

Eugene H. Nickerson Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 11/30/1971
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Eugene H. Nickerson was the county executive of Nassau County, New York (1962-1970). This interview covers Robert F. Kennedy's [RFK] interactions with Nassau County, RFK's early time in the Senate, and the New York Governor's race of 1966, among other topics.

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Eugene H. Nickerson – RFK #1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] and Nassau County: meetings, taking office, and the community
2	RFK's early time in the Senate: advice, collaboration, and staff
4	Nickerson and the New York Governor's race of 1966: interactions with RFK and campaigning

Oral History Interview

with

EUGENE H. NICKERSON

November 30, 1971
New York, New York

By Roberta Greene

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

*Tape II

GREENE: Why don't we begin with post '64. You were saying there were meetings and discussions about what he wanted to do in Nassau County.

NICKERSON: Yes. He set up some meetings, or had set up some meetings, around the state before he took office, I'm pretty sure, between the date of election day and January of 1965 to discuss with people and show himself to people, and basically to listen to people and what they were interested in in their areas. Let's see now. And then after he took office we in Nassau County, and I as Nassau County executive, worked closely with him, particularly with his staff, on things that the county was interested in. We were interested in getting more of Mitchel Field; we hadn't been given all of it or an opportunity to purchase all of it; other things. So I'd see him from time to time.

GREENE: To what extent were these ideas of his own, and to what extent were you and these other Nassau County people feeding them to him?

NICKERSON: Well, in terms of the specifics of Nassau County obviously he wasn't terribly familiar with them, and had to take the cue from us, which didn't mean that he didn't have ideas on other matters; obviously he did.

I've forgotten whether it was in that time or shortly thereafter that I talked to him about the Vietnam thing. It was early, I think, in 1965 I had a conversation with him in his office--it was in the post office building here on Lexington Avenue--in which I told him that I didn't have any sympathy

*Tape I was inaudible and was not transcribed. Material on it was covered in the second interview.

at all for that war, and we discussed whether there was any justification for the war even from the beginning. I asked him whether he thought so, and he said yes. But we didn't really get into that. His ideas had not matured by that time of 1965, the feeling of what a disaster it was.

The first discussions we had about the gubernatorial race were in that time. I think the first one was maybe even before he took office, in the fall of '64. He asked me whether I was interested in running for governor in 1966 and I told him that I was. And he said that one of the things that I ought to do was to go take a trip, not just to the "three-I league"--Ireland, Israel and Italy--but to other countries. And he said he thought maybe there would be some federal funding for that and to talk to Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin]; he said he'd undertake to call Dick Goodwin (he was still in the White House).

I did talk to Dick, and Robert had already talked to him and explored that, and they couldn't justify funding it because there had been too many politicians who'd already gone abroad under that program. But they set up things with the State Department--they asked me to lecture in Berlin and Rome, and a couple of other places. And I went at my own expense to about nine countries in the space of a little over a month--Moscow, Poland, and so forth, most of them countries in western Europe. That was at his suggestion. He said it would be much better at a meeting to be talking about what is going on in Poland, even though you are running for governor, than per capita aid to counties. A little less dull. Ask me a question.

GREENE: Okay. I was thinking maybe before we got to the governor stage, which is kind of a complicated thing, were there other substantive matters that you can remember from the early part of his time in the [U.S.] Senate, things that he either asked your advice on, or things that you asked him to do?

NICKERSON: Most of the things that we had were strictly local to Nassau County. You know, getting certain things funded.

GREENE: Could you be specific, the kinds of things?

NICKERSON: I can't remember, but the type of things would be to get our office for the aging funded; Mitchel Field I have already mentioned. Those kinds of things, straightening out snarls in the bureaucracy. We frequently would apply for demonstration projects, OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity], or HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare], and so forth, and we would get his help to do it. A couple of times when I testified, he would introduce me as someone from New York. I have forgotten whether I was down in his office one day--I think that was '66--but at any rate, while I'm thinking of it. . . .

It was at the time of the post office--no excuse me, the veterans hospital thing in which the veterans hospitals issue was whether some of them should be closed. I remember sitting in his office, and the call came through and he

waited for whoever it was. He waited, hanging on to the phone for whoever it was, so I assumed that it was the president, which it turned out to be. He said, here was Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], with the weight of the world on him, discussing hospital projects, specific ones in New York. And Kennedy explained that the Veterans Administration really hadn't done a very good job in preparing for the testimony (apparently he'd been at the hearings) and also that one of the hospitals that they were closing was just a very good hospital and ought not to be closed. [Interruption]

GREENE: Did you generally deal directly with him on things like this, or did you also have contacts with his staff?

NICKERSON: Oh, we had a lot of contacts with the staff. With Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman] mostly. Oh, we weren't involved in the veterans hospital as such. We had none in Nassau. I was talking to him about some other subject in there, and that just came up. I just thought it would be an amusing vignette.

GREENE: Oh, I see, I thought you were there, and it was a coincidence.

NICKERSON: No, no. It was kind of interesting to me that Johnson as president would really take the time on what was a relatively minor matter. Of course, it was one of the first times that the administration had been questioned by the Congress, and maybe that was why he felt that it was significant.

GREENE: Did Kennedy comment at all after the conversation was over?

NICKERSON: Nothing that sticks in my memory as such.

GREENE: He wasn't terribly impressed with Johnson's interest. . . .

NICKERSON: No, I don't recall that.

GREENE: Did you find him accessible and interested in the kinds of things you normally went to him on? Do you remember any occasions where you wished he had been more helpful?

NICKERSON: No, he made his staff available. His staff was extremely helpful, particularly Peter Edelman, whom we dealt with a lot. What was the name of that fellow, big tall fellow on his staff?

GREENE: Adam [Adam Walinsky]?

NICKERSON: No, no. He isn't a big tall fellow. I know Adam very well. That big tall fellow. Went to Max McCarthy [Congressman Richard D. McCarthy].

GREENE: Wendell Pigman?

NICKERSON: Wendell Pigman.

GREENE: I didn't think he was very tall.

NICKERSON: Well, I guess maybe he isn't. At any rate, he was taller than Adam and Peter. Everything is relative. And he helped us some, but it was mostly Peter that we dealt with. I remember at one time I went to see Johnson. This was in 1967, I guess (maybe we're getting a little bit ahead), and made various suggestions to him as to what he should do about the suburbs, one of which was, that there ought to be called by the president of the United States an international conference on the suburbs, and various other things that I suggested to him. I won't go into that conversation, which is part of another oral history. But Johnson didn't do anything with that, and so I suggested to Kennedy that he should do that, and that was one of. . . . We worked on that. It never came about, but I remember Peter was very much interested in that and involved in it. Peter was extremely helpful, a good man, excellent particularly in the health and welfare areas, which was his particular area of expertise.

GREENE: Okay. If there is nothing that you can fit in, I'm talking without notes, so I'm not sure of the chronology. . . . If there is nothing else in that type of thing, we can move on to the governor's race.

NICKERSON: All right.

GREENE: Unless there's something. If there is, let's. . . .

NICKERSON: Something may come to me.

GREENE: Do you recall your discussions with the senator about your interest in the governor's race, and how much he was willing to do and really how much of it did you do directly and how much was handled through Jack English [John F. English]?

NICKERSON: I told you, I think, the first conversation that we had which if I remember it, took place in my county car as we were going to one of those meetings. I think there were two meetings that we had with community leaders. One, I'm pretty sure, was between election day and the time that he took office, and maybe one was later. And maybe that conversation took place at the second one which was in 1965, in which he asked me whether I was interested, and so forth. We talked some at one point about these forums that were held around the state. Basically this was a suggestion of myself and Jack English that in the absence of a primary, which there wasn't at that time--it was decided by a convention--whether it would be a good idea for the candidates to expose themselves around the state to the potential delegates who'd vote at the convention for them. And I've forgotten whether we talked jointly with Kennedy, or whether I. . . . I had known Jack talked to him. Whether I talked separately to Robert about it. . . . In any event

there were conversations on that subject, and he thought that it was a good idea.

GREENE: Any discussion at that point, or did you clarify your own thinking on the matter, about how this would fit into your own ambition? Was it designed to promote you specifically?

NICKERSON: That was the. . . . I didn't say that to him. I don't know whether it was apparent to him, but it was designed to do that.

GREENE: But there was no commitment made or asked that if. . . .

NICKERSON: Never had any commitment. . . .

GREENE:that he would support you.

NICKERSON: No, no, not at any point did he. . . . I assumed that he would, but I assumed--and people had said to me, and I don't remember who--that he had favored me, but that he wouldn't. . . . He never told me that, as such. Although he indicated that. . . . You know, when we would talk, we would talk in terms of what would serve that purpose. But he never said, "Well I'm supporting you," in so many words. And we didn't have a running conversation about that. A few times we'd talk about things that I had done which either were hurtful or helpful in his judgment. For example, I got in a fight with the district attorney in Nassau County in which I accused him of the commission of a crime by trying to put a police officer in the jail, under cover, without the consent of the sheriff, which my county attorney informed me would be a violation of law. And we got in a fight about that, and Kennedy said he didn't think that was very helpful.

Another time I got into. . . . As a matter of fact, it was, I think, the day that I announced. I went around the state, and I made some remark in one of the speeches--in one day I went to five cities, I think, four or five cities around the state--and in one of them, Syracuse, in fact, I'd made a speech that the police training of the state police was inadequate and that they knew how to beat people up, but not how to do whatever, not how to. . . . I've forgotten the exact context. And we talked about that, and he told me he didn't think that was helpful. I explained that this was not. . . . What this was was symptomatic of Rockefeller's attitude toward life.

GREENE: Were you able to persuade him at all?

NICKERSON: Don't think so. I mean, I think he was probably right in political terms, because it got blown up out of context. There were a few other things of that kind. We had a conversation after Suffolk County came out for O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor].

GREENE: Well, that was kind of a. . . . That kind of broke your back.

NICKERSON: Right. Otis Pike, who is a congressman, was anxious--he didn't tell me this, but I understand--that he was very anxious that I should not be the candidate. He had ambitions at some point to be the candidate for Senate, and it was his judgment that if someone who was a WASP from Long Island was governor, that that would tend to foreclose a WASP from Long Island from being senator, and so he really was the one who argued most strenuously for O'Connor and swung the Suffolk delegation, and that was really the thing that was hurtful to me. Robert was in Hyannis, and I talked to him from Nassau. I told him basically that he could name the candidate if he'd just say so, and he said that he didn't know whether that was true but that in any event the Suffolk thing was very hurtful, and he thought that it would be just a bloodbath and that was the end of that conversation.

GREENE: How did you feel about that, personally? How did you feel about Robert Kennedy's behavior and actions or lack of it in this whole thing?

NICKERSON: I didn't feel. . . . You know, he had never committed himself to me, and I thought that he could have named the candidate very readily because they were just looking for leadership, as most politicians are followers not leaders, particularly what you might call professional politicians, and most politicians are fighting the last war generally with the weapons of the war before the last, as we saw with the nomination of Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg]. And that he could have at an early stage made that decision, and it would have been easy for him to do, but he didn't want to get out on a limb maybe, and felt possibly that he'd get hurt.

No one was particularly excited with O'Connor or with any of the other candidates, for that matter, so it would have been an easy decision for him to make, and I thought that he was much too timid, but I didn't have any personal feeling that he owed it to me or anything of that kind. I just felt that he didn't exercise the influence that he had. He had frequently told people that if he could appoint a governor, he would appoint me, so I thought that was very timid, and that he hadn't properly assessed the forces that were at work there.

GREENE: Do you think that it was. . . .

NICKERSON: He also had no doubt that if I'd been nominated that I could be elected. Well, I was told that.

GREENE: Because I was going to ask you if you thought the timidity came from the fact that he might go after the nomination. . . .

NICKERSON: Well, that's possible. That's possible, though that wasn't the information that came to me. I can't remember whether he told me that or not. It may have been Jack, or it may have been Robert himself, but he didn't have any doubt that I was electable.

GREENE: And what about the Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] memorandum, that could have been construed in so many different ways. How did you read that. . . .

NICKERSON: Well, I read the whole Roosevelt thing in this fashion, that, going back a bit from that memo, that part of the reason Robert Kennedy held back at the early stage was that he figured that Roosevelt, having helped John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], that he Robert Kennedy at least owed him a shot at the nomination. Although my impression was he didn't think Frank would be a great candidate for governor, or a great governor, but he did feel that he as a Kennedy should at least give him his opportunity.

Frank Roosevelt is someone--or was someone at that time--who was totally unrealistic about his opportunities and chances. You know, he thought for a year and a half before that convention that he had it sewed up, but he never had any substantial votes at all. And I don't think Robert thought realistically that he could be nominated, and then when. . . . I didn't talk to him at the time of the Roosevelt memo, but he thought that that would open it up and make it easier for him to make a choice. At least this is what Jack has told me, and you had better. . . . It's better to ask Jack about that than me because mine would be second hand.

GREENE: It's funny. You say that whole thing with very little rancor, and I have heard that your staff particularly was really angry at Robert Kennedy as a result of his not helping you. Is that accurate?

NICKERSON: Yeah, I think probably they were, but. . . . It's all past, isn't it?

GREENE: Yes, but it's important to get down the feelings of the time, I think.

NICKERSON: Well, no, I don't remember feeling. . . . I never remember feeling that he had any obligation of any kind. The problem was for me as a candidate that I was touted as Robert Kennedy's candidate.

GREENE: Yes, unfortunately.

NICKERSON: Right. So, you know, you had all the disadvantages of that and none of the advantages. Now, I don't suppose that's his fault, but that's the way it worked out. So if you're Robert Kennedy's candidate, he should say so, or else he really doesn't want you. The inference, it seems to me, is inevitably drawn from that. So it might be. . . . Who knows? You know, it might have been better to have been not Robert Kennedy's candidate right from the beginning, as O'Connor was, and in that event everyone doesn't sit around waiting for the word, and that was exactly what happened.

Everyone sat there, all those leaders, waiting for him to say yes, or who his candidate was and he never did.

GREENE: At one point, I remember Jack English took him. . . . I'm just not sure of the date without any notes, but he went to him and pleaded with him to give him one more opportunity to go around the state, and see what kind of support he could drum up. Kennedy went along with that. And then English did go upstate, and he felt the same way you just described, that he could only word things in a very clumsy way. You know, "Robert Kennedy would be very happy if you would support Eugene Nickerson," rather than, "Robert Kennedy is asking you to support Eugene Nickerson." Do you remember that?

NICKERSON: Yes, I remember that. I remember Jack going around at that point. Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] did not help much. People would call Jerry and he'd tell them, you know, "Robert is taking no position. He's not saying it. . . ." There was some negative feeling, in other words, there.

GREENE: Bruno wouldn't reinforce it, then?

NICKERSON: Yes. But, who knows? I mean, you can never recapture all that and what really lay behind it.

GREENE: Was there ever any discussion after the nomination went to O'Connor? Did you talk to Kennedy about it.

NICKERSON: Yes.

GREENE: Did you ever get any explanations?

NICKERSON: No. I went to see him. . . . Can't remember whether it was after that election. Of course, I saw him up at the convention, the '66 convention. You know, that was another interesting thing.

END OF TAPE.