

Wendell H. Pigman Oral History Interview – RFK#3, 06/24/1969
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Biographical Note

Wendell H. Pigman was Legislative assistant for Senator Robert F. Kennedy, 1964 - 1968. This interview covers collaboration between Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] and Senator Jacob K. Javits' offices, communication with John F. Kennedy staff at the White House under the Johnson administration, and the Hudson Highlands, among other topics.

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Wendell H. Pigman. – RFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

WENDELL PIGMAN

June 24, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Roberta W. Greene

GREENE: What was the attitude in the beginning towards working with Senator [Jacob K.] Javits' office?

PIGMAN: I don't know what his attitude was because he didn't tend to talk in those terms such as what his attitude was. But it was clear that Javits was a Republican and we were Democrats. There were occasions when we wanted Javits' assistance on measures and it was useful to get his support. On the other hand, on major legislative proposals that were not related specifically to New York and which he really wouldn't have any basis for interfering or holding up the action, we didn't really deal with Senator Javits at all. On the cases where. . . . By and large there was a fairly good, fairly reasonable staff relationship between the legislative assistants in Javits' office and the legislative assistants in our office because Javits' gal had gone to--[Patricia] Pat Connell--had gone to law school, I think, with Adam or one of them, either Adam or. . . . Yes, it must have been Adam. They knew each other. That provided a basis for communication. And my wife had known Pat Connell. My wife is a professional Republican. As a matter of fact my wife had worked for Javits when he was a Congressman, and I had voted for Javits as a Congressman. And I always said he was a good Congressman. But we were not interested in frying Javits' fish, and other than in those cases where there were New York bills in which it was important to have bipartisan support, we just. . . . I mean it wasn't a matter of sitting down and doing things together. Now, on the cases that we did such as--oh, I'm trying to think of some joint project. We were trying to get the nuclear accelerator for Long Island, although it probably wasn't in the cards. But a large group came down from New York, and both Senator Javits and Senator Kennedy attended that together. So there would be occasions like this when they would be doing the same thing. But we didn't go out of our way to follow his lead. I shouldn't say, "go out of our way"; we didn't follow his lead, period.

GREENE: Would you say that there was less cooperation in the beginning than after awhile? Some of the books have said that in the beginning there was more of a competitive spirit than after awhile when they realized certain things could be accomplished better if they could work together on them.

PIGMAN: I don't know if that's true. We used to always have problems with [Richard] Dick Aurelio on releasing information, on press release information. Aurelio was quite difficult on this and was always trying to, at least I felt he almost had to, be a little unscrupulous according to the rules of the game, in arranging for releases of information. I felt personally that Javits' method of working was quite different from Kennedy's. It was a lot slower. It took a lot of time to coordinate with them, and there seemed to be a lot of time spent by Javits' staff on things that, at least in our office were handled on a lot more expeditious basis. So that it was sort of a pain to have to coordinate. It took time, much too much time just sitting around and patting people on the back. I didn't like it, and I know that the Senator wouldn't have liked it had he been in my shoes either.

GREENE: Do you know of any occasions when Governor Rockefeller promoted his own legislative interests through Robert Kennedy rather than through Javits?

PIGMAN: I don't know. I can't think of any offhand that. . . . You know, the Hudson River Bill eventually wound up having some of Nelson Rockefeller in it. I wouldn't say that they were that sort of. . . . I wasn't aware of that sort of split. If there was, it was unknown to me.

GREENE: Did Senator Kennedy draw on people outside the Senate office for advice and assistance?

PIGMAN: All the time.

GREENE: Yes. Specialists in different areas depending on what he was working on?

PIGMAN: Depending on what you were working on, yes. You talk to the people that know in the field that you're dealing with at the time; find out who knows and talk to them about it.

GREENE: Was there any resentment on the part of the staff about this?

PIGMAN: No, we didn't know. If you're working on a problem. . . . We were generalists. I mean there are very few cases. . . . Robert Kennedy couldn't afford to keep on his staff a guy who's an expert on child welfare, and a guy who's an expert on social security

payments, and a guy who's an expert on this and that. You obviously have to draw on the people who are knowledgeable in the field. And there's no resentment at all. The experts were the people who know. You don't take their judgment cold turkey. You process it, and think about it, and combine it, and amalgamate it with other--or maybe you reject it entirely. The idea was that you talk to the people to find out what their thinking was, and try to get the people who were imaginative in finding new approaches and good solutions to the problems.

GREENE: Do you think this attitude extended to speech writing, too, that if they were working on a major address and outsiders were called in to help, would it still be the understanding . . .

PIGMAN: Outsiders wouldn't call in. . . . I mean did you say, "were called in to help?"

GREENE: Yes. They'd be asked to come in and help?

PIGMAN: Well, the Senator would call in, on the very top speeches, would call in--they were mostly Vietnam--would call on people like Schlesinger and Sorensen. I didn't write the Vietnam speeches so I had no particular feeling on it. I assume that he wanted to get the foremost advice before he took the major steps. You'd have to ask that question of Adam more particularly, to find out what he felt about it--to get a good understanding of what his reaction was.

GREENE: Especially in the early days while a lot of the JFK people were still at the White House, was there much information leaked from there to Robert Kennedy?

PIGMAN: There weren't a lot of JFK people left at the White House under the Johnson administration. There were some, but not an awful lot.

GREENE: Well, a number of them. Yes. Was there much of this leaking of information?

PIGMAN: You use the term "leaking of information." Now, I know for a fact that Senator Kennedy talked to (Bill D.) Bill Moyers on a fairly frequent basis. To say "leak information" I don't think that's the term to use. I think that Moyers felt it was important to keep bridges open between Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson for the benefit of the country and to let him know what he, Bill Moyers, thought and what President Johnson thought, and to learn what Robert Kennedy was thinking. I think it was a good exchange. Now, as far as leaking information from the White House, there were a couple of people there who helped us. The guy who subsequently became president of the Chicago Board of Trade was helpful, helpful in the sense that when we had a couple of projects that

needed pushing at the White House level, he'd push them. I'm just trying to think of other examples, if any, of help at the White House level. It seems to me that on a most routine basis we could get people in. I knew a couple of secretaries who were hangovers from the Kennedy days who were useful to get people on tours, things like that. You know, you implied by the question, "leaking information," that, you know, we had special taps on the White House and that's not true.

GREENE: Well, what I really had in mind was, would they inform him and keep him abreast of things which would have been of interest to him?

PIGMAN: Well, as I say, the only one I know of offhand is the continuing relationship with Bill Moyers. Henry Hall Wilson was the guy who went to head up the Chicago Board of Trade. As a matter of fact, he had to encourage me to let him know which projects we wanted to push. We didn't expect help from the White House, and it was unusual to get it.

GREENE: How were decisions made regarding requests to co-sponsor bills? I would imagine there must have been many people who wanted . . .

PIGMAN: Peter handled most of that of the vast flock of requests of that type. I handled the ones relating to conservation and in my areas. In a lot of cases you'd look at the nature of the legislation and you'd just see that it wasn't something that he really would be interested in and you wouldn't--this would never be brought up with him. One of the jobs to do, of course, was just to screen through and see the ones on which he should be consulted. And the ones where he should be consulted, you would look into the bill and find out who else was co-sponsoring it and find out what the nature of the bill was and get some advice, do some staffing on it, in other words. And then we'd take it in to the Senator and ask him whether he wanted to, just. . . . Sometimes he'd say yes, and sometimes he'd say no.

GREENE: Did it work more or less the same way as keeping him informed on the legislative activities and what hearing he might want to appear at?

PIGMAN: You know, somehow I get the impression that you have the idea that we'd let him know what hearings were coming up a long time in advance, and then he'd make a choice as to which ones. Usually there would be. . . . In some cases, we were trying to arrange hearings specifically to fit interests of his. In other cases hearings would be coming up on bills that he had co-sponsored or had sponsored. In those cases he, of course, would want to testify. It was just a question of verifying that and finding out whether he was going to appear in person and whether that could be fitted into his schedule, or whether he had any

interest for it, or whether he wanted to just submit a statement. The co-sponsoring of bills tends to be a fairly routine thing unless a senator is making a big deal of it, in which case he might well hit the Senator himself and ask him, in which case. . . . That happened on a number of occasions. Somebody would see him on the floor, a senator would see him on the floor and ask him to co-sponsor it. And sometimes he'd say yes, I mean just on the basis that. . . . He was quite knowledgeable. He'd been around the Senate before. He knew what the basic rules were, the way the place worked.

GREENE: What about seeking support for his own bills? Was this generally rather obvious who would be interested in co-sponsoring it with him, or did he actively solicit support?

PIGMAN: He personally, to my knowledge. . . . I'm just trying to think of. . . . Well, on some of the really hot bills, such as--and they tended not so much to be in the conservation area, but you know, well, like in the housing bill (I think you can get better information from Peter on this than I) he would seek out support from certain key people. But in the Senate, of course, it's not a matter so much of the numbers, it's a matter of who. They'd get people from the committee. We would call people directly, call LAs [legislative assistants] on the staffs and ask them if they would want to co-sponsor sometimes. But it's not like the House side where there's a tendency to go for numbers of co-sponsors.

GREENE: Is there anything else in a general way on the Senate operation, either your own job or just the whole way the office worked?

PIGMAN: That's a general question. I don't know if I . . .

GREENE: Well, is there anything that you feel we haven't covered that is significant as far as the way things worked in the office?

PIGMAN: No. Well, I can't think of it right now in any event.

GREENE: Okay. Then let's talk a bit about the Hudson Highlands, both the Riverway and the Compacts, and the expressway, and how all of these things seemed to come together at some point, and the relationship with Governor Rockefeller.

PIGMAN: I'm glad you think they came together; it's more . . .

GREENE: Well, I mean they seemed to be working at least during the same period.

PIGMAN: Well, in chronology it might have. I'm not sure that I could reconstruct the chronology exactly. But it started out with. . . . (Richard L.) Ottinger introduced the Hudson Highlands (Scenic Riverway) bill on the House side and asked Bob to introduce it on the Senate side. We made some minor changes to it and actively solicited Javits' cooperation on that because we wanted to have both Republicans and Democrats on it. Most of it then was aimed, the bill was really aimed at the Storm King Mountain project, not so much the highway project because the highway project came afterwards. It didn't fly, it seems to me, that first year; that is it didn't get through. But it was enough to help somewhat in bringing pressure on the Federal Power Commission to go carefully before taking action on the Storm King project. The Federal Power Commission is required to approve that. The next year. . . . Well, Rockefeller in the meantime was trying to work out a compromise, and he sent his guy Henry Wilson down-- I think it was Henry Wilson--to talk to us to see what could be worked out. Rockefeller, of course, tuned up the machinery of the state in the meantime, which is fairly considerable in New York State, to gain support for the concept of a Hudson River Commission, or Hudson River Valley Commission-- that it would basically be loaded with New York representation, that it would not have any federal representation.

It seems to me the subsequent legislative year that Ottinger and Kennedy--I'm not sure Javits was a co-sponsor the second time; I don't think he was--proposed a Hudson River Commission which would include the feds (federal representation); (Steward L.) Udall would be represented on this. And it was in that way different from Rockefeller's bill. Rockefeller's bill would be twelve board members from New York and nine from New Jersey and none from the feds, or one from the feds or something like this, so that New York would dominate it. He spent a lot of state effort selling that around. I think it was that year that Rockefeller submitted to the legislature one afternoon the bill for the highway on the east side of the Hudson and had the legislature pass it in Albany without any hearings. And this created quite a stink. And of course, this aroused the whole new set of people from the towns along the east side of the Hudson that would be affected by that. It also included a spur, that would presumably divert traffic away from Pocantico Hills, which was his home.

But it was the worst example of the highway forces at work in ramming through a highway without any local consultation, and that added. . . . So pressure was brought on Udall to hold up on any approval of that and also on the Bureau of Public Roads not to approve any road funds. I guess they weren't doing it with Public Roads money but somebody had to give approval at the federal level in the highway area, and they were asked not to do so. Again I don't think the Commission passed that year. Again the legislation did not pass. But it served its purpose which again was to halt the construction of the highway on the east side and to cause some re-thinking on that. The Rockefeller Administration did some re-thinking on that involving also

agreeing to run the highway outside of, on fill outside of the towns in some cases so that it wouldn't take out the houses in town. As I understand it, they're still. . . . I mean, they're either working on the highway or they never were able to completely stop it. There were many people involved in the highway opposition, the battle against the highwaymen. And Kennedy did not get as strongly into that as he had on the Storm King Mountain thing, though, primarily just on the basis of energy if nothing else. Ottinger was fighting a fairly successful battle, and there was not a hell of a lot that we could have added to it in stopping it. I guess it was a standoff on the highway, until the last minute before Udall left office when he approved it. And Ottinger, of course, has raised a stink since then claiming that it was to curry favor with the Rockefellers that Udall had done this.

GREENE: Because it was a complete reversal, wasn't it, on his earlier position?

PIGMAN: Well, he gave in to the state on this, in effect. One interesting thing about that was that Laurance Rockefeller split with Nelson Rockefeller on it because Laurance Rockefeller was a conservationist. He didn't split openly, but he was put in the most uncomfortable position, and it was hard for him.

GREENE: What was Kennedy's opinion of this Commission that Governor Rockefeller set up, of which Laurance Rockefeller was the head? Did he think that was kind of a stopgap effort to prevent federal intervention? This is what's been said.

PIGMAN: Well, that was pretty clear what it was. I mean it was clear that it was an effort. And Rockefeller was doing everything he could within his power to control the situation. Rockefeller's position on all federal legislation was that the state could do it better. The state would do it and he didn't want the federal government involved, or if the federal government was involved in any way, he wanted them to be outvoted by the state. So it was very clear what the Commission was set up for. There wasn't any doubt, I think, in the Senator's mind as to what that was.

GREENE: Who would be consulted on legislation of this type? Anyone from the outside on the original Riverway bill on just what was needed?

PIGMAN: Oh, we talked to Ottinger's people. We talked to the Interior people. We talked to Rod Vandirert who was head of the Scenic Hudson Preservation Society, who was fighting the Storm King battle. I'm just trying to think of who else.

GREENE: Was the Interior Department involved at all in drawing up your bill? I know they were in the Ottinger bill.

PIGMAN: No, they didn't draft the bill or anything like that. No, I think we asked them for their thoughts on it and what they thought would be useful and what some of the other patterns had been and what they could do if they had these powers. We asked them, however, the second year what their opinion was of the Commission proposal. And they objected to it, needless to say, for not having adequate federal representation. It wasn't the sort of bill that needed a great deal of consultation outside. We certainly did not consult the leadership in each one of the towns. We had a correspondence going on with the mayors of the towns that would be affected, explaining what the bill would do so that it wouldn't. . . . Rockefeller had tried to tell them that all their authority would be taken away under this, and we'd try to correct that impression.

GREENE: There were a number of mayors who were in favor of the Storm King project because of the local employment and revenue that would come in.

PIGMAN: It wasn't so much the mayors. The mayor of Cornwall was, obviously. But the trade unions were in favor of the Storm King project and also the highway builders because it's construction for them. And Rockefeller always worked closely with the unions in the construction business because he could help them a lot with projects. And so they favored the Storm King, and they favored the highway as well. And they were fairly influential in Westchester County. The Democratic chairman of Westchester County was not interested in taking a strong stand on the bill, or rather on Storm King in particular, or on the highway.

GREENE: The Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference, which was the citizens group, was the group that took the FPC decision to court on appeal. How much help did Robert Kennedy give them as far as. . . .

PIGMAN: None relating to the court action. None. Rather the reverse. That Scenic Hudson helped us with information and the like on what was involved in Storm King.

GREENE: That's what I mean. How much support did you give them for their appeal of the FPC decision?

PIGMAN: Now you know. Let me repeat what I said. I said we gave them none relating to the court decision, but rather the reverse: they helped us with information as to what the issue was. I think Kennedy issued a statement at one time saying that he would not intervene in the procedures, since it was of a judicial nature, before the FPC. But in general he was talking about the need not to destroy the ecology of the river and to protect the scenic beauty of the area. But we had help from the Scenic Hudson. They were lobbyists. In fact, they

were lobbying to get support for their position. But Kennedy never took the position clearly, and he could be criticized for this, I guess, by some as opposing the license. Rather, he was looking for some changes, some sort of compromise that would allow the project to be built without defacing the mountain or hurting the ecology of the river. It looked for a while as if the Con Ed [Consolidated Edison of New York, Inc.] was going to come out with a compromise. But Scenic Hudson kept at it and they never came up with one.

GREENE: Would you say that Robert Kennedy and Scenic Hudson differed somewhat in their end . . .

PIGMAN: Sure. Scenic Hudson was dead set against any project at Storm King. And Robert Kennedy was not dead set against the project.

GREENE: Was he satisfied with what Con Ed did come through with--lowering it so that only a small portion was exposed, and making a park around it and a number of other things? Would that have satisfied him?

PIGMAN: Well, they offered to put it underground, and they offered to The controversy then centered on what would happen. The power lines going down through Westchester were not to be buried, and he was unhappy about that. But I'm not even sure that's correct. I don't think he was involved that much in the day-to-day details of the bill. When it came to a point where he had to take action, then his approval was called for. But I think if Robert Kennedy were standing here today and you were to ask him was he satisfied with the proposed changes that Con Ed set, he'd probably say, "Well, I'm barely familiar with them. What were they?"

GREENE: Did you follow them closely yourself?

PIGMAN: Yes.

GREENE: Did you work fairly closely with Javits' and Ottinger's staffs on this?

PIGMAN: With Ottinger's staff, not with Javits' staff so much. No. Just on the first bill we tried to get their help. On the second bill we tried but they were not interested; they were staying out then because it'd become sort of a federal government versus Rockefeller fight, and they didn't want to get caught in the crossfire. As a matter of fact, they were embarrassed about it a little bit, embarrassed that they couldn't continue their stand.

GREENE: How do you read Lyndon Johnson's opposition to a federal role in the Hudson? He came out against this and . . .

PIGMAN: When did he come out against a federal role?

GREENE: I wish I had the date. He seemed to indicate that he felt that New York State should at least be given a chance to do it on its own. And at the same time he came out against the Storm King project. It was kind of a split. He criticized the Storm King project . . .

PIGMAN: You're telling me something that I've never heard before, which is interesting.

GREENE: It's from the [New York] Times. Actually, maybe I ought to stop this and check the date.

[INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: Well, anyway, we established that it was before the Kennedy bill was introduced.

PIGMAN: I'm quite sure it was. It's March something or other that the Kennedy bill was introduced.

GREENE: Yes, I have the date of the bill here. Yes, I have it right here. March 4, 1965.

PIGMAN: I don't think there was any argument that the state would play a major role in doing the development of it anyway. They'd get some federal funds but it wasn't going to be as much as their contribution would have to be. But the main thing was to get, I guess, some federal assistance in getting scenic easements, which we thought was the new and unusual feature in the bill. Also I get the impression in talking to you that this bill looms large in the history of Robert Kennedy. And I would say, in the Senate, I would say it just was one of the bills, was one of the first bills that came up. There were a lot of things going on at the same time, so that you shouldn't overemphasize. . . .

GREENE: No, actually the reason that I picked this to start with was because I thought it was interesting, the relationship with Javits and Rockefeller and the whole thing.

PIGMAN: Yes, I know. But the big bill that spring was the one adding the counties to the Appalachian Regional Development Act. That was the real coup. I worked with Adam somewhat on that, but that was the hot one, and that was the major political. . . . That sort of added substance to Kennedy's campaign claim that he could do more for New York, and it was seen as such by many people, sort of proof. In the campaigning in the fall, people had said, why should they kick out Senator what's-his-name.

GREENE: [Kenneth B.] Keating.

PIGMAN: Who?

GREENE: Keating.

PIGMAN: Keating, yes. The baseball commissioner. And the answer was, "Well, who would you rather have in the Congress to represent you, Keating or Kennedy?" And the answer was Kennedy in areas where they still thought Keating was a nice old man. What's your next question? (Laughter)

GREENE: I was going to ask you if you had any idea of how Robert Kennedy felt about Rockefeller in general. Did he see these highway and Storm King Mountain projects as typical Rockefeller maneuvers? How did he regard him as far as his sincere interest in the state?

PIGMAN: Vaguely somewhere in my mind, it seems to me that he made a reference to Rockefeller one time, some comment on what made him tick. I can't pull it up now. The attitude was that Rockefeller was not. . . . Well, there were just too many cases; for example, the desalinization project which Rockefeller wanted to start out on Long Island, where obviously Rockefeller was doing things for national publicity that were not helpful to the state. And those sorts of things made it clear. There was another case where there was contamination at the beaches in Rochester where Rockefeller backed all over the map and wound up changing the law in order to justify keeping the beaches open in Rochester. I don't think he particularly respected the man. Rockefeller was sort of much more the blarneyed politician, really, you know, the hail fellow well met and all that which Robert Kennedy was not. And that aspect of. . . . I would imagine, and he never said this, but I would imagine that Kennedy would have regarded that as being phony--the "Hiya, fella" that was just sort of the Rockefeller trademark.

GREENE: Just to get back to this other subject for another minute, Ottinger submitted a bill in '66 barring all man-made, or virtually barring all man-made, encroachments on the Hudson for about three years while this compact was being settled, while the New Jersey-New York compact was being negotiated. Do you remember the dispute about that, why Kennedy would not co-sponsor, well, not co-sponsor, but not submit it on the Senate side?

PIGMAN: No, I don't. Vaguely I recall that that came up and we did not want to get in a position of stopping every project. I mean it literally meant that every school, every, well, it said every federal project would be stopped, I think. The way it was drawn it would include Manhattan. There would be no activity, period. It was a very. . . . The wording was such that it was an intemperate legislative measure. We

wouldn't put that in for that reason. I mean it didn't specify in detail what it was, the types of things. Presumably it was talking about power lines and the like and the highway as well but then you also had to include every other sort of social project that there was.

GREENE: Do you remember discussing this with Udall at all? He objected to the what he thought was excessive authority given to the Secretary of Interior on these projects.

PIGMAN: Who? He, he . . .

GREENE: Secretary Udall.

PIGMAN: He objected, who?

GREENE: Secretary Udall.

PIGMAN: Oh, he objected to the excessive authority in Ottinger's bill?

GREENE: Yes, given to the Secretary of Interior, which amounted to veto power.

PIGMAN: Who told you that he objected, in the papers?

GREENE: Yes, it's a statement . . .

PIGMAN: The papers, again. Well, I didn't get involved in that. I suspect Ottinger's staff probably could tell you more about Udall's reaction. Udall didn't want to be put on the spot all the time. He was fighting a reasonable battle for Ottinger and Kennedy while keeping the FPC thing down. You just can't take a Cabinet member and stick him in the position of having to beat a governor over the head all the time.

GREENE: Well, shortly after that, Robert Kennedy issued his own bill on the same subject.

PIGMAN: That's right, yes.

GREENE: And I wondered if that was in response to . . .

PIGMAN: I think he agreed with Ottinger that he would put in a bill, but it would be a bill that would be more temperate than the one that Ottinger had put in. And it was, as I recall.

GREENE: Was he reasonably satisfied with the measure that was later passed even though it was amended and greatly weaker than the original bill?

PIGMAN: No, we weren't satisfied with it. It was just a You know, it was recognized as a compromise, and it really didn't do what. . . . I mean scenic easements were gone and the guts of the thing as a sort of an idea. I don't think that Robert Kennedy believed in commissions and in group things like that. They tend to be logrolling and they don't get a lot accomplished unless they have some good authority, and that didn't have a lot of good authority.

GREENE: Is there anything else on the Hudson during the period you were there that . . .

PIGMAN: Well, the Hudson River Pollution Conference was a lot of work for us.

GREENE: Well, I was going to talk about that at another time, but if you want to raise that now, it's fine.

PIGMAN: No, I'd rather not. I'm a little pressed on time right now.

GREENE: Okay, fine.