

Thomas J. Watson Oral History Interview –RFK #1, 1/6/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: Thomas J. Watson
Interviewer: Roberta W. Greene
Date of Interview: January 6, 1970
Place of Interview: New York, New York
Length: 27 pp.

Biographical Note

Watson, Thomas J.; Member, board of directors, Bedford-Stuyvesant Development and Services Corp. Watson discusses his role in Bedford-Stuyvesant, his impressions of, and relationship with, Robert F. Kennedy [RFK], and RFK as a presidential candidate, among other issues.

Access Restrictions

No restrictions.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed November 4, 1971, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Thomas J. Watson, recorded interview by Roberta W. Greene, January 6, 1970, (page number), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Thomas J. Watson, Jr.

to the

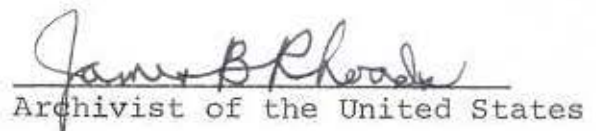
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

I, Thomas J. Watson, Jr. of Armonk, New York, do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interview conducted at New York, New York on January 6, 1970 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The transcript and tape are to be made immediately available for research use.
2. Researchers who have access to the transcript may listen to the tape; however, this is to be for background use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote therefrom.
3. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.


Thomas J. Watson, Jr.

10 28 71
Month, Day, Year


Archivist of the United States

11-4-71
Month, Day, Year

Thomas J. Watson

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1, 8, 14, 17	Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] and the business community
2, 8, 15	Watson's impressions of, and relationship with, RFK
3, 6	RFK after John F. Kennedy's [RFK] death
3, 19, 23	RFK as a potential president
4, 19	RFK and the Senate
9	Bedford-Stuyvesant
9, 8, 14	Watson and International Business Machines [IBM]
11, 16	Discrimination
18	RFK's impact in Bedford-Stuyvesant
20	RFK's thoughts on the Vietnam War
25	RFK's assassination

Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS J. WATSON

January 6, 1970
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: You had begun to talk about Robert Kennedy's reputation in the business community during the Kennedy Administration. Maybe you could just continue from that.

WATSON: Yes. Well, I'll start over again, I suppose, for your record. I didn't know Bob Kennedy very much on a business or political basis during the Administration of his brother. But just as one businessman associating with a great number of businessmen, I would say that his administration as Attorney General was one that was viewed with considerable question by the business community. Particularly after the steel crisis and the alleged comments he had made to his brother about businessmen. I think the business community were considerably suspicious of Bob Kennedy and what he might do as Attorney General. I think also that as the Administration unfolded and as he gathered very able people around him, and as he acted with moderation and consideration and dispatch, that the suspicion of the business community softened somewhat. But I would never believe that he was held in high esteem by business generally.

[-1-]

GREENE: Did he discuss this with you? Was he concerned with his...

WATSON: No. But I had a considerable discussion at one point with President Kennedy on the subject of the position of the total Administration with business. And I believe that we concluded at the time that important businessmen as a group were not a great political force in the United States, that they did not generally swing their businesses behind them in their voting, and that it was going to be essentially impossible to ever endear them to the Democratic Administration and most particularly to President Kennedy's Administration, and therefore, it wasn't worth any specific effort except to treat them fairly and well and not ever expect to convert them to being sympathetic. But I never really talked this specifically with Bobby.

GREENE: Is that true in later years, too?

WATSON: No. I think later on that I talked with Bobby. I held a number of dinners and lunches here in New York with members of the business community and the publishing community for Senator Kennedy in an attempt to have him better understood by the news media and the businessmen. These interviews were not particularly well-received either. I think Bob was at his best in front of large groups of people where he really felt a sympathy and an empathy in his heart for the people he was talking to. I don't think he knew businessmen very well, and as a consequence, I don't think he was ever really able to talk to them at their level. Sometimes there'd be some sparks in these luncheons as a result of the questions that went on afterwards. And sometimes he did quite well on the questions, but in an actual speech to businessmen, there wasn't much sympathy on either side, I don't think.

[-2-]

GREENE: What about your social contacts with him during the Administration? You mentioned off the tape skiing and....

WATSON: Yes. Well, he liked to ski and I saw a good deal of him in Stowe and in other parts of New England, participated in his favorite plan of ski races. Whenever we were together, he'd organize teams. He and his wife and my wife and I and various children would have relays down the mountain and very frequently Bobby's team won. We had a lot of great times in Stowe. I remember one particular evening when we were there with John Glenn and his wife, and [Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy] Ethel, I believe, organized the game of blind man's bluff. So if anybody had walked into the house at 10:30 in the evening, they'd find twenty adults prowling around the house in the complete dark trying to find each other in this game of blind man's bluff. He would also come up to North Haven, Maine for a couple or three days every summer, either sailing up or coming up by air. We had a fair number of long walks and talks in this connection. The more I saw of him under these conditions, the more I thought of him, the greater force I thought he could be for good in the United States, and the more I began to hope that he would in fact run for President and win.

GREENE: Well, just to back up a bit. Do you remember the period after the assassination, the decision-making on the Senate race? Did you have much contact with him then?

[-3-]

WATSON: I had very little contact at that time. One of the things that impressed me after his brother's assassination was the dispatch with which he moved to organize the funeral, to organize President Kennedy's most intimate friends and to see that they were involved and invited to the funeral, to the lying in state and so forth. I remember that I got the news of the President's death at around noon here in New York City, and I had to leave the city that afternoon. And by midnight that night I had a wire asking me to come with my wife to the White House to pass by the bier with the Senate and the Court, and then later on, was asked to return to the funeral itself. And I was particularly touched by the fact that as I had gone through the East Room, passed by the casket, and then was leaving the White House through the lower floor that Bob was standing at the end of the steps shaking hands with everybody that moved through. It seemed to me that this was an unusually sympathetic kind of thing for a person under that kind of strain to undertake.

But, I really had nothing to do with his running for the Senate. We had a talk about it once in Maine, and I told him that since he was a Bostonian that I thought that the running for the Senate in New York was awkward. He didn't argue with me very much, but he had a remarkable memory because when he announced for the Senate I got a hold of him on the telephone and told him I thought it was great and that I'd like to help in any possible way. And he said, "Oh, I thought you said that you were sort of against me doing this." And I said, "Well, I did, but I've changed my mind."

GREENE: Was that conversation when you told him you thought it was awkward, was that while you were up in Maine. I know you took a cruise. That was in August.

[-4-]

WATSON: I think it was in August. Yes. We had a long walk in the rain up there. And he was talking about a number of different things. And our conversation centered principally about whether or not he should go for the Senate in New York.

GREENE: He didn't seem to have made a decision by then?

WATSON: No. He didn't.

GREENE: That's interesting.

WATSON: It seemed to me that it was still quite open. But I got the general impression that he was leaning in the direction of doing it. And I did make the remark that I thought it was awkward for someone so identified with the state of Massachusetts and New England to run for the Senate in New York. I've since come to believe that my conclusion there was rather naive, seeing various other people run for the Senate in states that aren't really their own.

GREENE: How did he explain it to you? Did he attempt to reply?

WATSON: No, except that in a preamble to telling me that he thought he might run for the Senate in New York, he mentioned that he'd offered his services to Johnson, to President [Lyndon B.] Johnson as a special envoy to Vietnam, and really offered to do anything that the President wanted him to. We never talked about whether or not he wanted to be Vice President, but he did indicate to me that there was a considerable feeling of hostility on the part of the President toward him. And, therefore, I concluded he wanted to make his political career in the interim period in something other than a post in the Administration. I think he felt he had to because there could be no position for him in the Administration

[-5-]

GREENE: Did you get much of a feeling on that trip of what his mood was? Was he still deep in grief, or did he seem to be coming out of it at that point?

WATSON: Well, it's hard for me to pick one visit from another because President Kennedy sailed up to Maine the first year I spent a summer there. And I attended a large party for him. Then, the very next summer Bobby and Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] sailed up there together on a frightful old black boat. In fact, the boat was so poor that I told them at the time that I'd be doing the country a service by loaning them my own boat, the *Palawan*. And from that point on until Bobby's death, I loaned them the boat each summer. So much so that my German skipper got to know him intimately. He got presents from Ethel and frequently talked about his relationship with the Kennedys although I think he remained a conservative Republican to the end. So it's hard for me to pick one visit from another. But certainly, right after the President's death he was terribly gloomy. But I thought that he bounced back from that rather quickly. I never thought that he was what you call a sunny kind of personality, Bob. I thought he was more seriously minded, more conscious of a duty to his country and a desire to serve than most, and therefore, was not a kind of bouncy, ebullient person as one might think Teddy was.

GREENE: Would you say that's also true on social occasions? Skiing? Did he...

[-6-]

WATSON: No, he was, I think, pretty full of fun on social occasions. But I always thought he retained a certain dignity. I never saw him do anything that I thought was undignified on any kind of social occasions. And we saw him in the most informal kind of situations. But he had a reserve and a dignity about him, which is one of the things that made me think that he could make it to the White House.

GREENE: Well, anyway, when you spoke to him after he did decide to run in New York, did you do anything in the campaign after you offered?

WATSON: Almost nothing. I don't remember being asked to do anything. And I don't really believe that I did anything. I'm sure I must've made a contribution to the campaign, but outside of that I wasn't... [Interruption]

GREENE: Okay, then. The next thing that I wanted to ask you about was in 1965 when he was looking for somebody to run for Mayor against John Lindsay; I understand that you were one of the people he was interested in. Can you remember contacts with him or his aides on that?

WATSON: Well, I had some talks with him about the Mayor's job, but it was so totally remote from anything that I would have considered that the talk must've been very short. I also had a great admiration for John Lindsay, although I knew him very slightly at that time. So such a conversation probably took place. I don't remember it specifically, but it was very short. We also had a very short conversation on the governorship of New York. But I live in Connecticut and it would have been a bit awkward for me for the same reason that I thought it would have been awkward for Bob to run in New York for the Senate. But I just didn't want it that much, you know.

[-7-]

GREENE: Well, then in the Senate period, except for the Bedford-Stuyvesant project, did you have much contact with him on Senate activities and related matters?

WATSON: I think not really. It was during that period that I gave these luncheons for him. He wanted to be helpful in an ethical way to me and to the IBM [International Business Machines] company as our Senator, for our major operations in IBM are in the state of New York. He sometimes visited the cities where we had plants. I told him once — he mentioned to me once that we had a lot of help from the Watson family and hoped that one day he could reciprocate. And I said, "Well, you can reciprocate right now if you will give me the name of a good corporate lawyer that I might be able to get into IBM as our general counsel. And he said, "Well, I had two great people there. One was Nicholas Katzenbach and the other was Burke Marshall and if you can get either one of them, you'll be doing well." Well, I began to flirt with each of them. And Burke was willing to come. And, then after Burke did so well in IBM that we proposed to raise him above the level of counsel, he recommended that we go and talk to Nick. And Burke and I, jointly, did talk to Nick, and now, he's there. So I feel very happy about, not only Bobby's suggestion, but also the two people that I've gotten. They've been a great help around here.

GREENE: Did you have any contact with him or his staff members about the companion tax incentive bills that he introduced on housing and unemployment?

[-8-]

WATSON: I had no contact whatever with him on those subjects.

GREENE: I think maybe we could go on to Bedford-Stuyvesant. Now, my impression was that the main contribution of yourself and your corporation was the building of the plant in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

WATSON: I think that's right. Yes. At the time that Bob began to think about the Bedford-Stuyvesant area as a total development, we were independently thinking of trying to do a major ghetto project of some sort, but none identified. We'd done some things sporadic in Harlem and a little bit in the West Coast ghettos. We finally began to think that we ought to do is put a plant in the ghetto, not only to learn better about how to handle the Negro, but also try to have a kind of test tube example of what a major corporation might do. At that time another company had put a plant in Watts, but there were complaints that they were only making tents and so forth and that the skills the Negro was learning were not of a very high order. So we had settled on the plant and I must say that when — but not the location — when I heard that they were thinking of doing this Bedford-Stuyvesant area, I felt, all other things being equal, that was where the plant ought to be. Not only because of my admiration for Bob, but because they were trying to develop Bedford-Stuyvesant on an integrated basis. Whereas if you went in Harlem, there wasn't anything similar to the Bedford-Stuyvesant Corporation which could help one. Then I met Joan Doar and Frank Thomas and they impressed me as being good fellows. And that was another reason why it seemed wise to go to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

[-9-]

GREENE: Did he actually come to you and ask you to...

WATSON: No, he never did. I must say when we made the decision, I went to him and told him with great pride — in the meantime I had become a director with Bedford-Stuyvesant Corporation — and he was exceedingly pleased. I don't know whether we ever got the plant going.... We had a very small operation before his assassination. I don't know whether he was ever there. But I know Ethel has been there a couple of times since and been impressed by it.

GREENE: It had been started, I think, according to the....

WATSON: Yes. I think there was a hundred or two people. We now have five hundred out there.

GREENE: As to joining the D&S [Distribution & Services Corporation], did he come to you on that? Did he just ask you to join it?

WATSON: Yes. He did. And I had really no idea of what he was trying to do. He spent some time talking to me about it. And I finally agreed. And I didn't have very much identification with it until I began to see the kind of people that he was getting involved. And when I saw he had Benno Schmidt and Andre Meyer and [C. Douglas] Doug Dillon and others, and that things were really happening out there, I began to get quite excited about it and have been ever since.

GREENE: Did you have much contact with John Doar or with his predecessor?

[-10-]

WATSON: I never knew his predecessor. But I have had a lot of contact with John Doar. I was in Bedford-Stuyvesant by chance the first day that John Doar arrived, and spent some time with him just as he was moving into his hotel. And I've seen a lot of him since.

GREENE: Are you reasonably pleased with the job he's been doing?

WATSON: Yes. Indeed I am.

GREENE: Did you get involved at all in helping to recruit members of the two boards, particularly the D&S? Did you make any suggestions in this regard?

WATSON: No. I don't think so.

GREENE: Did you attend the meetings?

WATSON: I attended the meetings, most of them. Yeah.

GREENE: Do you think the black board is working out fairly well? Now, that is' been reorganized?

WATSON: Yes. It isn't totally black is it?

GREENE: The Restoration Corporation Board?

WATSON: Yes.

GREENE: There may be some Puerto Ricans. I think that is all.

[-11-]

WATSON: Yes. I think it's hard to have the two boards and yet, vitally necessary. You really can't get the horsepower to get things done without an influential, mainly white board. At the same time, if you try to do the things in the area which you wanted to with only that white board, there'd be conflict. So the second board, I thought, was a brilliant idea. But the fact that there are two brings about some conflicts.

GREENE: There are still conflicts between them?

WATSON: Well, my general impression is that the black board and Frank Thomas would feel happier if the white board didn't exist provided they could get the same horsepower, which of course, they can't.

GREENE: Do they seem generally receptive to suggestions you come up with?

WATSON: Yes. I have heard of no conflict whatever at the meetings of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Corporation. But we don't meet with the black board.

GREENE: Annually?

WATSON: Annually, perhaps. We've made one visit to the building with them. Maybe that was at an annual meeting. But, it's not a regular thing.

GREENE: Did you do any fundraising, especially in the early period of the Bedford-Stuyvesant project?

[-12-]

WATSON: No. I did only some fundraising in the IBM Company. As soon as other people began to give money, I tried to get a pace-setting gift from IBM. Except for that I didn't do any fundraising. I have written since then, written a lot of fundraising letters on three or four different occasions. But not in the initial stages which you were talking about.

GREENE: What kind of response do you get on the fundraising, particularly while Robert Kennedy was alive and closely associated with it?

WATSON: Well, I don't think it's changed any while he was alive or while he's dead. I think that anybody who knows anything about Bedford-Stuyvesant is impressed with the effort, and is withholding judgement as to whether or not the ultimate goal will be able to be reached. I couldn't guarantee it will be reached either. There are an infinite number of problems in the ghetto that I thought that Bob was pretty well aware of. Our own situation there is difficult. Our people tend to get quite starry-eyed about it. And yet, when you get out there and say, Okay now, what's your absentee rate? It's between two and three times the rate of the rest of the company. What is your inventory disappearance rate? It's very high. What is your lateness? And it's very high there. So it's going to be very difficult to make the Negro from a ghetto like Bedford-Stuyvesant, where the Negroes are generally poorly educated, a useful member of society. But I don't see any other choice but to try. So we're still trying.

[-13-]

GREENE: Did your association or has your association with the Bedford-Stuyvesant group involved your Corporation at all? Or was it strictly a personal commitment, you know, your original commitment to be on the D&S? Did that involve anything?

WATSON: No. It didn't involve IBM in any way. There was no pressure on us to put that plant there at all. Never even talked to us. Although they were very pleased when we did it — I think they consider it one of the bellwethers of the area now — but no pressure to do, no.

GREENE: No. Actually when I asked you about the response you got to your fundraising letters, I was wondering if there were objections in the business community because of...

WATSON: I can't recall any.

GREENE: No.

WATSON: No. I just don't think that I can run that; or the IBM Company can run that over a very long period at a very inefficient level. So I try to tell the blacks who work there that after a preliminary period we really must get it on line as efficient as any other IBM plant. That's going to be the measure; but we'll give them a few years to get there.

GREENE: And there were no objections to the fact that this was a Robert Kennedy project, among the business people.

[-14-]

WATSON: No. Oh, no. I'll tell you. I have never had any pressure from my board or from anybody in the business about my relationship with Bob Kennedy or any of the other Kennedys. I once made the mistake of making a speech at a convention about Jack Kennedy — that was before he was elected — about my enthusiasm for him. And I got a very strong reaction from a group of average thirty-year old, very successful IBM young executives. I think it was a mistake to talk politics in a convention. And I never again did do that. And I never again had criticism. But I had a fair amount of criticism on that one.

GREENE: How realistic and practical do you think the ideas of the Restoration Corporation are, as a businessman looking at it?

WATSON: Well, I think the general aim of the Restoration Corporation, I think, is probably to try to make Bedford-Stuyvesant, not only look better, but also operate as a more profitable segment of the community. And those broad aims, I think, are fairly practical. I think if you drive around there now, and compare it to what it looked like four years ago, you'll have to admit that it does look nice; it's cleaner, it is neater, the people have a little more pride in themselves. Now whether you'd be able to carry that on from IBM and from a few other plants, find at long last sufficient industry in there to employ the people locally and to get the economic level high enough, and the level of despair low enough so that the drug addiction will tend to decrease and the poverty in the streets will tend to decrease, I just don't know. I think you'll need another five years to tell. It isn't going to be done very quickly. The trouble with

[-15-]

ghetto projects, in my opinion, are that they are started with great enthusiasm, great fanfare. You get some dedicated, over-believing person in charge, who goes around and makes a lot of speeches about how wonderfully everything's going, and then pretty soon, somebody comes in and really measures it and finds that the costs are way out of line. Then they either drop it or lower it to such a low level that everybody gets discouraged. So what I've been trying to preach on IBM is to keep your mouths shut until you can get your statistics right up level to an ordinary plant somewhere else, and then begin to talk about it. It's been difficult. The local people would like to go out and sing praises to a project which really is not successful as yet but we have every hope will be successful.

GREENE: Did you talk in detail with the Senator before and during the setting up of the project about....

WATSON: No. I talked to him generally on the subject of the Negro, though. And I think he realized that the application of the Negro to the higher levels or middle levels of the economic society was going to be very difficult. I don't think he thought for a minute that you could take the average Negro and compete against the average white person and come off with the Negro holding his own. I think he felt that because of long prejudice that the Negro needed a bit of reverse — what's the word?

GREENE: Reverse....

[-16-]

WATSON: I want to say segregation, but that isn't quite it.

GREENE: Reverse prejudice?

WATSON: Reverse discrimination. Yeah, reverse prejudice. And I think we're doing that.

GREENE: Well, anyway, looking back, particularly up to the point of the Senator's assassination, how do you see the project? How did he see it? Did you discuss in terms of the progress you'd made and where you were going?

WATSON: Well, I think that he thought that toward the end of his life, or toward the time that he was — after the project had been going — what was it, three years between the time he started and the time he died?

GREENE: Yeah. Well — just about three years.

WATSON: I think that he felt in the initial stage that it was going to be a lot easier to make a fine economic community and a fine living community out of Bedford-Stuyvesant than the facts actually supported toward the end of his life. I think the three years showed that it was going to be a lot more difficult than it was. It was more difficult to get the funds, both governmental and private funds, and more difficult to make progress with the blacks.

But I saw no diminishment in his enthusiasm to make that progress or his enthusiasm to improve the lot of the black man.

GREENE: Was he understanding about the reluctance of business to get involved, or did he resent this?

[-17-]

WATSON: I never found a single thing in Bob Kennedy which would make me think that he resented any part of the business community in any way. I don't think he thought a great deal about the business segment. But he certainly had no prejudice against it.

GREENE: Maybe I worded that poorly. What I was thinking was, did he feel that they were simply not doing what they should?

WATSON: I never heard him say so. I think he felt that it was a wealthy company who could have the financial muscle to go in and do something in the ghetto, that a company that was a marginal operation really couldn't. Because the trouble in the ghetto was it was filled with marginal operators already. They were in there trying to squeeze that low-level work force down to a very low per-hour income in order to make a marginal product. We went in there with an average wage of three dollars or more and this was the way, I think, he thought that the whole economic level could be upgraded there.

GREENE: Have you gotten any feeling since his death of how much of an impact he really had on the whole thing? Has it succeeded and continued fairly well?

WATSON: Well, I think that he had an impact over there and it's sorely missed at the moment. I think that every Negro in Bedford-Stuyvesant felt that he had a personal friend in Washington that was really thinking about his individual destiny and how he could improve his individual lot as a black man in Bedford-Stuyvesant. And of course, that's been lost. And the Negroes grieved terribly at his death and there's been nothing since to supplant it in Bedford-Stuyvesant. I suspect these can't be. But to a degree that is implicit all over the United States with "less-chance America."

[-18-]

GREENE: Is there anything else on Bedford-Stuyvesant that you'd like to add?

WATSON: I think not because — I think that you have in your questions and preparation felt that my most significant relationship with Bob Kennedy outside of the social was related to Bedford-Stuyvesant, and that my contacts with him Bedford-Stuyvesant were minimal as my answers to your questions have suggested.

GREENE: Well, then, do you have anything to add other than going on into the Presidential thing? Do you have anything on the Senate period?

WATSON: No. I think not. Except that when I visited him down there in Washington, which I tried to do every few months I happened to be in Washington or when they gave a local party. It just seemed to me that after his confrontation with Johnson, and the obvious conclusion on one or both sides that he was not going to be a vice-presidential candidate, that Bob began to grow at a much more rapid rate as an individual than he ever had before. I thought he became a great force in those three or three and a half years, a much greater force than I think he could have become had he been selected as Johnson's Vice President.

GREENE: Well, then. You mentioned before we started taping again that you had had at least one lengthy conversation about the presidential nomination.

[-19-]

WATSON: Yes. I talked with him, I guess, two years before he announced, when he was visiting in Maine. This was as a result of three or four years of relatively close association. And I told him privately at that time that I thought he would make the best President in the offing for the United States, and that certainly the country was not making the kind of progress that I had hoped. And therefore, I would like to undertake to back the Senator for the presidency in any possible way I could. He was rather non-committal on that. And he said it was very flattering and he appreciated it a great deal, but he didn't really say whether he was interested or not. He just said, "That means a great deal to me to have you say that," but no commission beyond that. And then we didn't talk again about it until he came over here to my office within a month, I guess, before he ran. And we sat around and talked for I suppose more than an hour on this subject. And it was obvious then to me that he was doing some great soul searching about what he ought to do in connection with the next Administration. And I remember that I talked a lot, at least half the time on the subject of Vietnam. And his thinking was a good deal ahead of mine. My thinking now would be about what his thinking was then. And that was how long ago? My goodness.

GREENE: '68, March '68.

[-20-]

WATSON: Yeah, quite a while. I said, "What would you do about Vietnam?" And he said, "I'd get out of there." And I said, "How?" And he said, "I'd get out of there in any possible way. I think it's an absolute disaster. I think it's much worse to be there than any of the shame or difficulty that one would engender internationally by moving out. And, so with whatever kind of apologies and with whatever kind of grace I could conjure up, I'd get out of there in six months with all of the troops the United States has." And I think that the last two years have proved that he is probably right because we are just spreading our dissatisfaction and unhappiness and making other countries dissatisfied over a longer period of time. But we're going to end up with the same general result, no matter how we play it. I think

he had a long vision on Vietnam and what it was doing to this country. And, I think, perhaps, Senator [Eugene J.] McCarthy took that from Bob and used it to his great advantage in his presidential campaign.

GREENE: Did he discuss McCarthy's campaign with you at all that day?

WATSON: No. Except that I think that he — we discussed enough in Washington. I once had dinner with just him and Teddy at Teddy's house in Washington, and a few visits here in New York, so that I felt that he was embarrassed by the fact he'd let McCarthy test the water and then he plunged in. And I think he'd indicated that he'd been in touch with McCarthy and tried to make some kind of

[-21-]

a compromise between them which I suppose might have meant McCarthy stepping back to a vice-presidential candidacy or something. But he could get no enthusiasm at all out of McCarthy and it came to nothing. But I knew he felt diffident about the fact that many of his staff, as you know, went up and worked for McCarthy. And as soon as he announced, they just dropped McCarthy and moved back to him. I also think that Bobby was a pretty hard-minded guy politically, and I learned a lot about politics from him. And I think that that's the name of the game. If politics are the art of the possible it was possible for Bob to win. It certainly wouldn't have been possible for McCarthy to win. So I didn't really blame him a bit for being realistic and jumping in where he thought he had an opportunity even though it was somewhat difficult on McCarthy.

GREENE: You know, you say that you were probably two years behind him in your own thinking on Vietnam. How did he respond to your feelings? Did he try to convince you?

WATSON: Well, when I said, "How would you do that?" it was interesting I think. He really wasn't interested in discussing with me the specific methodology because he thought that the goal of getting out was so doggone important. I was more mesmerized by how you would deal with the South Vietnamese; how would you deal with your promises as an ally and so forth. He put all that secondary to getting out because we were going to have trouble anyway. And, curiously, I sat in October of this year with three leaders of the senior class at CalTech [California Institute of Technology] — which is a very high-level intellectual institution, as you know. We were just having dinner in Palm Springs and I put them the same question: "What would you do about Vietnam?" And they said precisely what Bobby said. Namely, "I'd get out right now under any conditions because what you're doing to the country does not equate with the disgrace that you'd have internationally by pulling out." It was interesting — very youthful opinion, but very parallel to Bob's.

[-22-]

GREENE: That day, did he discuss the presidential race in terms of other issues and the Johnson Administration in general and the advice he was getting from all sides?

WATSON: Yes. I think that he discussed that race sufficiently to let me know that he felt that the country was not getting the leadership that was necessary to continue it as the major force in the world of power and hopefully the major force in the world for good that the country was capable of delivering. We didn't discuss Johnson specifically, though over a long period of years it was obvious to me that there was not much love on either side. The Johnson Administration once asked me to do something in it and I gave it some small consideration. And I got hold of Bobby and asked him what he thought I ought to do. And he really didn't comment, which was I think a very statesmanlike position for him. But I gained from all of our contacts that he had little respect for President Johnson. And I know there was no warmth on the part of President Johnson for him. And they weren't at all the same kind of people.

GREENE: You couldn't pinpoint that conversation anymore specifically than about a month before? Do you have any real idea what the date might have been?

WATSON: No, but I could certainly look it up and tell you. Is that interesting to you?

[-23-]

GREENE: It might be interesting. You don't have to do it now. It's always interesting to see, you know, how his thinking was at different points in that period. Did he call to tell you himself that he had actually decided to run, or did you find that out...

WATSON: Your name is Miss Greene?

GREENE: Mrs. Greene.

WATSON: Mrs.

GREENE: Right.

WATSON: You don't look old enough to be married.

Now I don't know how, but for some reason the day that he was announcing for the Presidency he invited Burker Marshall and I down to his apartment, down there at U.N. Plaza. And we went in and I must say it was a terribly thrilling morning to me. He asked me about fundraising in the business community and about the acceptance of business and how we might get the best mileage out of what few businessmen there were that would lean in his direction. He asked Burke a certain number of things that Burke might do in his areas.

This fellow that now runs the RFK Memorial, [Frederick G.] Fred Dutton, seemed to be one of the principals in bringing all this together. I remember he and Bobby were kind of sitting

on a bed in Bobby's bedroom. But there were eight or ten or fifteen people there. And it was a very dramatic kind of morning. And I don't remember whether he announced that morning or whether he had announced the morning before.

[-24-]

GREENE: It would probably be that morning because the next day he was in Boston.

WATSON: Well, then that must've been it.

GREENE: Just before the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

WATSON: Probably was. I remember telling him that I would be delighted to do whatever was necessary up to and including taking a leave of absence for the year in order to help him. Then after he started campaigning, he really didn't ask me for any help. And except for going out and making speeches, which I thought, perhaps, I would be doing in — When was he shot? In September?

GREENE: No. In June.

WATSON: In June.

GREENE: June 5th.

WATSON: Oh, yeah. Well, I thought that as the summer rolled on and the fall rolled on that I could probably do whatever good a businessman could do by getting active at that time. It didn't seem to me that it was important since he hadn't asked me to get involved with the thing earlier. And then I remember that Burke went out to California to be with him and told me about the fact that California looked very good. He came back, I guess — Bob was shot on Monday? — it was early in the week, I believe.

GREENE: Yeah, It was a Tuesday, wasn't it?

[-25-]

WATSON: Burke came back from the weekend, and I saw him on the Monday at IBM and he said that things were going well. Then I remember he was shot and I just couldn't believe that two brothers could both be killed so I assumed that he had just been wounded slightly. And Burke and I were going out to San Jose anyway, the IBM San Jose plant. So I said, "Well, let's go to Los Angeles and just stop by and see how Bobby is." In the meantime, Burke then called and — Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kenendy] needed to go out there, too. So, we stopped at the airport and got her brother-in-law, the Prince, whatever his name is.

GREENE: Stanislas Radziwill.

WATSON: Radziwill. Then I saw all those people around. And I thought, my gosh, nobody will ever believe that I was going to California anyway. So I called back to IBM comptroller and said, "I want to charter this jet for this trip so there'll be no criticisms of me taking Mrs. Kennedy out." I was glad I did because on that I did get some stockholder queries as to why I had used IBM property to take Jackie. And I thought they were legitimate questions. But I had chartered the plane so there was no problem. But when I got there — [Charles F.] Chuck Spalding was in the car riding into town with us. Jackie said, "Chuck, what's the story? I want it straight from the shoulder." And Chuck said, "Well, Jackie, he's dying." So then we knew that it was all over.

GREENE: Now, this would have been sometime, I guess — no, in the middle of the day. The times were different, of course, because it was midnight here. In fact, it was later here when he was shot. Would this have been the very next day?

[-26-]

WATSON: The very next day. And I decided at nine to go. Burke got the word that Jackie was going with us. We met her at Kennedy airport. As soon as that prince got off his plane, he came right over and off we went. [Roswell L.] Ros Gilpatric brought her out to the airplane. Curiously, we stopped at Grand Island for gasoline and bumped right into [Thomas B., Jr.] Tom McCabe, head of the Scott Paper Company, and a whole bunch of people who were coming back, I think from Oregon, from having helped Rockefeller in his assault on Oregon. I remember introducing Jackie to them there.

GREENE: But, it was not yet clear to you and to Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Onassis, that it was as serious as....

WATSON: No. Not at all. Even though Burke had talked on the phone out there. I suppose it was one of these old stories of a very, very vital person. The more vital the person, the more difficult it is to accept that he exists no longer, he or she exists no longer. I think that's what it was.

GREENE: If you have nothing else....

WATSON: I think not.

GREENE: I have nothing else. Okay. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-27-]