to Bobby, and he used to shake his head and very characteristically he used to . . . He had kind of a mannerism which was kind of a "tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk," tsk, tsk type thing which he did very frequently. There was a lot of that at that time, a lot of that at that time.

GREENE: Were there policy changes that were taking place that upset him, too? Or was it mainly a question, as you've described, of personalities?

WILSON: No, there really weren't many policy changes that took place during that period that I can recall, anyway. It was really, mainly, a matter of personalities. What comes to mind most are films, really. We put into the works a film on John F. Kennedy--which we've subsequently finished--which was called Years of Lightning, Day of Drums, which eventually, you may recall, was shown commercially and still is. But one thing we also did--had to do, really--and it was right. . . . We also started a film on President Johnson, a shorter film, which came a little bit later because we went immediately to work

on the film on John F. Kennedy. And of course he was very interested in both those films, particularly the one on Kennedy.

GREENE: Did he follow it in its progress, or was he mainly interested in just seeing that it was done?

WILSON: He was mainly interested in seeing it was done. It still was very difficult to talk about it; we just went ahead and did it. And I'd give him a rough rundown on how it was coming, and then I'd always tell him how the Johnson film was coming, and he used to be amused by that. But, no, there weren't any real policy problems that I can remember at USIA.

I do remember that my feeling at that time was very strongly one of wanting to get out of the government and--although I didn't. I stayed in for a year after. I actually stayed in for a year and a half after President Kennedy's death; I left in the summer of '65. But I was dispirited and disillusioned. I had known him a long time and closely, and when I had problems of that kind, I used to often turn to him and ask for his advice. And it was the first time I'd ever known him when I would turn to him and--I was so used to. . . . I turned to him and I asked for advice on my own problems, and he wasn't giving any advice in those days--at least, not to me. He just would shake his head. His problems were so much bigger than mine that I wouldn't pursue it.

But I was interested in. . . . Actually, what I wanted to do was I wanted to get out of Washington, but I liked the government. And what I wanted to do was get an ambassadorship. I told him this very frankly. We talked it over and he said, "You'll never have a chance of getting an ambassadorship because you're too closely affiliated with me in the mind of the president, in the eye of the president." And, well, I never got an ambassadorship. I don't know whether that was the reason or not. In retrospect, I'm just as glad, but at the time it was really what I wanted to do--mainly, because I wanted to stay in the government, but I wanted to get out of Washington, which I found oppressive.

GREENE: Did he ever talk in terms, personally or generally, about people that he was close to and the president was close to who stayed in for, as you say, a year, a year and a half? How did that sit with him?

WILSON: Oh, I don't think that sat too badly. Each case was different. I mean, after all, I stayed in and I don't think that sat too badly with him. I think he understood. I think he was very compassionate about the fact that we all loved the government. And I think he realized there was terrific conflict in a lot of people's minds between tremendous enjoyment of the work and the fact that we no longer had as president the man we had gone into the government with.

But I never, no, I never can remember him ever being critical of anyone for staying in the government. I can remember him. . . . I think he was critical of some people who he thought just sort of had once been totally close to President Kennedy and totally loyal and then seemed to just throw themselves at President Johnson. I heard him make some comments, undoubtedly many comments, along those lines. But . . .

GREENE: Do specific people come to mind in that regard?

WILSON: Yeah, well, a lot of them do. The one person that comes to mind particularly is (McGeorge) Mac Bundy. He was really very unhappy with the whole vice presidential thing. He was furious about that.

GREENE: Because of that phone call from him where he asked him to withdraw?

WILSON: Yes, yes, yes. He was really furious about that. Well, you know, the Kennedys--Robert and Ethel[Skakel]--attached a great amount of importance to loyalty, I always thought. And once somebody really committed an act which they regarded as patently disloyal, it was pretty hard to ever get back in their good graces again.

GREENE: And Bundy never really did?

WILSON: I don't think so, no.

GREENE: Did you work at all on the Kennedy Library in that period? Were you advising at all?

WILSON: No.

GREENE: No?

WILSON: No.

GREENE: On any other projects that he was interested in?

WILSON: No, not really. I was really very busy at that time. At least for most of those months I was running USIA and because they hadn't named a new director--(Edward R.) Murrow having. . . . Murrow got sick and had to resign, due to cancer, one month after President Kennedy was shot--I was sort of there for

a long time until (Carl T.) Rowan got named. Incidentally, on that subject, Robert Kennedy always thought that my chances of getting the directorship of USIA were very slim. And once again, he used to say that one of the main reasons was that I was so closely affiliated with him. Whether that's. . . . I think there's a lot of truth to it, too.

GREENE: Well, we can go back to the Palawan. Was there anything specific on that trip that you didn't mention that seems important? As I know it, Rowland Evans and Paul Fay and the Watsons and Mrs. Kennedy were aboard. Was it fairly unanimous among them that he ought to do this New York thing, or were there still people close to him who thought he shouldn't?

WILSON: No, I would say that it was unanimous that he should do it. No, it was unanimous that he should do it. Well, we did discuss what it was going to be like to be a senator. Of course, he hadn't gone through the campaign then, and there wasn't any assurance he'd win. Although, oddly enough, I don't remember any real discussion of the campaign itself, which, I think, probably turned out to be tougher than he thought it was going to be, undoubtedly turned out to be tougher than he thought it was going to be. We really were kind of assuming he would be elected. And so we discussed what it would be like to be a junior senator. And he really had grave misgivings about that. But still, by the time we were on the Palawan, he really had started to get his motor charging about running for the office and then holding the office. He was clearly in a healthier frame of mind then, than he had been in the previous months. I mean, he was really more fun to be with, and it was positive.

GREENE: Did he ask you at that time or later to work in the campaign, or did he assume you couldn't because of your position?

WILSON: We discussed that, and as a matter of fact, he took the initiative and said I couldn't, or I shouldn't because I was in the government. So I really didn't, except for one time when I came up and spent a couple of hours with him looking over commercials in one of the tape studios here in Manhattan.

GREENE: Those were the (Frederic S.) Papert clips that we talked about?

WILSON: Yeah.

GREENE: How satisfied was he with these?

WILSON: He didn't like them. But he was a very hard man to satisfy on television commercials or literature or what have you. I remember he also asked me what I thought of his literature. And as I recall, I think I said I thought it was pretty good. This was after the fact, after most of it had been created and was actually in printed form. No, he wasn't happy with the commercials at all, and he was very critical of Papert and the ad agency. But I really, having gone through it all again with him in '68, think he was the kind of man who was always very ill at ease with advertising, advertising people, and very ill at ease with anything that involved him in terms of pictures--the transmission of him over television or on the printed page or what have you. He was really a very intensely critical guy about it, and I don't remember him ever being completely satisfied with anything that was ever done on television or on the printed page, ever.

GREENE: Were there other people at this screening?

WILSON: Oh, yes. If I can remember. I mean there must have been five or six others. Steve Smith was there, and Papert was there.

Well, the fact of the matter is, the trouble with the screening is that you're in the middle of a campaign--and I would have guessed this was in sort of, maybe the third week in September--and you really pretty much have to take what they give you by then. And so while you. . . . You know, he complained about a lot of them, and I think he killed a couple of spots. But if he really had done what he wanted to, he probably would have killed them all, and then he wouldn't have had anything to put on television.

GREENE: Were the other people less critical, or did they share his dislike of this stuff?

WILSON: I think everyone was less critical than he. Steve was pretty critical, but I think I was less critical, and I think the other people--I just can't remember who they were. I just remember Steve and Robert being there.

GREENE: I know at some time that George Stevens was brought in to make a campaign film, and he in turn got (Charles Eli) Guggenheim.

WILSON: Right.

GREENE: Was that satisfactory?

WILSON: Yes, that was the one thing he did like. He liked the Guggenheim film very much and after the campaign attributed his victory, or he gave the film a lot of credit for his victory. I don't think he attributed much of the credit to the rest of the advertising effort.

GREENE: What kind of problems would that create with Papert--the fact that his effort was not appreciated and Guggenheim's was? Was this a problem in '64? I know it got to be in '68.

WILSON: Yes, I think it was a problem in '64. The situation with Papert was somewhat similar in '64 and '68 to the extent that Papert had a man who worked for him named (William A.) Murphy who was the man who was in charge of buying the television spots, which is just as important as making the commercials. You have to know when to buy them and when to put them on the air and how to get them on. . . . It's a very tricky art, and Murphy was terrific. Everyone agreed Murphy was what you were really buying when you bought Papert, Koenig and Lois. Also you were buying an agency that believed in you. There was no question that Papert really believed in Robert Kennedy, and so did the people that worked for him. So that was a plus.

I think Kennedy was always dissatisfied with the quality of the product. I think he was satisfied with the techniques involved in buying the time and placing it all. I think he thought they were very good at that, even though he didn't think the product was very good. But I really--injecting myself into it--I don't think he would have been satisfied with anyone's product. He was terribly critical. And this goes back a long time. I mean, I was in the magazine business when I first got to know him. And any story that was ever written about him on any occasion, he always picked apart. He was hypercritical about anything about himself.

GREENE: Was there ever any real consideration given to changing agencies or just getting rid of them completely? Or did he feel that that was the best he could get?

WILSON: No, I can't answer that in '64. I can in '68. "

GREENE: Well, I mean after '64.

WILSON: I mean, if. . . . You want me to jump to '68 on the agency thing?

GREENE: Sure.

WILSON: Okay. Well, in '68, when I called him up and said I would

like to go to work for him, he said, "Great". And a few days transpired, and then Steve Smith called me and all of a sudden I was up and caught in the maelstrom. In effect, Steve said, "You pick the agency", to me, and so I first made a date to go see (William) Bill Bernbach of Doyle Dane Bernbach. And I insisted that Steve come along. He didn't really want to, but I really insisted he come along. And we had a session with Bernbach, and we would have liked to have hired Bernbach. Really, what happened. . . . Now I remember. Bernbach would have done John Kennedy's campaign in '64. An agreement had been made that he would be the ad agency for John Kennedy in '64. And he subsequently became Lyndon Johnson's ad agency as a result of this prior arrangement. Everybody liked Bernbach and thought he was talented. So we went to Bernbach and--in effect were sort of feeling our way up in his office--tried to determine whether he would like to do the Kennedy campaign. And it quickly became apparent that he didn't want to do the Kennedy campaign in '68, the Robert Kennedy campaign--that he wanted to remain neutral. And what he did was remain neutral, for a while anyway.

He kept sending a very bright young man--followed me all over America-- a guy named Arie Kopelman, as I remember his name, with ideas for what we could do in the Kennedy campaign. And I subsequently found out that there were a couple of guys from Doyle Dane who were working for (Eugene J.) McCarthy, and then Doyle Dane itself as an agency finally went to work for (Hubert H.) Humphrey in '68. In other words, to be candid about it, they were placing their bets all over. I thought they behaved badly. But they placed their bets all over, eventually ended up with Humphrey, who was the winner in terms of the nomination. But then they fell out with Humphrey and Humphrey got rid of them in about September. I don't know the details, but they fell out and they ended up with nobody.

But in the session with Bernbach, he was obviously embarrassed not to accept the Kennedy campaign because he previously wanted the John Kennedy campaign so badly, and that he just wasn't going to get into the Robert Kennedy campaign. You could see he wouldn't. So the decision was then thrown back to me. And I really had it; I talked to about three other ad agencies, including Papert, Koenig and Lois. And the pressure was just tremendous to get going because everything was late, as you recall, anyway. The decision was late and the whole thing was late, and the pressure was just enormous.

So I decided on Papert, Koenig and Lois again, really on two bases. One, they wanted it. And that is an important basis. They liked

Robert. They believed in him; they still believe in Robert Kennedy. And that's very important. And two, they'd done him before. And even though I knew that he wasn't happy with them before, what the hell? They'd been through it once, so they knew the difficulties and they still wanted it again. They still had Murphy, who was good. And, you know, they had a lot of film left over from the last time, and it just seemed, with the short time frame, that it really seemed the right thing to do. So we went with Papert, Koenig and Lois again. I have said to Steve Smith, "This is what I think we should do." And he said, "All right, then go ahead and do it." I said, "Well, what about Bobby?" He said, "Well, why don't you call him up and ask him?" And, my god, at that time he was in the middle of California campaigning twenty-two hours a day. I made a couple of phone calls and didn't get through to him. About twenty-four or forty-eight hours elapsed and so I went ahead and said, "Okay, it's Papert, Koenig and Lois."

GREENE: How did he react when he found out?

WILSON: Not bad. He said something like, "Oh, my god. Not them again." But half in jest. I think he realized intuitively and immediately that there were pluses as well as minuses. I think he also realized--in fact, I'm positive he realized--that he was an impossible guy. He, Robert Kennedy, was an impossible guy as far as this kind of relationship was concerned. He really didn't like advertising people, any of them. And he really was always terribly self-conscious about anything involving himself. So away we went. And, gee, man, it was just turbulence the entire 1968 campaign. It was pretty bad actually.

GREENE: Before we get into details of that, I wanted to ask you if you used Papert in the interim between '64 and '68 at all, while he was in the Senate. Did he have any use for that?

WILSON: I don't know the answer to that. I just don't know. I would doubt it.

GREENE: As far as you know, it went from just the '64 race?

WILSON: I can't imagine what he'd need them for, so I doubt it.

GREENE: Yeah, and I think that in '66, with the (Frank) O'Connor campaign, he refused to get them for O'Connor. Do you remember that at all?

WILSON: Is that right? I didn't know. That's interesting. I didn't know that.

GREENE: Maybe there's a connection there. In the Senate period-- I doubt that there's that much specific stuff, but did you see him frequently?

WILSON: Yes, yes. I used to see him very frequently. You know, mine was a mixture of a social and a business relationship. It was really quite a social relationship in that my wife was a very good friend of Ethel's. And so I used to see him at night and on the weekends. And when he was in the Senate, why, he still was--he was always enormously curious about what was going on at USIA. And as he got into the Senate and I really was actively trying to get out of the government and decide what I was going to do, I used to talk to him about my future.

Interestingly enough, he was. . . . I don't know whether he put in a good word for me or not. He may have. But anyway, I was offered a job by Tom Watson, the president of IBM (International Business Machines Corporation), a very good job, and I turned it down in preference to coming to Time, Incorporated, because I liked the Time, Incorporated job better. I liked communications and magazine work better than computers is what it boiled down to, although the other job was a hell of a good job. And he was very disappointed that I didn't take the other job, clearly he was disappointed. He really liked Tom Watson. I think he thought I was nuts not to go to work for IBM and to go back to Time, Incorporated, a company about which he had very mixed feelings since they'd been writing about him in Time and Life for years, some of which had infuriated him.

GREENE: Did he talk to you at all about his problems with them, or ask you to see what you could do about it?

WILSON: Oh, he always talked to me about Time and Life. Whenever. . . . This of course, was characteristic of him. He always tried to get out of you what your expertise was. And certainly, I had expertise in this company. You know, if there was a story or interview going from Time or Life, he'd often call me and ask me about what did I think of such and such a guy who was doing the interviewing and how did I think he'd get treated. Actually, an awful lot of the questions were ones to which I couldn't add any more than he could add, but I'd do my best.

Actually, his brother used to be that way. His brother used to call me up when he was president and ask me about a particular editor or correspondent of Time and Life or Fortune, sometimes at the most outlandish hours. And Bobby did the same thing.

- GREENE: Were there specific people on the staff that he didn't care to have much to do with?
- WILSON: Yeah, he had his favorites and those he didn't like. I mean, he liked the correspondents and he didn't like the editors is really what it boiled down to. He liked Hugh Sidey very much and he liked Hays Gorey very much. And, insofar as he knew some of the editors--he didn't like them very much.
- GREENE: Did he think the distortions came from the editing rather than the reporting?
- WILSON: Yes, yes, he thought the distortions came from the editing and . . .
- GREENE: Is that accurate?
- WILSON: . . . not his friends the reporters. Sometimes it's accurate and sometimes it isn't. But, I mean, you know reporters often reported. . . . These two men I'm talking about are as good as any reporters there are, and they reported some things that he wouldn't have liked. But I think essentially he thought that Time, particularly, was rather anti-Kennedy in their overall bias and had been for some time. And he blamed that on the editors, not on the correspondents in Washington, and essentially he was correct there.
- GREENE: Did he talk to you about his general problems or, you know, his problems with the media? Did he ask advice in this?
- WILSON: Yes, he used to talk to me a lot about that. He would particularly talk to me about media problems of magazines--not television, for example, which I didn't know anything about. But he would talk to me about magazines and what kind of a shake I thought he'd get if he did such and such a story with a magazine. And also he'd often. . . . Of course, he was always being photographed, and he'd often talk to me about that. Since I'd come from Life magazine and knew a lot about the use of photographs and all, why we'd often talk about that. He was never satisfied with any pictures or rarely satisfied. I don't say never; some pictures he liked. But he was rarely satisfied with most pictures that were taken of him and his family.
- GREENE: Would he make comparisons between Life and Look for instance, because they always seemed to favor Look over Life.

WILSON: Yes, he did make comparisons, and he did favor Look over Life mainly because of a personal relationship being developed with Stanley Tretick, who was a photographer for Look.

GREENE: And Warren Rogers?

WILSON: Warren Rogers, yeah. And also Laura Berquist.

GREENE: Yeah, I know who you mean.

WILSON: You know who I mean. And they had a... . No question that Look and Bobby had a long love affair which Life never really had with him. He did, he very much liked Sidey and Gorey, but he didn't really like the treatment he received as well at Life as he did at Look--until, of course, you came to the (William) Manchester thing and then the. . . .

GREENE: Well, that's what I was going to ask you. In the course of that, did you discuss it in terms of Life at all? Did he ever consider when Look behaved "badly"--did he ever talk in terms of giving it to Life instead?

WILSON: There was a consideration. I'm trying to dredge that out of my memory. I know he had one talk with me about it. He had one talk with me about it. It wasn't very long, and I think. . . . I'm really having a hard time remembering. It seemed to me he asked me what kind of treatment I thought Life would give the Manchester book if an arrangement was made with Life. And I think I said to him that. . . . I think very honestly I said that Life was kind of tough and independent, which they are about these things. And I said. . . . He'd had plenty of dealings with them before. Of course, this was a little different; this was a manuscript. But I think generally he asked me my opinion on how much adaptability there would be on the part of the Life editors. And I think I gave him my honest opinion, which was my opinion then and it would be my opinion today, that there wouldn't be too much adaptability and that they would want to run it the way they wanted to run it. . . .

GREENE: Would this explain. . . .

WILSON: I think maybe one of the reasons. . . . I think the reason he went to Look was he thought there would be more flexibility and understanding there. Actually,

exactly what happened with them is exactly what would have happened if they had come to Life, too, I'm sure. Because Life would have had their back up about the same kind of things that Look ultimately did.

GREENE: Did you advise him at all on that whole matter?

WILSON: No, No. I did not advise him on that matter. He never, as far as I can recall, once he got into it with Look, asked my advice on it.

GREENE: Did he before that, other than this one conversation?

WILSON: As I say, there was one conversation from sometime before, quite a bit before.

GREENE: Yeah, but that was the one . . .

WILSON: And you know, I don't know, but for all I know I certainly might have well had some influence on tipping him toward Look instead of Life, although his inclination would have been to go to Look because he had much closer relationships with them and he'd been treated better by them. Generally, the stories Look did between the time of the death of his brother and the senatorial campaign, let's say, were pretty good.

GREENE: Was there talk of other journalists besides those that you were most familiar with in here? Did he ever express opinions of the kind of treatment he was getting from other parts of the press?

WILSON: Well, yes, like almost everybody in public life, he was pretty hung up on the New York Times. And he was nearly always mad at the New York Times about something or other, because the New York Times is a daily and they were always dealing with him or his family, and he really felt the New York Times was an anti-Kennedy paper. And I agree with him; I think it was. I was sympathetic to most of his views. I think the Times was very tough on him and his family by and large. He clearly thought they were bastards and used to use words like that about them.

GREENE: Did he ever discuss his press people with you? There were, you know, three press secretaries, starting with (Edwin O.) Guthman, (A. Wesley Jr.) Barthelmes, and then (Frank F.) Mankiewicz. Did he ever imply what were their strong points and their weak points?

WILSON: No. No, he wouldn't. No, he would not have done that with me. I know I could talk with most authority on his attitude toward Guthman which was, gee, just about 100 percent. I think he thought Guthman was just a tremendous guy and he was crazy about him, and he thought he did a wonderful job for him. I never heard him criticize Guthman. I didn't see as much of him when we got into the Mankiewicz period, because I was back here and he was in Washington, and I just didn't see as much of him those years, the last years, as I did while I was still in Washington. So I can't really comment on that.

GREENE: And Barthelmes, does he stand out in your mind at all?

WILSON: Don't even remember Barthelmes. How long. . . . When was Barthelmes there?

GREENE: Guthman was only in a couple of months, and then Barthelmes took over for the following year, from '65 through June of '66, I guess it would have been.

WILSON: Well, he, of course, post-assassination. Yeah, but Guthman was there from '61 to '65. I barely remember Barthelmes, to be totally candid with you.

I hope you. . . . I'm sure in the course of the interviewing, the trip he made around the world will be documented. Because my wife went on that trip. That is the one he went to Japan first and Indonesia and Thailand and ended up in Germany, I guess, ended up in Berlin. I hope that, well, I'm sure Guthman will be interviewed. That was a very interesting trip. And my wife was on that trip. And I only mention it because Guthman was on the trip. I remember when she came back from the trip how high she was on singing his praises, because obviously Bobby felt that way about him, too. He was very high on Guthman.

GREENE: What about personal conversations during the Senate period? Did you get the impression that he was more satisfied or less satisfied with the Senate than he had expected, and specific things that he liked or disliked or found frustrating in those years?

WILSON: Well, once again, I've got to position myself. I left Washington in approximately July of '65, so I saw most of him up till that point. Then I was here and he was there, and I just didn't see him as much. And I would think those were not very satisfying months for him--the first six months he was in the Senate. I think his humor was rather wry, but I think he felt very

impotent and frustrated. You see, he was just beginning to sort of find himself. I think it was after that that he really found himself and became caught up with the problems of the blacks and the Indians and the Mexicans and the like. But I would say that those first six months were kind of a floundering. He never really was a flounderer; that's not right. But he was certainly starting to try and find his way with only modest success up through that point.

Of course, after that I would only see him if he came to New York or I was there. I really regret that I sort of felt that. Because I saw him less frequently, I missed out on this change, missed out looking into the man's change, which clearly began to take place in his outlook and his personality in this, really, this beginning of identification with the minority elements of our society. You know, I was always fascinated and surprised when I talked to him to find out how much it suddenly had developed, because I wouldn't see him for a couple of months.

GREENE: When can you first remember discussing. . . . Well, I guess you'd have to discuss these problems in the context of the possibility of running for president, or the presidential possibility in terms of the problems. When did he get down to discussing this specifically?

WILSON: Running for the presidency?

GREENE: Yeah, and the factors that he felt were pressing him into it.

WILSON: Well, let me say first that I really felt that there was very clear intention and thought in his mind--and in all our minds, or in close friends of his, even in the summer of '64, even on that boat--that he would run for the presidency. And I think he had it, too. I would be hard put to recall any conversation, although I'm sure we mentioned it. It, maybe, was kind of laughed at a little bit, but I'm sure that everyone really had that in mind.

GREENE: But particularly for '68.

WILSON: Right. I just find it very hard to put a date on it. I didn't personally participate in any of the sort of agonizing sessions in early '68 that I've read about, or in '67, for that matter. I just don't recall.

GREENE: Did you have any advance word that he was going to run, or was it a question of when he announced?

WILSON: Well, now, I knew in advance, well, maybe five or six days, but I'm not sure if I can remember how I knew. I guess we called some--I may have seen him in New York. I think I went to some party one evening during that period, and I think he pretty much indicated he was going to do it.

GREENE: Was he still asking opinions at that point?

WILSON: Yes, yes.

GREENE: And how did you advise him?

WILSON: Oh, I advised him to run. I was--I very much advised him to run.

GREENE: You said you called him right after he announced . . .

WILSON: Yeah, well, he announced . . .

GREENE: . . . and offered your services.

WILSON: He announced on a Saturday and I called him at home Sunday morning about 8 o'clock, before he went to mass. And I could tell that he was quite touched by the fact that I had called. I said, "I want to work for you if I can be of any use. And I want to leave my job and if. . . ." I said, "I haven't talked to anyone here about it, but if it involves quitting my job, then I'll do that." No question he was touched by that and said so. And then he called Ethel to the phone right away and made quite a point out of getting her on the phone and telling her what I volunteered to do. And she was kind of emotional about it, too. That pleased me, as I look back on it, almost as much as anything I can think of. But anyway, he said. . . . As I said, I think he was kind of moved by it a little bit, and he said he'd get in touch with Steve and Steve would be in touch with me. And the implication was I was going to do it. But we didn't, in that phone conversation, discuss what I would do. Of course, he knew what my talents were and he knew what I'd done in the '60 campaign, and, so obviously, I would be somewhere in the area of communications.

GREENE: Let me turn this tape, just so we don't run out in the middle. (Interruption)

WILSON: . . . frustrating if we get going on something good and you find you've been talking into a dead mike.

GREENE: Oh, I know. And yet it's very distracting when you keep going like that. Okay, anyway, you just go ahead now.

WILSON: All right. Well, so until I heard from Steve, I just continued at my job here, because I wasn't positive that they'd have anything that they wanted or have a spot that was right for me and all that sort of stuff--although I was willing to do anything. So about four or five days went by, and I was out in Chicago at some convention in connection with Life magazine when I got a series of phone calls from Steve Smith. And of course, this was always the case: he wanted me to come aboard right away and organize the advertising campaign--in fact, the whole media campaign. And I was out in Chicago. So that night, still in Chicago, I talked to my boss, who at that time was a fellow named (Jerome S.) Jerry Hardy, who is the publisher of Life. I said I wanted to take a leave of absence, and they were great here and let me do it. And I left, and gee, in about three to four more days, I was gone.

So then I checked in with Steve. And the first thing was to pick the ad agency. And I really, I've been through that, or at least the high points of it. As I said, I did talk to some other agencies, but there wasn't anything particular about them. The basic choice was really between Doyle Dane and Papert, and we ended up at Papert. After we picked Papert, then I moved to the Washington office.

As I look back on it--the whole period--it was a very uncoordinated and pretty fouled up scene, really. One of the problems with him and his campaigns and media was really that he had a--he really was always ill at ease with it and always kept it at arm's length. And therefore, unless he had somebody he really totally trusted, he didn't want to sit down and talk with him, so he just wouldn't sit down and talk with the guy--like Papert, who you really should sit down and talk with for an hour or two and say, "Look these are my aims and this is what I want to emphasize", and bat it around. Then the man who's got to spend all this money has a better feeling for what he has to do. He just wouldn't do that, take the time.

And so I was the person to talk to at first, and then (Richard N.) Dick Goodwin got into it. He had great confidence in Dick, at least on the television side of it. And what we ran in terms of television--which is where most of our money had been, television--really, was sort of a four-headed monster. We had Goodwin who worked with John Frankenheimer and, essentially, what they were really interested in was making half-hour movies. They made one for Indiana and they made a sort of a variation of it for Oregon, and then they made a fabulously fine, probably as good a campaign movie as has ever been made, for California.

GREENE: Is that the one that was finally shown at the convention, that Guggenheim one?

WILSON: No, that's a different one. Because as I said, there were four legs. There was that leg. Then there was Guggenheim. Guggenheim wanted the whole advertising, and. . . . I've got to go back. I had forgotten that I did talk to Guggenheim when I was given this responsibility and, in fact, I went down to see Guggenheim in Washington and looked over some of his commercials for other candidates, that he had done as well as some of the Kennedy commercials he had done in '64. And Guggenheim, in effect, said, "Give me the whole television job. Let Papert do the print job. But," he said, "Give me the whole television job." I didn't give it to him because although I thought he was good, he had a very bad reputation, anyway, for not getting his stuff done on time. He was slow. And I don't regret that decision today. Although I still think he's very good and I thought he was good then but he was slow. He never got anything done on time. But if he had had the whole campaign to do, I think he just didn't have the manpower. He had a small outfit, and I don't think he would have succeeded.

But anyway, we did hire. . . . Bobby wanted Guggenheim to do the long film, again. And in effect, what Guggenheim did was really kind of a redo of the one he had in New York, which was kind of a--you've probably seen it--a history of his life, of Bobby's life, with shots here and there. It was very warm and human. And since Bobby had felt it was good in '64, why not stick with that thing again in '68? Now, I think what Bobby really wanted was a new film from Guggenheim, but there wasn't really time to do a new film. It takes a hell of a long time to do it. So, in effect, what Guggenheim did was pick out some hunks of the old one and put some shots of Indiana and California into that and bring it a little up to date. And we used that Guggenheim film quite a lot.

Meanwhile, as I said, Frankenheimer and Goodwin were making long films which we also used. But the real problem was to get enough spots, which is a much different kind of an art.

GREENE: Who brought Frankenheimer on, by the way?

WILSON: Goodwin

GREENE: Goodwin himself.

WILSON: Yeah. Goodwin and Papert barely spoke. They didn't get along at all. I ended up as kind of an umpire with these elements. And somehow or other, we bought

the time, we filled the spots, and we filled it with a fair amount of balance, and I think we probably did it reasonably well, but, my god, was it disorganized because Guggenheim did his half hour film and he also did about eight spots, all of which were always coming in too late. But they were quite good when they came in. Then we had Frankenheimer, who, under great pressure, finally made some spots, too. Then we had Papert who thought that he was supposed to be running the whole campaign and really had no power. I mean, all the power was taken away from him. He was back in New York trying to cut some spots out of a variety of films both Guggenheim and Frankenheimer had shot. And he got a few of his spots on the air, too.

GREENE: Why and by whom was he cut out?

WILSON: Well, he was really partially cut out by me, and he was partially cut out by Goodwin. I think we did that because--well, mainly something that I couldn't see when I first took on this job, but I certainly came to learn-- Bobby really didn't have any faith in him, and you could never get the two of them together. When you get into that situation and you only have a few weeks to go, you really have to have somebody making the films who you know the candidate has some faith in, so when he finally sits down and looks at them, he isn't going to throw them all out the window. And we knew he had faith in two people. One was Goodwin and another was Guggenheim. And since Goodwin hired Frankenheimer and sold Robert Kennedy on Frankenheimer's talents, why, that meant Frankenheimer was in good standing, too.

GREENE: Did you think he was?

WILSON: Oh, I thought he was terrific. Yes, he was very good. He was very good. So, in effect as the campaign went on, Papert faded into the background and we kind of had a Murphy didn't--Murphy, the guy who buys the time. He had an enormous operation. By the time we hit California, he had three or four time buyers and himself, and they were on the phone all day long, all over the place. So that part of the Papert operation, as it had before, once again made great sense and went great guns. Papert himself was reduced to impotency and it was kind of pitiful. And ultimately, Goodwin and I picked the spots that were used. The candidate didn't really see all of them. A lot of them were picked and we used them and he never even saw them. He just never stopped long enough to look at a lot of them.

The same is true of radio. We had a terrible time with the radio,

too. And we didn't do very well in radio. In fact, I think we did badly on radio. I think one of the factors contributing to how badly we did in Oregon was that McCarthy did a good job with radio and we did a poor job with radio.

GREENE: Was it a question of quantity as well as quality, because I've heard people who were in Oregon say that you just couldn't get away from McCarthy. Every time you put your radio on, he was there, and that you almost never heard anything of Kennedy's.

WILSON: Well, it was both. But certainly, the quality was poor. We didn't, until the very end of the campaign, make any really enormous effort to make radio spots as radio spots. We picked stuff out of the television spots, Robert Kennedy's voice saying various things, and used them. And they just weren't very good. Now, as to the quantity, McCarthy must have outdone us two to one on radio spots. Of course, there's a whole story on Oregon which is fascinating. And maybe I ought to talk about it right now.

GREENE: Sure.

WILSON: When we signed up Papert, Koenig and Lois, it was agreed that they would buy all the time. And this is how they get their money out of it; this is where they make money. They get 15 percent. They had agreed that they would buy all the time in Indiana, Nebraska and California. But they were not given the opportunity to buy any time in Oregon. And the reason was that Robert Kennedy, no, I guess (Edward M.) Ted Kennedy made a deal with Edith Green that, in return for her support in Oregon, she would have a veto factor on not only who worked in Oregon, but very specifically on who handled the advertising. And she had a man there who was her man in all her campaigns. She specifically said that he would have to handle the advertising. His name, incredibly enough, was Harry Turtledove.

GREENE: Oh, my gosh.

WILSON: Harry Turtledove was a local--had a little tiny advertising agency in Portland, Oregon. Harry Turtledove handled all the advertising in Oregon, and I was the liaison with Harry Turtledove. He's an awfully nice man, and he got all the commissions, and it added up to a lot of money ultimately. He didn't participate in making any of the spots--I mean, we sent the spots up to him--but he placed them all. He was in charge of buying the time on television and radio. In effect, he bought a lot

of television time, but he bought very little radio time.

What really happened was that McCarthy didn't have much money when he hit Oregon, and so he decided he'd stay out of television pretty much, or at least the early phases. And radio time is a lot cheaper. So what money he had he threw into radio. And we threw very little into radio; we threw all ours into television. So we were on television more than McCarthy, but he was on radio more than we were. And you know, everybody looks for reasons why Oregon was lost. I mean, I think this is a reason, but we really did very poorly on radio compared to McCarthy. We did poorly on radio everywhere. It was really the weak. . . . We were so seized with television that we didn't pay much attention to radio. If I had to do it all over again, I would pay a lot more attention to radio. But it just got away from us.

GREENE: Where did George Stevens fit into this whole puzzle?

WILSON: Good question. Well, George was a very good friend of Bobby's and Bobby had great respect for his judgment, as do I, in motion pictures. George Stevens was essentially a backer of Guggenheim all the way, and George Stevens felt that Guggenheim should do the whole campaign. George Stevens was against Goodwin and against Frankenheimer. And first, he was also one of my closest friends.

GREENE: On artistic . . .

WILSON: Yeah, on artistic grounds. He thought Guggenheim was better at this kind of work. And whenever he got a chance to see Bobby--which wasn't too often, since George had a new job in the American Film Institute and he therefore couldn't participate in the campaign full time, but he tried to be helpful back in Washington when he could--he urged the cause of Guggenheim. As I say, I really was kind of the referee, and what I ended up, in effect, doing was hiring both Guggenheim and Papert, Koenig and Lois--not both, but all three, and then Goodwin and Frankenheimer. Essentially, only two of those three made most of the creative stuff, which was the Frankenheimer-Goodwin axis and the Guggenheim-George Stevens axis.

GREENE: Did Goodwin get along as badly with Guggenheim as he did with Papert, Koenig?

WILSON: Yeah. He would have nothing to do with Guggenheim. He thought Guggenheim was okay, and he. . . . Basically, Goodwin's position was, okay, let's use the half hour

documentary that Guggenheim was making on Robert Kennedy's life. But he only grudgingly agreed to having that used on the air at all because he knew Robert Kennedy liked it so much. As a matter of fact, Robert Kennedy once in the campaign, I think before the Oregon election, ordered me point-blank to use the Guggenheim documentary whenever possible, and in preference to the Frankenheimer documentary. And I obeyed him up to a point. But I was trapped in a situation where I thought both of them were useful.

Actually, Goodwin never went to Oregon. I think he went there one day. But I ended up with Oregon and Turtledove. And in Oregon we ran more Guggenheim than anywhere else, which infuriated Goodwin who was sitting back down in Los Angeles. I remember him calling me up when he found out that I'd run--I'd thrown the Guggenheim thing in a couple of extra times. And he said, "Why the hell are you doing that?" And I said, "Because the candidate ordered me to this afternoon."

Well, this isn't very definitive, but it gives you--as I unroll it--a sense of the turmoil that occurred in the media campaign. I mean, it was turmoil. And yet, we got on the air, and by and large we got on the air with rather good quality stuff, I think. But it was hardly thought out and organized . . .

GREENE: The well-oiled Kennedy machine.

WILSON: Anything but, anything but.

GREENE: Do you think Goodwin was talented and experienced . . .
(Interruption)

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

GREENE: . . . enough in this area to have as much to say as he did?

WILSON: Yes, I think Goodwin was very talented in making films. I don't think he had enough experience in making thirty second spots and sixty second spots, and a real example of the fact that he had no experience is he just didn't have the time--wouldn't give the time to radio. And to be candid, I wasn't experienced in it either. I mean, I have no background in television. The television campaign really was run by Goodwin and Wilson; neither of us had any background. Well, Goodwin's background was the McCarthy campaign, where he'd done some of that stuff. He was very talented in editing film and in shooting film and in concepts for

situations where you'd have kids questioning the senator, and all sorts of things. He was really damn good at that. And I think he has a feel for that. And some of the stuff that he and Frankenheimer did was, I thought, first rate--as good as anything I've ever seen. But he didn't have any experience in the business of having a timetable: when you turn out the spots, and how many you want, and priorities, and meshing them in with radio, and all that. And neither did I.

Now the people who did have the talent were Papert, anyway, and the ad agency. And they went as I say, pretty much by the boards.

GREENE: Did Goodwin respect Murphy? Could he . . .

WILSON: Yes. Goodwin, we all respected Murphy.

GREENE: . . . look beyond Papert?

WILSON: Murphy operated in this arcane world of his own, which he was so obviously terrific at. And we all respected Murphy.

GREENE: Did Goodwin have personal problems in the campaign because of his association with McCarthy? Did you get a sense of distrust of him?

WILSON: Yeah, I saw a lot of Goodwin. I saw a lot of Goodwin and I had probably as good a read on Goodwin as anyone, particularly in California. I saw him intimately all the time. Yes, he had terrific troubles. And there were very few people who really trusted Goodwin. In fact, I think Bobby was probably the only guy in the campaign who did trust him. But he did trust his judgment and his talent as far as television was concerned. And also he would turn to him for ideas on speeches and all that. And I don't think Bobby had any doubt about Goodwin's . . . (Interruption) I don't think Bobby had any doubt about Goodwin's loyalty at that stage of the game. I think everyone else did. I didn't. I think Goodwin was working 100 percent for Robert Kennedy. But, you know, Goodwin. . . . McCarthy people used to come see Goodwin all the time, even when he was working for Kennedy. They were always around. What the hell they talked about or not, I'm not sure. I met a lot of them. I'm talking about younger kids who were quite interested in Goodwin.

So he was an interesting, ambivalent figure, to say the least. But I really, I did see him probably more intimately than anyone else

from this kind of a standpoint. And I do feel that Goodwin--once he joined the Kennedy camp--worked loyally for Kennedy. I don't think he ever double-crossed him, positive he didn't. Although I think a lot of people probably think he may have, I don't think he did.

GREENE: Well, maybe we ought to stop now rather than go on to something else.

WILSON: Okay, okay.

GREENE: Since we're not going to get through another thing.

WILSON: Right.

GREENE: That's it.

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