

Abraham D. Beame, Oral History Interview – RFK -- 6/27/1978
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Biographical Note

Beame, New York City controller from 1961 to 1965 and again from 1969 to 1974, and New York City Mayor from 1974 to 1977, discusses his unsuccessful 1965 mayoral bid and the help he received from Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), RFK's presidential race, and the difficulties that arise when one politician campaigns for another, among other issues.

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Abraham D. Beame

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Oral History Interview

with

Abraham D. Beame

June 27, 1978

New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: Well I think the logical place to begin would be when you first remember meeting Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], and perhaps a little bit about how your relationship developed and how your impressions of him may have differed from what you expected?

BEAME: I undoubtedly met him before he came into New York as a candidate during the time that his brother [John F. Kennedy] was president. Actually the first time--makes it very difficult in my mind to be able to remember that--it could have been at the Mansion [Gracie Mansion] at a reception or a time--at that time Mayor Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] was the mayor and I was the budget director--yes, I could have met him during that period because that was before he announced as a candidate for senator. I did get to know him, of course, much better during the time he came to this city to become a candidate for senator, and thereafter when he helped during my mayoralty campaign in 1965. The first time I remember getting a real kick out of being with him was when a few of us were on a platform when he was going to be put into nomination for senator. And friends of mine were very strong supporters of his and they were very strong in the leadership of the organization. One of them particularly, Stanley Steingut, was very helpful in getting Kennedy's campaign underway. So, as I say, that was probably the first time I met him in a closer way.

GREENE: You said that he was amusing on that occasion--I think that was what you said, amusing.

BEAME: I don't think I said amusing. I didn't use that expression. I don't remember how that word came about, but it was the first time I really was--maybe I used the word "enthused" in connection with it.

GREENE: How did you feel when you heard he was coming into New York and as his candidacy developed? Were you in favor of it?

BEAME: Originally there was a reticence on the part of a lot of people to have somebody from another state coming here, especially when you think of the fact we've got eight million people and we have many good people here. But he really became an inspiration.

GREENE: Did you do anything actively to promote his candidacy once he was nominated?

BEAME: Well I did whatever I could, yes. Of course I was very close with Mr. Steingut who was in one of the--you might say he was the most powerful individual leader in the state because he came out of the county that had the most delegate votes, and we both were very active to try to get his nomination across. There was no problem in the real sense because as we went on, a lot of enthusiasm developed.

GREENE: Do you remember campaigning with him on any occasions during that primary where there might be some anecdotes?

BEAME: I don't remember anything, nothing special that I know of. At the time, of course, his campaigning was statewide and I was involved in the city here, and other than being at various events where he was campaigning, I remember nothing special during that time he ran. When I ran, of course, in '65 it was different because he would come out with me. He was very, very helpful to me, and yet in a way I used to feel awkward about the thing because we'd go out on a truck, whether it was in an area inhabited by minority population or in middle or upper class areas--but more particularly in the minority regions--and he would introduce me very warmly, very effectively, and I would go to the mike and he would move on the side and everybody moved over to him. In that way, I felt very frustrated, you know.

GREENE: I've heard that from other people for whom he campaigned.

BEAME: That's right.

GREENE: Did he seem conscious of this and anxious to avoid it?

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BEAME: He tried. He understood that, and I think he really would have preferred it not happen because he knew that it would sort of have some kind of an effect on the candidate. And that happened, too, when we walked the streets. A lot of people would be going to *him*, asking for his autograph and so on and of course, the candidate was not as important to that area as he was.

GREENE: Well I had quite a few questions along that line, but before we get to that I wanted to back up a little bit and see if there's anything you might remember from that period between the time he came into the state and when you first started to talk about the mayoral. What kind of reputation did he develop, particularly among the people that you saw frequently--public officials and people like that?

BEAME: Well, I'd say a lot of people in those days felt that he was good coattails and therefore, from that point of view, were very anxious to have him around. There are undoubtedly people who know that generally the whole Kennedy family is very tough and very realistic, and they sometimes don't appeal to some of the politicians.

GREENE: Could you be a little bit specific? Were there people that he simply couldn't win over?

BEAME: By and large, it's very hard if you're speaking about people--are you speaking about names? I couldn't give you any names. By and large, nobody I know of would ever overtly try to put himself in that position, but sometimes you heard comments, you know, and you sort of got that reaction.

GREENE: Did you find him responsive? Were there occasions when you'd call him on something--this is before the mayoral when you'd call his office?

BEAME: I never had occasion.

GREENE: There weren't such occasions?

BEAME: No.

GREENE: Okay then, why don't we move up to the time--were there any conversations about the situation in New York before Wagner stepped down--was that even considered?

BEAME: With him?

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: And me?

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GREENE: Or with his staff or your people.

BEAME: No, none at all that I had.

GREENE: Well, then Wagner took himself out on June tenth. Can you remember anything about the first contacts with Kennedy or Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] or anyone else who might have been representing him?

BEAME: Well, the contacts occurred some time after I already had begun my campaign. In other words, I didn't call people to ask them would they support me. I never do that--I might get a wrong answer! [Laughter] But what I did is make my mind up I was going to go and I had some very good friends as I said, among them Stanley Steingut and others, who felt that I should do it and I sort of had a feeling that when the campaign was over--the primaries--that Bob Kennedy would help whoever is the candidate. I didn't *expect*, and I don't think, anybody should have expected, that he would take a position in a primary and I don't think he did.

GREENE: No, no he didn't. I don't know--it would be interesting to know whether you were aware of the fact that he did make some efforts early on to feel out outsiders--people outside the mainstream of the party like Frank Hogan [Frank Smithwick Hogan] and Ted Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel] among others--to see if they would be interested in running, and without success. You didn't hear those rumors?

BEAME: No, no I didn't hear it at all.

GREENE: Okay, well then in the primary of course you defeated Screvane [Paul R. Screvane] and assorted others and became the candidate. Do you remember what your first contacts were with Kennedy at that point--or with Steven Smith or whomever might have been talking to?

BEAME: I had a recollection at one time of going to his home--we had a meeting there. He was there, Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman]....

GREENE: You mean at UN Plaza [United Nations Plaza] or in Virginia?

BEAME: No, it was in New York, but was it--it could have been the UN Plaza--did he have another place?

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: I've been to his UN Plaza another time.

GREENE: That's the place he usually used. At one point he had a place in Glen Cove but that was really during the campaign.

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BEAME: No, this was in the city.

GREENE: Then it would be UN Plaza.

BEAME: And I think Stanley Steingut was there with me--he had a few people, I think he had Peter, and probably, Steve Smith--and by and large talked about the campaign in general. At that time, of course, it was obvious he would do everything he could to help.

GREENE: Do you remember--was that a time when you first discussed Steve Smith coming on and working for the campaign?

BEAME: No, I don't remember whether I did or the campaign's leadership did speak to Steve about coming on. I might say that I had been to see him--oh no, this was right after the campaign, something else I'll mention later.

GREENE: Okay.

BEAME: But as I say, I don't think that I spoke at that time about who should come on or anything like that. It was just a sort of a get-together and I guess he--although he knew me--he apparently wanted a better feel. And at that time, he indicated he would do whatever he could.

GREENE: Did you discuss overall strategy and where the campaign's emphasis should be and that sort of thing?

BEAME: Well, I don't doubt we did. I honestly don't remember any details. It's interesting--I'm getting some pictures together or some things together I've got at home. I think I... just put it off, take it off. [Interruption]

GREENE: I don't know how much you remember of this, but I'd like you to describe how you hoped to use Steve Smith and anybody else that the Kennedy people might have available to you, and how well they worked out and how they meshed with your own staff... this kind of two-staff operation.

BEAME: Well, it's very hard for me to answer the last question because a candidate doesn't get involved. He doesn't get involved in finances or, to a great degree, involved in the organization. You leave it to those who should because your job is to get out on the streets and go to key places and get to know people. So, as I say, I didn't get involved in that. Obviously, we felt that Steve Smith coming aboard would automatically bring the Kennedy image to the campaign, so that would be helpful. And of course, he had been an effective organizer and I don't know, frankly, exactly what he did there, because as I said, I paid little or no attention. Eddie Costikyan [Edward N. Costikyan] was the campaign manager, I think Jim Farley [James A. Farley] was the

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campaign chairman. I left it all to them.

GREENE: Bert Podell [Bertram L. Podell] was also.

BEAME: Bert was, you might say, the deputy campaign manager. Eddie was away a good deal--he had some cases in Texas--and Bert was there, really, working day-to-day.

GREENE: So far as you know, did Smith make a contribution? Was it a useful thing to have him there?

BEAME: Oh I'm sure he did, yes. I really couldn't evaluate it.

GREENE: Were there conversations that you remember as far as how Robert Kennedy could be used most effectively, or would that have taken place at the staff level, too?

BEAME: Oh I'm sure there were. That was also at a staff level.

GREENE: Yes. Okay then, we talked a little bit in the beginning about your campaigning with him and some of the problems. Did you choose, after some of these experiences with him, to have him campaign by himself instead? Was that more helpful?

BEAME: No, I wouldn't have asked him to do that. I didn't think it would be appropriate, you know. And I sort of left the scheduling to whoever took care of it and that's how it proceeded.

GREENE: I know there was one meeting that's been written about, and I've heard discussed, in the middle of the campaign where supposedly Kennedy worked hard at trying to convince you and your staff to do more in the ghettos, and more particularly with blacks and Puerto Ricans, as the natural Democratic constituencies--do you remember that, and whether....

BEAME: He may have been discussing it with the staff but I don't have--I don't remember whether I was there.

GREENE: Well, my impression was that you were but that could be wrong.

BEAME: It could be, and I really wouldn't.... I couldn't tell you....

GREENE: You don't remember times when he urged you to move in that direction and spend more time in minority areas?

BEAME: I honestly don't. Well, I do remember campaigning there with him and as I say, it was taking your life in your hands because I don't know if you.... We'd go there and they'd just

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pull him down, drag him down and push everybody in his way. So again, that was another illustration, another indication of the problem that the candidate had.

GREENE: How did he respond to this? Did he sort of go with the crowd, or did he...

BEAME: Oh yeah.

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: Yes, he was very easily meshed in with them, of course.

GREENE: Were there ever occasions where you discussed this phenomenon that we're talking about, where sometimes he detracted--distracted--from the candidate.

BEAME: Oh sure. I must have talked to the campaign committee, you know, to people in the campaign.

GREENE: But to him directly?

BEAME: Oh to him? No, never. And that was my general reaction later when I indicated I thought it would be inadvisable to have--at least I wasn't too amenable to getting national outside help.

GREENE: There was some effort, I think, to get Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] to come out with a strong endorsement and I know you went to Washington [Washington, D.C.]. Do you remember that whole thing, and whether Kennedy was helpful in getting a White House announcement?

BEAME: Did you say that I went to Washington for it?

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: I have no recollection. I do recall....

GREENE: Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] came in and....

BEAME: Well that's a longer story. I do recall what happened was that top strategy was "Let's get Johnson in" and that the thesis would be I, Beame, could do more for New York, in Washington. And it may even be that some circulars and billboards were made up on that slogan. I had a very negative feeling about that, but then I felt that the general feeling of the campaign leadership was to do it, and therefore I assumed maybe they had a better feeling about this than I did and I went along with it. I remember we sent a telegram to Johnson--I don't know if you just see the pictures here...

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GREENE: Right.

BEAME: ... to have him come to New York to Governor's Island--to, you know, Liberty Island--to sign, I think, an immigration bill....

GREENE: That would figure, right.

BEAME: And he thought it was a great idea, and he came. That's where we took all those pictures. And when we came Congressmen were seated up front—see, I wasn't the mayor, I was a city official, so Lindsay [John V. Lindsay] sat in front of me at that time. So that was one relationship. And as we went on, it was felt that we ought to get something from Johnson--a statement or something. Again I say to you, I have no recollection of going to Washington. Maybe I did. I honestly don't recall--I've been there so many times. I can't just think of that one, or recall that one. But it was during the time he went to the hospital when he had to be operated on and he therefore couldn't do or say anything. And we were having a pre-victory dinner--this was on the Saturday night before the Tuesday election--so he sent Humphrey up, or Humphrey came--and I met him at the airport and there were all the mikes and all the press, you know. And a question asked of Humphrey, "Is the President endorsing the mayor," or rather, "the controller?" Humphrey says "You listen to me tonight at the dinner." At the dinner, he said nothing. And so--which is another reason why I'd just as soon not have outsiders--and so it was interpreted that the President is not interested, and the press played it up a good deal. That was Sunday morning—Sunday, perhaps Monday, I don't know. Anyway, just during that time the President was getting out of the hospital and went down to his ranch, and I got a call from Eddie Weisl [Edwin L. Weisl, Sr.] who was very helpful to me, too, who was very much upset about this. And he said--this was at headquarters, I was in that day--and he said

"Look," he says, "will you call--the President, who went down to his farm in Texas." He says, "He's not taking any calls, but he wants to take your call. Will you call him at such and such a number?" I did. Well, for twenty minutes, he went on, and berated the press reports. "To think that anybody would get that impression!" he said, "Why would I send Humphrey up except to indicate where he (Johnson) stood?" and things of that sort, and then he went on to talk to me. And, as a matter of fact, in the course of the conversation he says, "You go out there, and you talk to them about the Model Cities Program." And he started talking to me about it. I didn't understand what he wanted me to say about it. But that was the first evidence that he was going to have such a thing as a Model Cities Program. So that conversation, as I told you, took place, and about a day after the press statements that he would not endorse me. The next day, he issued a statement... [Interruption]

GREENE: Bill Moyers [William D. Moyers], right.

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BEAME: ... a big supporting statement, and so on. [Interruption] You know, I remember that, I heard it on the air. I remember the street I was on, Queens Boulevard. I was just going to make a turn to get to the Boulevard Restaurant where there was a rally going on.

GREENE: When you heard Moyer's press conference? You mean when he announced that Johnson?

BEAME: Yeah. Where, you know, his report was that Johnson's support....

GREENE: You didn't use anything he had said to you in your private conversation? You didn't take his advice and come out and announce the Model Cities Program?

BEAME: No, I didn't. He didn't put it as announce it but...

GREENE: Yes, I know what you mean.

BEAME: ...you can talk about that, you know, as if to say, "I told you and I gave you the permission to do it." Well, for twenty minutes he was on the phone. He was furious about the press reports.

GREENE: That, I'd never heard about any place. That an interesting....

BEAME: That right?

GREENE: No.

BEAME: As a matter of fact, sitting with me while I was on the phone was Eddie

Costikyan and George Daly, who was my PR man in the campaign anyway.

GREENE: What about the whole effort to get Wagner to come out? He was kind of playing cat and mouse during that period. Do you remember?

BEAME: I don't know. There was no enthusiasm on my part for that.

GREENE: You didn't particularly want the endorsement?

BEAME: I didn't. No, you see, I had also been critical of Wagner in terms of certain fiscal policies. That's when I broke with him.

GREENE: Right. Were there people from whom you wanted support that Robert Kennedy was helpful in gaining, or did you use him at all that way?

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BEAME: I never asked him. It's not inconceivable that the staff did. You know, fellows like.... I say staff, I mean whether it's Farley or the campaign manager or Steingut, or any of those may have had occasion to talk to him about some things, yes. Yeah, Humphrey was very helpful, too. He came out, you know, and campaigned with me....

GREENE: I think he was in town twice during that period.

BEAME: Yeah, he and I developed a very good, a very warm friendship.

GREENE: Did you ever find out why, after saying he would have something to say at the dinner, he said nothing?

BEAME: I never asked, [Laughter], no.

GREENE: One of the great mysteries. There were a number of occasions, including some of the dates I have--September 26 and October 17--when you debated Lindsay and Buckley [William F. Buckley, Jr.]. Do you remember anything that Robert Kennedy or his people did to help you prepare for those debates?

BEAME: Oh yes, I remember. We met in Kennedy's apartment and Peter Edelman. Who else, there's one other?

GREENE: Bill vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel, Jr.] Was he active? Or Gwartzman [Milton S. Gwartzman]?

BEAME: Not as active, not as involved as they were with me. Peter Edelman is

another....

GREENE: You mean Adam Walinsky?

BEAME: It could have been Adam, yeah.

GREENE: Yes, a possibility.

BEAME: And I remember that we were sort of rehearsing some things for our-- everybody threw questions at me and so on--in the debates.

GREENE: And was Robert Kennedy present also?

BEAME: At some part, yes. I remember my going into another room at one point with--I remember Peter Edelman particularly, I don't remember.... Of course, some of my people....

GREENE: Right. It must be difficult to have a campaign where you've got your people, who are 100 percent loyal to you, and then you have this sort of outside group that's being helpful, but still has their own primary loyalties. Do you see any problems? Were there problems with that?

[-10-]

BEAME: No, I don't mean.... The only problems are that, you know, when they get the reactions of the other people, they don't necessarily go along with them.

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: You see whether any part of it has any value and incorporate it.

GREENE: Would the Kennedy people defer to your people in making decisions on things like that? Can you remember?

BEAME: I really don't know. I think while there, our people always wanted to make Kennedy and his people feel that they were wanted, and therefore, would not, you know, sort of try to knock down what they're saying too much.

GREENE: I've heard secondhand information that, I don't know if it extends to you personally, but at least some of the people who were active in your campaign felt that Kennedy did not do enough, that he could have done more to help you. Did you share that feeling?

BEAME: I wouldn't have shared it only because I had this sort of gut feeling that I'd

prefer to be alone, so I therefore would not try to encourage too much from outsiders.

GREENE: How helpful was it for him, as he did, I know, on several occasions particularly in the last few days, campaign by himself for you in areas where he was particularly popular? How helpful was that sort of thing?

BEAME: Well, that we'd only be able to tell by looking at the results there, but I'm sure it certainly had to help, it couldn't be otherwise.

GREENE: Did you ever have the feeling that he could have done more of that sort of thing?

BEAME: I never got to a point of evaluating it. And I just went along on my job, what I had to do. I had a schedule, I had to meet that schedule, and that's all that was in my concern. I'd sit down occasionally, not too often, with the top staff of the campaign and talk over some things, but generally I got my schedule and I had to adhere to it, one way or another.

GREENE: There was one, that meeting that I raised before that you didn't remember, during the middle of the campaign, and there's a story that sort of was linked to it. And that is that after the strategy session where you talked about a variety of things that could be and might be done during the campaign, later in that day you met with Roy

[-11-]

Cohn [Roy M. Cohn], who it turned out was helping you in the campaign. Do you remember that?

BEAME: I met Roy, sure, you know. This was a campaign where you obviously wanted all the help you could get. Now Roy had some relationships with certain groups that could be helpful. And I met with him, and he's been a friend. I've known him for many years. I don't remember exactly what we talked about, but I do remember, of course, being with him.

GREENE: Do you remember that causing any problems with the Kennedy people when they learned about it?

BEAME: No, I don't.

GREENE: No. Because they were not the warmest friends.

BEAME: I don't know. Oh I know that, but it wasn't as if I was saying, "well, I'm going to do whatever Roy Cohn tells me to do." Just that there's certain

things he offered and I don't think it would be appropriate to say, "I don't want to have anything to do with you."

GREENE: Was there any effort to keep Kennedy from finding out, or....

BEAME: Oh I don't know.

GREENE: No.

BEAME: I would have no knowledge of that.

GREENE: This whole area of one figure campaigning for another, which obviously in this case and others I've heard of, is not that useful. What do you think in general, not necessarily from a personal standpoint, of how effective it is to have one man campaign for another?

BEAME: Well generally you can't transfer, as a general rule, support, very easily. It might work in occasional cases but as a general rule, especially today under the more sophisticated situations where you have the media, T.V., radio, press, and you have this intensification and educational things which are distributed, and all of that, people make their mind up more on the reaction they get from the candidate. So, it's very difficult to transfer. You could get, for example, in the old days when a fellow like Frank Roosevelt, [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] President Roosevelt, said something about somebody, people took it as gospel. But today--and I use that expression "today"--I'd say within the last generation, almost, certainly the last decade or more, it hasn't been that way.

GREENE: What about in terms of name recognition, if you're not a particularly well-known candidate?

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BEAME: Well that's, of course, of great value. Yeah, sure, great value having somebody there whose name means something so they at least...

GREENE: Identify with, yes.

BEAME: ...can remember and associate, you know.

GREENE: And financially?

BEAME: Yes, very helpful, sure.

GREENE: Did Kennedy do any fundraising for you that you were aware of?

BEAME: I don't know.

GREENE: You don't know.

BEAME: He undoubtedly in some way, because of his presence in the campaign, other people were attracted to it, there's no doubt about that.

GREENE: Okay, then the last few days of the campaign, is there anything special leading up to the actual election?

BEAME: You mean involving Kennedy?

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: Well, I don't remember. You said an October date was a debate?

GREENE: Yes, the last one I think was October 17, I think. That may not have been the last one, but that was the last one that I have note of.

BEAME: It wasn't the last one....

GREENE: There were seven altogether, I think.

BEAME: Oh, there was one *I* challenged...

GREENE: October 17.

BEAME: ...I challenged Lindsay.

GREENE: Lindsay.

BEAME: And I don't think I ever talked to Bob Kennedy about it. I don't know how they felt about it, but I was adamant on that, because I felt that in his material there were lies,

[-13-]

absolute falsehoods about different things, you know. [Interruption] I said, "I want a debate with him, and I want to throw these lies right out." And there was a great deal of.... And I don't know whether that time--it's not inconceivable--I might have again met with Peter Edelman and the others. Anyway, I got there at that debate. I take out a Lindsay campaign circular, and I read it, and say, something about the effect of blaming me for some kind of increased cost and something, or something like that. I said, "Well that's a lie," you know? And I went on, I read the next thing, I said "that's a lie." Well, when it was all over, I thought about it, and I think that cost me at least 50,000 votes. That cost me the election because all I needed, by the way, was a turnover of that number of votes of about two and one half million

votes cast. But they say that cost me the election, because I could picture the nice old lady sitting there and saying, "Look at him calling this wonderful shining knight--or knight in shining armor--a liar!" You know? And I think that hurt me, so I wasn't so smart in asking for that last debate. [Laughter]

GREENE: Yes.

BEAME: That was, I think, the Sunday night before the election, yeah.

GREENE: Yes. Do you remember talking to Kennedy at all about what you expected? Did you feel you were going to be defeated by that time or....

BEAME: Oh no.

GREENE: No?

BEAME: No. I did feel that we were slipping. You know, interesting, after I won the primary, which was, you know, considering the fact that I beat Wagner and others, you know, and O'Dwyer [Peter Paul O'Dwyer] was it, Fitts Ryan [William Fitts Ryan] and so on, I went away to a friend's house--Jerry Finkelstein--and I remember Ted White [Theodore H. White] came over and talked to me while we were there, out in Southampton, and right after the conversation with him, George Daly, who was the PR for the campaign, also was at this place--we were there for about ten days, something like that--and George yelled to me as he was coming off the stairs and we were on the lawn, "Abe," he says, "how about taking a walk?" I says, "Sure." George was a taller fellow, and they have a very big lawn, almost like a football field, so we took a walk around and George had his arm around my shoulder and he said to me, "Well, its all over." This was after the primary and only five or six weeks to election. I said "What do you mean, Lindsay quit?" He said "No!" He says "We got a poll, 48 percent for you, that answers your question." I could feel the slip as we got down to the end.

GREENE: Well I know Kennedy...

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BEAME: And I think a lot of it was due too, to the fact of people sort of began to sit on their hands. They felt, well, they were starting to cut up the pie....

GREENE: Of course, these things always come with the benefit of hindsight, but I guess Kennedy had said that perhaps if there had been more of an effort with blacks and Puerto Ricans you might have held on to some of the traditional Democrats and you could have therefore offset some of Buckley, because Buckley was really the spoiler in the whole thing.

BEAME: Oh yeah. It might have been. I really don't know. I might say that just,

before I forget, you asked me about Kennedy.... After I lost I went away for about ten days and while away I began to think of that's wrong with our Democratic party in the city. And I thought of the fact that we have five county organizations, county leaders, each of whom is concerned about the problems in his county, and that problems involving the party citywide, there's nobody, really, to get at it, because we have no city leader. And it's about the only city in the country like that. And that these problems are attacked on a crisis basis, whenever necessary, and also that you begin to deal with a citywide election all of a sudden, you know, at the end. And so as a result of that, I felt what we needed was a reorganization, that we ought to have some person on top, who would coordinate the activities of the counties, recommend things be done throughout the city which are good and which some counties have done and are good to be used citywide; even deal with, or rather, develop newspaper and so on, get better coordination and day-to-day coordination. And so it occurred to me that we ought to have what I call the New York City Democratic Committee and put somebody on top who would...

GREENE: Oversee it, yes.

BEANIE: I didn't get the encouragement and I couldn't understand why, bearing in mind the fact that this was such a vital thing and so important and so needed.

GREENE: Was it that he didn't seem to see that need?

BEANIE: I don't know. Maybe he felt it would be better for him not to have that, I don't know. Anyway, he didn't dismiss it, but he gave me very little, if any, encouragement. I nevertheless pursued it and I called a meeting of all of the county leaders and the top men in the Democratic party--I was still controller--no, I was out as controller...

GREENE: No, you weren't controller, that's right.

BEAM E: ...and I did that after I was out, and I was very pleased with the response that came--there must have been about fifty to seventy-five people. We met, I think, in the Commodore [Commodore Hotel]...

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GREENE: Did he attend the meeting or send...

BEAME: I don't think he was there.

GREENE: ...send a representative?

BEAME: And out of that, we got exactly what I wanted. And I discussed with the county leaders who would be best and I suggested Jerry Finkelstein and

they went along with it, and it developed. It still exists. It isn't as potent as it was under Jerry.

GREENE: Who is the head of it now?

BEAME: Jerry gave it up after a while and Bernie Ruggieri [Bernard J. Ruggieri] took it over, and finally last year, I think, before Carter [Jimmy Carter]—oh yeah, it was '76 when Bernie decided to drop out and I asked Angie Duke [Angier Biddle Duke] to take it over. But it isn't what it was. Under Jerry it was a real strong force because....

GREENE: Did Kennedy show any interest in it once it took off?

BEAME: I don't recall that he did.

GREENE: He didn't?

BEANIE: It didn't seem that he did. Yet, it developed, it was strong, it prospered and it, you know, there were events which were staged under it. For example, in '72, he invited all presidential candidates in. [Interruption]

GREENE: Okay.

BEAME: Yeah. I said that he'd have them all come to his home for breakfast and he would invite the leaders of the Democratic party and leading contributors. There were reformers, and others, and top people to come listen and talk to them, and question them and so on. And in that way Jerry got himself in a good strong position, too. But it was a--it was an effective thing, and I was very sorry that it isn't as strong as it was, but I guess he was a different kind of a person, you know.

GREENE: Were there other occasions in that period that you saw him?

BEAME: Kennedy?

GREENE: After the mayoral?

BEAME: I really couldn't say, unless....

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GREENE: Did you talk to him at all when he was in the process of deciding about the presidential race in '68, late '67 or early '68?

BEAME: I didn't have any special conversation with him, but I know that at one time or another I indicated to him I think he had a good chance.

GREENE: And once he did announce, did you take any position within the city?

BEAME: No, we were not--we didn't have a primary.

GREENE: Yes, well he died before the primary. The primary would have been the very next primary, as a matter of fact, after California.

BEAME: No but we have--we had no preferential primary.

GREENE: Presidential preferential?

BEAME: I don't think we had it, did we?

GREENE: Yes, at that time it was scheduled for June 18 and then he died on the sixth.

BEAME: I honestly don't remember. I was under the impression that.... Oh we had a primary, I understand that. But the delegates, were not identified ... on the machine with any specific candidate. I believe the first time that happened was in the 1976 primary. Do you understand what I mean?

GREENE: Yes, it's not openly identified on the machine, but still there were delegates for each, of McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy], and Humphrey, and Kennedy would have....

BEAME: I think I was a delegate-at-large in the national [Democratic National Committee] so I wouldn't have been voting on....

GREENE: Do you have any recollection of how you felt he would do in New York?

BEAME: Oh, we thought he'd do very well.

GREENE: Is there anything else that you can think of? Maybe you have some thoughts on Robert Kennedy's place in the whole picture, particularly in New York. How much of an impact he had and how lasting was it?

BEAME: Well I think he still has, especially in the minority areas. He did a lot for Bedford-Stuyvesant. And I attended the annual celebrity tennis matches and Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] is always very much in the limelight, as you know. She's

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a wonderful person. And I think he had an impact here, no doubt about it.

GREENE: If there's nothing else, I think we're finished.

BEAME: Thank you.

GREENE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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