

Robert J. Burkhardt, Oral History Interview – 6/24/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Robert J. Burkhardt
Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey
Date of Interview: June 24, 1964
Location: Washington, D.C.
Length: 8 pages

Biographical Note

Burkhardt was a New Jersey political figure; director of the Democratic national registration drive in 1960; Executive Director of John F. Kennedy's (JFK) Inaugural Committee from 1960-1962; and Assistant Postmaster General in the Bureau of Facilities from 1961-1962. In this interview, Burkhardt discusses his work with New Jersey governor Robert B. Meyner, JFK's 1960 presidential campaign and inauguration, and Burkhardt's work as director of Richard J. Hughes' 1962 campaign for governor of New Jersey, among other issues.

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Robert J. Burkhardt, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, June 24, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Oral History Interview

with

Robert J. Burkhardt

June 24, 1964
Washington, D.C.,

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BURKHARDT: In the mid-1950's I was not tremendously impressed with the political potential of John F. Kennedy. I had a different interest, of course, because I was Executive Director of the Democratic Party in the state of New Jersey and completely in favor of advancing the cause of Robert Meyner [Robert B. Meyner], our Governor at that time. John Kennedy posed a threat to this cause because he was obviously a potential candidate.

I had met Kennedy several times while he was serving in the Congress. We had developed what you might call a superficial friendship. We knew each other casually but not deeply.

MORRISSEY: Do you have any recollections of any of the occasions on which you met Kennedy when he was Senator?

BURKHARDT: I remember one occasion when he came to Trenton to attend a fundraising dinner. He had been invited by Representative Thompson [Frank Thompson, Jr.], his good friend, and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] came too. We had quite a problem in arranging the way in which the Senator and Governor Meyner would greet one another at this dinner. We arranged for each one to walk towards the other and greet the other in such a way that neither one would appear to be bending over backwards to please the other or impress the other.

In 1958, 1959 and early in 1960, I was traveling to the important states throughout the country in support of Governor Meyner's cause. Everywhere I went I was constantly seeing Kennedy representatives—men like Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Ted Sorensen. By May, 1960, as a result of so much exposure to the Kennedy organization, I realized that Kennedy had greater support than most people realized and that Meyner was a long shot at best. Meyner also had two liabilities which were significant. He was an apostate Catholic, and as such, given the practicalities of politics, there was little likelihood of his nomination

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for either the presidency or the vice presidency. Secondly, since Kennedy's strength seemed great enough to get him the presidential nomination, there was no likelihood that another Easterner would be chosen for the vice presidential nomination.

In May, 1960, I told the Governor that I felt he had no chance of being on the ticket. I felt that Kennedy would be nominated on the second ballot at the latest. This was a confidential talk with the Governor, and a very difficult one, as you can imagine. He and I were as close as brothers at that time. I asked him for his permission to allow me to tell Senator Kennedy what I had told him. He gave me his permission to do so and a few days later I came to Washington to talk first with Ted Sorensen and then with the Senator. I stated my viewpoint to each. The Senator suggested that I have lunch with Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]. I did so, and told Bobby what I had told the others.

A day or so later the newspapers in New Jersey published a story that Meyner and I had parted company because of differing viewpoints on his candidacy. The Governor said he had no knowledge of the story; he referred the reporters to me. I referred them back to him until finally I said publicly what I had said privately before—that Kennedy would be nominated on the second ballot at the latest, and also that Governor Meyner had no chance at all for the nomination.

MORRISSEY: Where do you think the leak came from?

BURKHARDT: I suppose from Ted Sorensen or Bobby Kennedy.

MORRISSEY: Did you have and other contacts with Senator Kennedy or members of the Kennedy organization prior to the convention?

BURKHARDT: I recall that Senator Kennedy came to New Jersey to expose himself to the New Jersey Democrats. The New Jersey delegation had invited each of the four major candidates to appear before it at a meeting and subsequent reception to "sell his wares" and to plead his cause. The candidates came in the following order: Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], Symington [Stuart Symington II], Kennedy, Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. I met each of them at the Newark Airport and drove them in my convertible Oldsmobile to the respective meeting places. The Humphrey meeting was at the Essex House, Newark; the others were at the Robert Treat Hotel, Newark.

I particularly remember the Kennedy reception because of its great enthusiasm and the very, very large crowds. I can recall driving up in front of the hotel and the two mounted

policemen were on the sidewalk under the marquee to keep the crowds away. One of the horses kicked my right front fender and made a good impression on it. When I

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called the Senator's attention to it, he facetiously quipped, "I assume you have insurance." It was very evident at all of the receptions that Kennedy was by far the most attractive and receptive to an overwhelming majority of the delegates. I might also mention that both at the airport and at the hotel, the employees seemed to appear—not in groups but rather one by one—to see Senator Kennedy. This did not occur at the arrivals of or receptions for the other candidates.

MORRISSEY: Theodore White [Theodore H. White], in *The Making of the President, 1960*, says that Ambassador Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] was influential in persuading party leaders in Northern New Jersey to support his son for the nomination. What's your view on this?

BURKHARDT: I have no personal knowledge of Ambassador Kennedy influencing any of the major party leaders in Northern New Jersey, although I have hearsay and rumor evidence that this was so. Former Mayor John V. Kenny of Jersey City was allegedly in close touch with the Ambassador, and Congressmen Neil Gallagher [Cornelius Edward Gallagher] and Frank Thompson, Jr., of New Jersey were closely identified with the Kennedy movement. I have heard also that during the West Virginia primary, Angelo Malandra of Camden, Paul D'Amato of Atlantic City, and others of Italian extraction were working with Frank Sinatra in influencing voters in the West Virginia campaign.

MORRISSEY: At the convention in Los Angeles did you see Kennedy or much of the members of his organization?

BURKHARDT: I saw Kennedy on three occasions in Los Angeles. Each time he queried me about the intent of the New Jersey delegation. Each time I told him it was committed to the Governor on the first ballot. He urged me to keep working on the Governor, but nobody was successful in impressing the Governor in this area.

I remember a caucus of the New Jersey delegation in the Statler-Hilton Hotel. Meyner explained his position: he had promised Lyndon Johnson and the other candidates that he would be a favorite son on the first ballot and he felt he should maintain this position in fairness to all the candidates. We polled the delegation—I remember the polling well because I was the one who did it—and when I came to my own name I said I would vote for Meyner on the first ballot and be for Kennedy immediately thereafter. I felt that my eight-year association with Meyner required me to do this.

MORRISSEY: Were you involved in the decision to choose Lyndon Johnson for the vice-presidential nomination?

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BURKHARDT: No, not at all.

After the convention was over, I went to my country place in Central Valley, New York, for a few days of relaxation. I was tired and I was emotionally spent after having worked so closely and so hard for Bob Meyner over a seven-year period, switching to Kennedy just prior to the Convention, and not being an integral part of the team that put Kennedy across. I guess everybody gets tired in politics and wants to quit at least one time during his career.

I received a phone call from Robert Kennedy, who said that John Kennedy had asked him to ask me if I would be willing to play some part in the campaign. I expressed a willingness to do so. Shortly thereafter I was appointed Director of the National Registration Drive for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. I moved to Washington to work on this job.

The responsibilities of the job of Executive Director of the National Voters Registration Committee included the setting up of quotas for the several states based on census figures, working with the respective state registration chairmen and labor representatives, together with the various citizens movements and civic groups which were interested in promoting registration. This, in my opinion, is one of the more important aspects of any political campaign. The key to victory is through thorough canvassing and complete registration of the potential voters. It was estimated that our activities stimulated between 8 and 9 million new registrants. It was our opinion, further, that perhaps 70% of this group voted Democratic. We had a relatively small staff in Washington, headed by Congressman Frank Thompson, Jr., of New Jersey as the National Registration Chairman. He and I had worked together in New Jersey and knew the great importance of registration, together with the great benefits of a good job. We sent into 9 or 10 states cadres of experts on canvassing and registration to work with the state chairmen and state registration chairman to bring about a maximum effort. Emphasis was placed on negro wards in the urban areas and on low income white wards, also.

MORRISSEY: Did you see much of Kennedy during the campaign?

BURKHARDT: I saw Senator Kennedy three times during the campaign. On one occasion there was time for hardly more than a "hello" and "how are you?" but he was always interested in the conduct of the registration drive. He made pertinent observations about what was happening in certain states, which indicated his interest and his knowledge.

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Late in the campaign I saw him in Trenton. I was flying from Washington to New York and decided to stop in Trenton because he was scheduled to be there that day. I waited about ninety minutes in front of the State House for his appearance. I was standing off to one side, lined up with several other people who had come out to see him, but he recognized me in the crowd and called me over to thank me for the work I was doing in the registration

drive. He also added something to the effect that, perhaps I might want to work a little harder in the remaining days of the campaign.

After the election I went back to my home in Central Valley, New York, planning to take about ten days off. I received a telephone call from Katie Louchheim [Kathleen Louchheim], and, I think, from someone else, if I remember correctly. They wanted to know if I'd be available to direct the President's Inaugural activities. I said I would be. So I went to Washington to work for two months on this job.

This job was very hectic. The pressures from Congressmen, from party contributors, from members of the Kennedy family for tickets, invitations, credentials for various affairs like the Governors' reception were tremendous. I received a call from the President—the first time I had talked with him in two months. "I hear you're lousing up all the tickets," he said. I replied, "Well, Mr. President, I'm trying to do the best I can." He said he was only kidding, that he wanted to thank me for all the work I was doing.

My impression with respect to the Inaugural Committee was that it was the toughest job I have ever had. I served as Executive Director under the chairmanship of Ed Foley and worked intimately with Ted Riordan, the President's personal representative to the Inaugural Committee. Our staff was considerable. Committees were formed for the promotion and implementation of such things as the parade, inaugural balls, gubernatorial receptions, concerts, housing, transportation, invitations, sale of inaugural medals and other concessions, etc. The pressures were immense, indeed, not only from the respective states but from members of the Congress and the President-elect's associates. A complete record of the Inaugural Committee's activities is on file in the Archives for further study, if desired.

The next time that I saw the President was during a ceremony in his office in which we presented to him a souvenir album of tickets and other paraphernalia representing the Inaugural activities. He was very appreciative. I hope this album will be available in the Kennedy Library when it is built.

MORRISSEY: I am sure it will be. Could you tell me about your appointment as Assistant Postmaster General for Facilities?

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BURKHARDT: During the period in which I was directing the Inaugural activities, I heard that my name had been submitted for Administrator of the General Services Administration. When I realized what this job would entail in terms of time I asked that my name be withdrawn. I accepted the job in the Post Office Department instead. My appointment in the Post Office was that of Assistant Postmaster General for facilities. This made me in effect the chief purchasing agent, real estate officer, builder, and maintenance man for the Post Office Department with its 500,000-plus employees.

When Richard Hughes [Richard J. Hughes] was nominated as the Democratic candidate for Governor of New Jersey, to succeed Meyner, he asked me to direct his campaign. I said that I would do whatever the President wanted me to do. Apparently Hughes went to see the President because I received a call from Larry O'Brien or Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]—I can't remember which one—saying that I could take a leave of absence to

work for Hughes, but to put my letter to the President in the form of a resignation. I did so, and the President responded warmly, saying, in effect, that I always had a job in his Administration as long as I wanted one.

On the first of July, 1961, I resigned and went to New Jersey to direct the campaign for Hughes. We felt that Hughes had a good chance to win the race against James Mitchell [James P. Mitchell]. I recall a meeting I came to here in Washington in which Matt McCloskey [Matthew H. McCloskey, Jr.], John Bailey [John Moran Bailey], Larry O'Brien and Kenny O'Donnell and I discussed the possibility of the President making an appearance in New Jersey on behalf of Hughes. The proposal was put up to the President for his consideration. He was very realistic in appraising whether his presence in New Jersey during the campaign would be wise. I told him that the vote for Hughes and Mitchell appeared divided 49% to 49% with 2% undecided and that his presence could make the difference. He didn't commit himself then to coming to New Jersey, but apparently his other advisers gave him the same estimate I gave him and he decided to make the appearance.

An official appointment was scheduled for Hughes to issue the invitation to the President to visit New Jersey. I accompanied Hughes to this appointment but hung off to the side when we entered the President's office because I didn't want to inject myself into a discussion between the President and a gubernatorial candidate. But the President was extremely gracious. He said, "C'mon over here, Bob," motioning me towards his desk, "I want you to participate too."

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This graciousness was characteristic of Kennedy. I recall once when I was Assistant Postmaster General that Mrs. Burkhardt [Lucille Hogan Burkhardt] and I attended a reception at the White House. When we approached the President in the receiving line, and when the aide announced our names the President said very warmly, "Hello Bob. How are you doing? How are the kids? Where are they?" He asked Mrs. Burkhardt about the welfare of our four kids. I didn't know that he knew that we even had a family. It seemed that we stood there for ages, although it really was only two or three minutes. I was much impressed by this aspect of him.

Returning to his visit to New Jersey during the Hughes campaign, I recall that we had a reception for him at the airport. He was introduced to the county leaders and other leaders in the party. Then he asked me, "What do I talk about to this crowd?" I said, "Mr. President, it would be presumptuous of me to suggest what you might want to talk about." But he insisted that I give him my suggestions. I recommended that he discuss three topics: (1) the lack of debates, because Hughes had challenged Mitchell and Mitchell had refused; (2) the state of the economy in New Jersey, because more jobs were needed; (3) the need for world peace, with any specific references about the world situation which he would care to make. He took these three topics and wove them together beautifully. He spoke quite eloquently for twenty seven or twenty eight minutes to a crowd of about fifteen thousand people. I was much impressed with this performance.

MORRISSEY: After Hughes was elected did you think about returning to a job in Washington?

BURKHARDT: There was some talk of my going to California to direct Pat Brown's [Edmund G. Brown] campaign against Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon]. I was unfamiliar with the state and felt I couldn't offer anything to Brown or the California Democrats. And when Hughes took office, I was appointed Secretary of State for New Jersey, which is the position I occupy currently.

MORRISSEY: Any final recollections or impression, Mr. Burkhardt, you could offer about John Kennedy, or his drive for the nomination, the campaign against Nixon, or his performance as President?

BURKHARDT: I would say that John Kennedy seemed to be a man for the times in which he lived. He exemplified a youthful aggressiveness, a healthy, attractive magnetic personality, and a tough approach to the problems that faced him whether they were those of campaigning

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or those of great responsibilities of the Presidency.

In my opinion, the major factors which led to his success in the election were: (1) His forthright appeal to the nation at large in his speech at Houston to the protestant ministers; and (2) His appearance and conduct during the first debate.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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