

**James Loeb Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 05/25/1972**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** James Loeb

**Interviewer:** Larry J. Hackman

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**Biographical Note**

James Loeb was a publisher for the Adirondack Daily Enterprise as well as a New York political figure. This interview focuses on Loeb as co-chairman of the Kennedy operation in New York in 1968, Robert F. Kennedy's [RFK] presidential run of 1968, and RFK's changing role in politics from 1960 to 1968, among other issues.

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Gift of Personal Statement

By James Loeb

to the

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, James Loeb, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America for deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, the tape(s) and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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James J. Leeb

Date

March 3, 1970

Accepted

James B. Rhoads


Archivist of the United States

Date

March 10, 1970

ADDENDUM TO GIFT OF PERSONAL STATEMENT OF MARCH 3, 1970 BY JAMES I. LOEB

This is to provide that an oral history interview regarding my association with Robert F. Kennedy conducted with me by Larry J. Hackman of the John F. Kennedy Library on May 25, 1972 shall be treated by the Kennedy Library in the same manner as the earlier interviews of November 12, 1967 and February 9, 1968 for the Kennedy Library. Provisions regarding the treatment of said interviews are contained in the Gift of Personal Statement signed by me on March 3, 1970 and accepted by the Archivist of the United States on March 10, 1970, a copy of which is attached to this addendum.

  
James I. Loeb

*Sent Nov 21, 1974  
Returned Dec 2, 1974*

James Loeb – RFK #1  
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Oral History Interview

with

JAMES LOEB

May 25, 1972  
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Larry J. Hackman

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

HACKMAN: You want me to wait awhile?

LOEB: Oh, no, that's all right. The conversation February 22, 1967 had practically no significance, political significance. Bob Kennedy had come up to ski, which he did at Tupper Lake. Then he came for supper. Frank Mankiewicz was there and a few other people. I can't even remember any significant aspect of that conversation.

HACKMAN: I'd wondered if at that point or at other instances he or Mankiewicz or maybe Gerald R. Bruno out of Syracuse talked with you about newspaper coverage of Robert Kennedy or political events in New York?--no real contact on that?

LOEB: You mean at that time?

HACKMAN: Yes, then or . . .

LOEB: Well, I was later co-chairman of the Kennedy operation in New York State. That's kind of an interesting story, but that's not an . . .

HACKMAN: In '68, you mean?

LOEB: In '68, yes. There never was. . . . It never really got to be organized except on paper.

HACKMAN: Yes.

LOEB: You want me to tell you about that?

HACKMAN: Yes, yes.

LOEB: Well, I remember--go go back for just a minute--that in 1960 after [John F.] Jack Kennedy was nominated, despite my efforts for the most liberal candidate of that year, namely Hubert Humphrey, which sounds a little strange as we're talking now. . . . I keep thinking I had no problems about supporting John Kennedy for the presidency, but that brother of his who was being so much trouble in 1960. . . . If anybody told me then that eight years later I would be co-chairman of Bobby's [Robert F. Kennedy] campaign I would have thought he was crazy. But this is only an indication, it seems to me, how all the Kennedys, the three Kennedy brothers I might say, have grown. From the time I first knew each one of them I never would have given any one of them much chance at the kind of future that each one had. But this was strange. I was for Bobby Kennedy.

Then one night I came home from my little newspaper in Saranac Lake--it must have been about 6 o'clock--and the phone rings and some girl says, "Mr. Loeb, could you give me your biography?" And I said, "My what?" She said, "Just a brief biography." And I said, "Well, for goodness sake, why?" She said, "Well, I'm calling for Robert Kennedy's headquarters and I thought you were going to be co-chairman of the campaign." And well, I said, "Gosh, I. . . . Nobody's ever asked me." "Oh," she said, "I'm terribly embarrassed. Somebody will call you within the next hour." And [William H.] Bill vanden Heuvel did call and he said, "Jim, I'm terribly embarrassed. We just assumed that you were for Bobby Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger said you were." And I said, "Well, Bill, I am, but you have to remember that my oldest friend in politics is Hubert Humphrey. I'm certainly for Bobby Kennedy, but I just sort of think maybe I should sit this one out. At least would you give me over-night." He said, "Sure, just think about it."

So I thought about it, and I wrestled with myself all night and I talked with a few people, and I came to the conclusion you couldn't be sentimental about these things. Despite old friends you were. . . . Anything you can contribute to electing the man you thought should be president of the United States, you had to do. I was to call back [William] Bill Walton in the morning because Bill vanden Heuvel was leaving town. I called him back from my newspaper office. He wasn't in and they said he would call back.

In the meantime the mail comes and the mail contained a letter from the vice president of the United States, Hubert Humphrey. And that was a strange one because several weeks previously [James B.] Scotty Reston has in a column something to the effect that some of Hubert Humphrey's close friends were urging him not to run and he mentioned Reinhold Niebuhr, [Joseph L., Jr.] Joe Rauh, and myself as the three people urging him not to run. Actually I hadn't urged him directly not to run, but through some of his friends. . . . And my partner Roger Tubby, then director of United States Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, who was and is a total hawk--



and we're still good friends, but differ on many subjects--saw this in Reston's column. He sent a telegram to the vice president saying, "On this issue I disagree with my partner and I urge you to run for the good of the country." So the vice president sends me a Xerox of the cable with a cute little note saying "Oh, Jim, I know you're going to be with us eventually" and so forth.

And in this mood Bill Walton called up and said "Jim, what are your feelings this morning?" And I said, "I'm going to do it," and so I did it. I was co-chairman. Then I sat down and typed out personally a long letter to Hubert Humphrey and he took it graciously as he always did and said, "Oh, well. . . ."

HACKMAN: How much really got going then? Who did you work with, or how . . .

LOEB: Nothing got going. Actually we were waiting for the California primary and then Bobby was to come in. And interestingly enough, in the Wisconsin Progressive, [Morris H.] Morey Rubin was devoting his July issue to the three candidates, and he asked me to do the piece on Bobby Kennedy. Originally he asked Arthur Schlesinger, frankly, but Arthur had just done a piece for The New Republic and so he suggested that I do it. [James A.] Jimmy Wechsler did the one for Eugene J. McCarthy and Gus Tyler did the one on Humphrey. So I said I would do it but I figured I might as well wait for the California primary. So I outlined the whole thing, had it all set, and set aside two or three days--it was to be a fairly long, major piece--to write it. I, of course, waited until the California primaries. That evening everybody remembers what happened. We happen to have in Saranac Lake a Will Rogers Hospital and they were having a board meeting. And they had two of what they called "press previews" of movies. One of them that took place that night was "For Love of Ivy" with Sidney Poitier, and he was in town for the occasion. And we went to the movie at the little local theater. We had headlines on the paper "Guess Who's Coming to Saranac Lake!" Afterwards some of us went to watch the result of the primaries on TV and after about midnight I went home. But somebody down the block had NBC [National Broadcasting Company] on and fell asleep and woke up about 5 o'clock and found out what happened and called me. Then I went to the Whiteface Inn and woke up Sidney Poitier and told him. It was a dramatic conclusion. And so my article was never written. I may say, the one interesting aspect that would have been in my article had I written it was. . . . And this, I don't know if this is in the history of that period. The turning point was, of all things, the District of Columbia primary. Do you know about that?

HACKMAN: In '68 you mean?

LOEB: Yes.

HACKMAN: Yes, I interviewed Peter Edelman who was . . .

LOEB: Well, the problem was this: Before the New Hampshire thing, McCarthy decided he'd look more like a candidate if he announced a few other primaries, and one of them was the District of Columbia. They asked our mutual friend Joe Rauh to organize the District of Columbia. He was chairman of the Democratic party in the District. And he said sure. Then when Bob Kennedy got in the race there was a real problem. Even at that time Washington was a largely black city. Joe could not get a substantial delegation including important black citizens on a McCarthy delegation to run against Bobby Kennedy. So to make a long story short, he negotiated with Gene and they agreed that they would have a peace delegation--I think with a slight McCarthy majority; but I mean, they would combine them. But the important point was that Joe twice talked to Gene McCarthy about this and he twice agreed to it. Then one day somebody from the Washington [Evening] Star called him and said "Mr. Rauh, I've got bad news for you. Senator McCarthy has disowned your agreement." And Joe said, "I just can't believe that." But there the headline was: McCarthy (or whatever it was) Disowns Joint Slate. And from the McCarthy point of view this could be understood because what happened was that McCarthy's people told him if he started making joint slates with Bobby Kennedy, his own personal candidacy would be lost. And my own sources indicate that he really felt that if Humphrey were to be stopped and that if there were a choice between McCarthy and Kennedy, [Lyndon B.] Johnson would much prefer McCarthy. And that's why he stayed in the race.

HACKMAN: Okay. Well, then maybe we can go back to the September '67 meeting that you said [Jack] Newfield has misinterpreted. I have the Newfield book here if you want to refer to anything.

LOEB: That's all right. There was an ADA [Americans for Democratic Action] board meeting and [Allard K.] Al Lowenstein was there. Somebody told me that Bobby would like to talk to me. I was going to stay over the next day, but then it worked out that we were going out there that evening. So Jack Newfield and Al Lowenstein and I went out in my daughter's car and took her home and then got lost for about two hours before we found the Kennedy home.

HACKMAN: And then Newfield says that he and Lowenstein came together and that you and Schlesinger were already there, so that's inaccurate.

LOEB: Does he say that in the book?

HACKMAN: Yes.

LOEB: No, the three of us went together. At the Kennedy home, in addition to Bobby, Arthur Schlesinger was there.

HACKMAN: He says "Arthur Schlesinger and James Loeb were with him." He says, "Lowenstein and I arrived about 10:30 p.m. and were greeted by a relaxed Kennedy. Arthur Schlesinger and James Loeb were with him."

LOEB: I don't see how Jack Newfield could have forgotten that terrible ride looking for the right Chain Bridge Road in Virginia. That was gruesome. But anyway, we arrived together. And--what's his name, his assistant? Adam Walinsky. It was the first time I had ever met him, although I had known his father very well. Actually Adam didn't say anything. And the question. . . . The thing that I resent in Newfield's discussion of it in his book is that he has me down as a pro-Johnson person. That was not the question. The question was whether Bob Kennedy should run. And I remember distinctly saying that I learned one thing from my old friend Hubert Humphrey, and that is that everybody in politics has to consider himself as a commodity. And I thought that Bob Kennedy was too valuable a commodity to throw away on what looked in September 1967 like a fruitless gesture. It would exacerbate the differences and it would probably make him considerably less viable for 1972. It was on that basis that I urged him not to run, and I wasn't the only one. I think in defense of my position at that time I think perhaps I could say that even Newfield quotes [John Kenneth] Ken Galbraith as saying that the greatest single political event of 1968 was the Tet offensive, which had enormous impact. Anyway, that was what the discussion revolved around.

HACKMAN: Can you remember how Robert Kennedy was reacting to Newfield and Lowenstein at that point?

LOEB: I remember very distinctly that Bobby was listening. If you ask me what were his reactions to all this, I would have a hard time remembering because I have a very distinct recollection that he was just listening. He may have asked a few questions, but he didn't express an opinion as to what he should do. My impression was that he was not going to run.

HACKMAN: What was Schlesinger arguing at that point? Do you remember?

LOEB: Arthur--I wouldn't like to be pinned down to this. My impression is that he'd agree with me pretty much. Al Lowenstein was, of course, the only one who really. . . . I don't know about Newfield; but Al Lowenstein of course was gung-ho about dumping Johnson.

HACKMAN: How did the discussion end then? Was there any sort of conclusion, or how did it break up?

LOEB: No. . . . After all, we didn't arrive till after 10 o'clock. So it was maybe a three-quarters of an hour bull session,

is what it was.

HACKMAN: Newfield says an hour and a half.

LOEB: Well, maybe. I wouldn't call him a liar for three-quarters of an hour on that.

HACKMAN: Can you remember any discussion at all of a possible Johnson withdrawal, because one of the things that Newfield says is that someone raised the point that--I guess Lowenstein raised it--if Johnson could be defeated in a couple of early primaries he might pull out. And Robert Kennedy said, "I think Al has a good point. Johnson is a coward and he might pull out." Does that ring any kind of bell with you?

LOEB: No, not affirmatively, but I wouldn't. . . . I'm in no position to say that he didn't say that. I suspect that he probably did say something about that, and of course, I can only give my own reaction to subsequent events. Without taking any credit away from Gene McCarthy for having gone into and started it, I have always been under the conviction that it wasn't Gene McCarthy that knocked Johnson out of the race, it was Bobby Kennedy. I've always felt that. I don't think Gene McCarthy really scared Johnson that much, but Kennedy certainly did. I mean he was faced with a badly divided party and he just decided no.

HACKMAN: When we started talking, you referred to Robert Kennedy as "that guy who gave us all the trouble in 1960." Were you referring to him just in a general sense as head of the Kennedy campaign, or are there specific things that stick out that you were thinking about?

LOEB: Well, of course, the West Virginia thing and Franklin Roosevelt's charge against Hubert. And I think I might say this about Bob Kennedy: In 1952 when Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. was in effect chairman of the committee that was trying to nominate Averell Harriman--an effort which looked much more ridiculous than it actually was because Harry S. Truman pushed Harriman in and then deserted him--I remember Frank saying one day that he'd talked to Ed Flynn, the former national chairman who was still boss of the Bronx. And Ed Flynn said something to him that I always remembered, and I remembered it particularly in 1968 when Bobby Kennedy got involved. Ed Flynn said, "Frank, what you're now doing is you're running the Harriman campaign." He warned Frank. He said, "You know, there are two ways to get into politics: one as a candidate, and one as a manager. They're entirely different. If you're a candidate you have to be somewhat above the battle or at least appear to be. If you're a manager, you have to be prepared to do a lot of things that you ordinarily wouldn't want to do." And I think that one of Bobby's problems in 1968 was that he had moved from the one to the other and some people remembered the animosities created by his managerial efforts.

HACKMAN: During the '60 campaign--I assume during the campaign you were back in Saranac Lake during most of that time-- can you remember anything at all in terms of upstate politics that year and the Kennedy organization up there? Paul Corbin or any of these people who were in the state?

LOEB: Nobody. I was in. . . . When you talk about upstate you're usually talking about Rochester, Syracuse and so forth. There are so few votes in the Adirondacks that. . . . Kennedy was very popular up there, and I think had he lived he would have carried there. I don't think there's any question about that. But there was no real activity in the North Country. After all, there are only three delegates for that entire congressional district which runs from Lake Champlain all the way over to Watertown and down to Oswego. There were six counties and three delegates.

HACKMAN: Okay. Unless you've got something else. . . .

LOEB: No. . . . If Bobby Kennedy had lived I certainly don't know whether he would have been nominated. But I think one thing is obvious: that [Richard M.] Nixon would not have been president. I think that's the. . . . In other words, if Hubert Humphrey had been nominated, as I think is probably just as likely even if Bobby had lived, I'm sure that Kennedy would have gotten up on the rostrum at that convention and led the fight for the election of Hubert Humphrey and that he would have had an enormous influence on Hubert, a countervailing influence to the Johnson influence, and it would have been an entirely different ball game. As a matter of fact, I remember that between Kennedy's loss of Oregon and the California primary, I remember having lunch with Arthur Schlesinger and suggesting that Bobby make a public statement to the effect that he would abide by the results in California and that if Senator McCarthy won in California that he would support him for the presidency and that he would expect mutuality.

(Additional note: Arthur can, and undoubtedly has, spoken for himself on this point. But he told me at the time that there was no possibility of Bob Kennedy doing as I had suggested, that Bob felt McCarthy was totally incapable of being president, and that, despite Vietnam, he would take his chances on Hubert if he, Bobby, lost the race.)