

John Saltonstall Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 1/16/1969
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

John Saltonstall (1916-2007) was a Massachusetts political figure, member of the Democratic State Committee in 1952, and a delegate at large at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. This interview focuses on Saltonstall's professional relationship with John F. Kennedy [JFK], the activities of Massachusetts Democrats, and JFK's 1960 campaign, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN SALTONSTALL

January 16, 1969
Boston, Massachusetts

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Well, why don't we start by my asking you the general question if you recall when you first met John Kennedy and what were the circumstances and what were your impressions of him?

SALTONSTALL: I never met him in college; he was two or three years behind me. I did know his brother Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], who was a classmate of mine, class of 1938 at Harvard. I think that the first time I ever met Jack was through somebody of whom you may have heard called Benny Jacobson [Benjamin Jacobson]. Is that name familiar to you?

STEWART: Right. A tailor or....

SALTONSTALL: That's right. Benny used to give a dinner every year for current and former members of the Harvard football team, and he used to have favorites of his, of whom I was one, come there too. I think that was the first time that I ever met Jack, and it probably was like around 1946 or '47. I don't have much of an impression of him from those days, and I think that the first that I ever really sat down to talk with him at length would have been in early 1952, in the early stages of his running for United States Senate against Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.].

[-1-]

STEWART: Let me back up. Had you known Joe very well or casually?

SALTONSTALL: I'd known him casually through a rather silly connection, which was that we used to patronize the same tutoring school at Harvard. In those days, for the gilded youth who didn't care to read or go to class, there were places where you could go to get filled in at the last minute before the exams. And so far as I can remember, Joe used to go there for every course that he had. Whether he did any work on the outside or not I don't remember. I never had a very high opinion of Joe's intellect, but perhaps I misread it; maybe I was fooled by the kind of jolly, hail-fellow-well-met exterior, but he always seemed to me to be a little thick.

Jack never impressed me that way, but I must say that my first encounters with him were not terribly impressive. I was not unfavorably impressed; I just didn't sit up and take notice. But when he started to run for the Senate in 1952, I was at the time either the state chairman or about to be the state chairman of Massachusetts ADA [Americans for Democratic Action], and I was somewhat surprised -- because in those days ADA was anathema to a large body of the political spectrum -- I was a little surprised that he seemed to be anxious to have the ADA endorsement. In fact, he was quite persistent about this, and the outcome was that three of us interviewed him -- Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., and Mrs. Helen Rotch, who was sort of the *grande dame* of Massachusetts ADA, and myself -- and we talked with him, I think, at the Harvard Faculty Club, or maybe it was in Schlesinger's office in Widener -- I guess that was where it was -- for about an hour and a half.

I hadn't realized that he was as well informed on issues or had as much acumen or ability to express himself. I was quite impressed with him at that time. And I was also impressed with the fact that he handed us each a rather neatly typed memorandum at the beginning of the conference showing the positions which the ADA had taken on a series of national issues during the last year, and the number of times when he had taken the same issue. His batting average was quite high, like eighty-eight percent or something like that.

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STEWART: Do you...

SALTONSTALL: Go ahead.

STEWART: Do you recall how he set up this meeting, or who he was approaching to try to get an endorsement by the ADA? Who was his main contact is what I'm asking.

SALTONSTALL: I'm not sure. It might have been Mrs. Rotch; I've forgotten now. All participants in that meeting, of course, are now dead except for myself.

In any event, we did ultimately endorse him, although there was some distrust, I think. ADA at that time felt very strongly anti-McCarthy -- Joseph R., of course -- and there were some whispers concerning the strong tie between Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] and Joe McCarthy. And I think that ADA was somewhat parochial, too, in the sense that it was mainly Yankee and Jewish, and Irish Catholics didn't abound in the group.

In any event, we did endorse Kennedy, as I've said. And, as a matter of fact, later on in the campaign my interest went even further than that, largely through a guy called Gardner Jackson, whose nickname was Pat (he's also dead.) Pat was sent up to Massachusetts by the political arm of, I guess, the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] -- or it might have been the Textile Workers, I've forgotten; it was some labor organization, I think AFL-CIO -- to try to help out Kennedy in the fight against Lodge. And Pat succeeded, after a week or so of efforts, in getting me and some others interested in forming a kind of a liberal campaign organization for Kennedy, which was called, I think, Independent Citizens of Massachusetts for Kennedy or some such thing. I've got some papers about it and some records of it somewhere; I just can't quite remember what the precise title was. Of course, this was more a letterhead organization than it was a working organization. What we did was to call up some liberal Democrats around the state and get the use of their name and get financial contributions. We ran a series of ads in the newspapers I think before the campaign, and I was the chairman of that thing. I think Pat Jackson did most of the work, but I did a few things in connection with it.

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STEWART: Going back a minute, as far as this meeting was concerned, do you recall asking him specific questions, for example, about McCarthy or whether...

SALTONSTALL: No, I don't think so. I think we stuck to issues. It was a gentlemanly, polite meeting; I don't think we got into much in the way of personalities.

STEWART: Was there much opposition within ADA leadership to the endorsement, or was there much support for Lodge, do you remember?

SALTONSTALL: I wouldn't say that there was much support for Lodge. I would say that there was some opposition to Kennedy. In other words I would say that there was a substantial sentiment within ADA to endorse no one.

STEWART: Had the organization endorsed people before?

SALTONSTALL: Oh yes, we were in the endorsement game -- no question.

STEWART: Didn't Pat Jackson have a blow-up with Ambassador Kennedy during that campaign? Do you remember that at all?

SALTONSTALL: I think Pat did tell me something about that, but it's very hazy in my mind. I can't imagine that it was a really serious explosion because Pat, as I recall, stayed on in Massachusetts and worked right through to the end of the campaign.

STEWART: Did you see Kennedy at all during the campaign, do you recall?

SALTONSTALL: Not during the final stages, I don't think. I don't remember it. I certainly didn't confer with him about this committee that I was the titular head of, but I might have seen him at some political meeting or other.

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STEWART: But most of it was handled through Pat Jackson?

SALTONSTALL: Yes, that's right. I guess my next connection with Jack, of any importance at all, was in connection with the capture of the chairmanship of the Democratic State Committee. Was that in '56 or...

STEWART: Right, '56. As far as the Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] campaign, I assume you were reasonably active in that in Massachusetts?

SALTONSTALL: I was. Yes.

STEWART: Do you recall any conflict between the Kennedy operation and Stevenson operation, or was there as much cooperation as you could expect?

SALTONSTALL; So far as the ADA people were concerned, they were spending 99 percent of their time for Mr. Stevenson in 1952, and I don't recall that there was either much conflict or much cooperation. I think that the Kennedy campaign was run on a very separate kind of basis. I do recall there being some friction between the Stevenson campaign and the Dever [Paul Dever] campaign in 1952; and the mere fact that I remember it with Dever and not with Kennedy bears out my rather hazy recollection that this was quite an independent campaign that did not try to have joint dates for radio time or joint headquarters or joint billboards or any of that sort of thing. Whereas, on the other hand, there was some effort to marry Stevenson with the rest of the state ticket, and it was not a very effective mixture.

STEWART: You people endorsed Dever also, do you recall?

SALTONSTALL: No, we refused to endorse Dever, and that was really what broke up, as

much as anything else, an organization which had a brief, but fairly effective, career in Massachusetts, called the United Labor Committee. This was before there was any organic unity of the AFL and the CIO, and the liberals felt that the labor movement should at least be in some position to work together politically. So through the auspices of the ADA in 1948 this committee was formed, which consisted of three representatives each of ADA, AFL, and the CIO. Have you heard about the United Labor Committee?

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STEWART: No, I don't think so.

SALTONSTALL: Well, the first thing that it did was to get together, quite successfully, in the election of 1948 to oppose various anti-labor referenda, like the "right to work" law and so on, and also to push the candidacy of various liberals. It worked quite well in 1948 and in 1950, when the United Labor Committee and ADA had endorsed Dever, but in 1952 there were those in the ADA who felt that Dever's first term as Governor had not been what it should have been -- excuse me, his second term because he was first elected in '48. Excuse me. [Interruption]

STEWART: You were talking about the...

SALTONSTALL: Yes. It was really sort of a cultural difference between the prevailing sentiment of ADA and Dever; they didn't really understand him, nor he them. As a matter of fact -- this is a kind of side foray, but it's a good example of the cultural gap -- I was pretty friendly with Paul Dever, and yet he could not believe, as recently as something like January of 1952, that Stevenson would ever amount to anything politically because he said that he just was too liberal and that his veto of the Broyles [Paul Broyles] bills in Illinois had spelled the death knell of Stevenson's political career. Dever just was not very strong on notions of civil liberties and free speech and so on.

STEWART: Was Dever ever worried that Kenneyd may oppose him? Dever wanted to run for the Senate, didn't he, or he had some...

SALTONSTALL: Yes, I think so. I can't recall Dever ever expressing any fear or concern in regard to Kennedy. I can remember him expressing feelings that Kennedy didn't have any sense of party loyalty, and that he was always a loner and running on his own, and that he didn't think that a fellow that had all of those advantages and was using the party label should give so little to the Party. I can remember his making remarks to that effect sometime in the early fifties.

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STEWART: So you say you had no real contact between the 1952 campaign and

1956?

SALTONSTALL: Yes. I think probably I'd met him casually at political gatherings, and maybe I'd corresponded with him on one or two points, but no real connection until 1956. And I've forgotten how it came about; I think he probably phoned me on his attempt to depose Mr. Burke [William H. Burke] as the State Chairman. I said that I would.

So I got together some of my more liberal political friends, people who were politically oriented to the extent of being friendly with one or more members of the State Committee, and we gathered in a suite -- I think it was in the Statler Hilton, or the Statler as it was probably then called, although it might have been the Copley Plaza, one of the two. And there was a center room where you came in, and then there were a couple of bedrooms off on either side. What we did was to invite people whom we knew on the State Committee to show up on a staggered schedule basis, which got all fouled up pretty soon. Kennedy would stick his head out from the bedroom every once in a while or bring somebody out that he'd finished twisting the arm of and call for the next one. In the meantime, while he was going on with this operation, you were trying to soften up your people a little bit, too, or just standing around shifting from foot to foot.

I might tell you an amusing little story -- at least I always thought it was amusing, I was amused at the time. Of course, Bobby was quite young at that time -- Bobby Kennedy -- and not too well known to politicians in Massachusetts. Anyway I was standing in the outer room at this meeting waiting for Kennedy to get my next person, and Bobby came into the room. And I was standing talking to a guy by the name of John Cort...

STEWART: Oh yes, I know him.

SALTONSTALL: ...who you know about evidently, and Bobby came into the room and went around shaking hands. He came up to me and extended his hand and said hello and so forth, and the kind of looked at Cort and passed by him. And Cort let him get about three feet away, and then he reached out and grabbed Bobby's coattail, and he pulled him back. Cort sort of turned him around and he said,

[-7-]

"Your name's Kennedy, isn't it?" And Bobby said, "Yes." "Yes," Cort said, "I remember you. You're just as snotty a little kid now as you were in prep school." Apparently Cort was on the faculty and had taught Bobby at some prep school.

STEWART: Milton Academy?

SALTONSTALL: It might have been. But anyway, he was offended that Kennedy had not said hello to him, you see. I was surprised because John Cort is a

very mild-mannered and rather gentlemanly fellow, and, boy, was Bobby surprised. He sort of mumbled an apology and then faded into the background.

STEWART: About how many people of the, what, eighty members of the State Committee would ADA have any kind of an interest in or...

SALTONSTALL: Oh, very few. I would say that the ADA types -- we weren't the only ones who were at that meeting, you understand -- but I would say that the ADA types weren't able to do much with more than seven or eight.

STEWART: Yes, right. And certainly those seven or eight were for Lynch [John M. Lynch].

SALTONSTALL: Yes, but the one that I thought that I had the greatest "in" with, I think, ultimately voted for Burke.

STEWART: Oh, really?

SALTONSTALL: His name was John Dolan from someplace in Brighton, I think, and he had been a protege of Congressman Thomas Eliot and was always very friendly with me, because I'd been a friend of Tom's, and always used to talk a kind of a liberal reform line with me. But I think I remember being very disappointed in Dolan on that occasion because he wouldn't commit himself to Kennedy before the meeting and said he wanted to have a chance to talk with him. Then I think I learned, to my surprise, afterwards that he'd gone away and had voted for Boyle.

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STEWART: Burke.

SALTONSTALL: I mean Burke, rather.

STEWART: "Onions" Burke.

SALTONSTALL: Yes. I can't say that I contributed a very great deal to that operation, but I did try.

STEWART: Were you still chairman of the state ADA?

SALTONSTALL: No, I was not.

STEWART: Had the ADA had any role in creating a movement to get rid of Burke, of course, was opposed to Stevenson, among other things? There was

the whole involvement of the McCormack group which wasn't too happy with Stevenson, either.

SALTONSTALL: No, I don't recall that the ADA was particularly active in that. I think that the prevailing attitude of the ADA in those days was that, being on the Senate Committee, which I had been -- I'd been elected in '52 -- or having anything to do with it, was a pretty raffish, or at least certainly overly sweaty thing to do, you know. No, I don't recall that the ADA ever tried to do anything with Onions.

STEWART: Were you at the 1956 Democratic National Convention?

SALTONSTALL: No, I was not. I was at the '60 Convention, but I was not at the '56 Convention. My next substantial undertakings with the Kennedy were in the 1958 campaign, when he was running for re-election to the Senate and I was running for Congress.

STEWART: You ran against Curtis [Lawrence Curtis]?

SALTONSTALL: I ran against Curtis. I think I first started talking with him during the primary. My recollection is that somewhere around June of 1958 I flew down to Hyannis with a photographer and went and sat with him for two, three hours taking some pictures and

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talking with him about the civil rights movement, which he didn't know as much about as I did in those days, and was sort of quizzing me about it -- as a kind of a quid pro quo, I almost felt, for taking pictures with him. I had called him to tell him that I thought that he was in duty bound, sort of required to give me some pictures, even though I wasn't through in the primary, because one of my primary opponents, Edward McLaughlin, who later became Lieutenant Governor, was prominently displaying pictures in his publicity that he'd taken with Kennedy. I said that it seemed to me that I'd been as helpful to Kennedy and as friendly with him as McLaughlin, and so he ought to take some pictures with me.

So he agreed, and I flew down in a little chartered plane with a guy by the name of Wayland Minot, who must have weighed about three hundred pounds. I remember that the pilot and I were huddled way over as far as we could be to the other side of the plane because he seemed to be weighing it down so much and it was all he could do to sort of heave himself around -- heave himself up the stairs to the front porch of the Kennedy house and so on. But he was very much taken with Kennedy and took a lot more pictures of Kennedy than was necessary. He was much impressed with the repose and relaxation -- he was sort of my regular campaign photographer -- and he said, "You ought to study those pictures of Kennedy and learn to have some of that kind of repose yourself." He was particularly taken by Jack's hands and how relaxed and confident his hands looked. Anyway...

STEWART: Do you recall any specifics of this discussion about civil rights? You said...

SALTONSTALL: He was asking me about various people and what I thought of them and telling me about troubles that he'd had with some of them, and what should he say, how should he deal with them in such a way as to get into better communication with them. That was about what it amounted to. He knew that I had been co-chairman of the NAACP national convention in 1950, I think, and that I saw a lot of certain Negro leaders. He was concerned about some kind of a conflict he was having at that time, as I recall it, with Ruth Batson.

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STEWART: Of the Massachusetts NAACP?

SALTONSTALL: Yes.

STEWART: Right.

SALTONSTALL: And it seemed to be that -- and I'm sort of reaching back now -- it seemed to me that he'd been having some kind of trouble with Roy Wilkins. Anyway, we discussed the names and numbers of the players, and I suggested some people he might go to, and I think, perhaps, we discussed some issue material, too, and some positions he might take.

STEWART: But it was your impression that he had not real good grasp of the issues on civil rights?

SALTONSTALL: No, no, no. My recollection of that meeting was that when he raised the subject I came to the discussion with kind of a feeling that maybe he wouldn't know too much about it and ended up by being surprised that he knew as much about it as he apparently did.

STEWART: Did he resolve this problem of any involvement in your primary fight? Was it just McLaughlin, you and McLaughlin?

SALTONSTALL: No, it was three-cornered. It was McLaughlin, and me, and a guy called Joe Mulhern. Mulhern came in second -- spent an awful lot of money in the thing -- and McLaughlin a fairly poor third. I didn't try to seek out Kennedy at all during the balance of the primary, after the photographs because I didn't think that it was fair to ask him to help. But I had a victory cocktail party to try to salve the wounds of intra-party conflict two or three days after the primary -- this sort of a 5:30 cocktail party at the Hotel Somerset -- and just about everybody of any importance in the Party showed up, including Kennedy, who stayed there, had a few drinks, and I guess

used it as an occasion of his own to sort of solidify himself within the party. He took quite a few photographs with various people at that party; I've got some of them somewhere.

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Then, despite the fact that I was being fended off by Smith [Stephen E. Smith] and O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], I did get quite a lot of cooperation from Kennedy during the campaign. Steve Smith -- whom I didn't deign to talk to myself most of the time; I had my campaign manager talk to him -- was very standoffish. Kenny wasn't quite that bad but pretty much so. They'd always say no, but I'd contrive some way of reaching Kennedy myself. And he signed some ads for me and let me use a little message of endorsement that I had from him and from John McCormack and, I think, from Adlai Stevenson that I ran on the radio quite a bit. Then Kennedy appeared with me on a joint live television show, and his advisers kept telling him, and he would occasionally mention it to me, that he didn't want to have too much exposure, and also that if he did a lot for me he'd have to do a lot for other candidates. But I think that with the exception of Jim Burns [James M. Burns] in Williamstown, I was the only guy that he really did anything for. I also had a joint tea party with him in West Roxbury, which he came to and was very nice about.

I was surprised after the television show -- nothing had been said about finances -- he kind of pulled me aside and took five one hundred dollar bills out of his pants pocket and handed them to me and said, "Here, let me pay for this." So I said, "Well Jack, that's awfully kind of you, and I'm surprised and didn't expect it. But I'm kind of starchy about taking cash contributions, and I have to tell you that I, of course, will take it, but that I want to report it." He looked a little surprised, but didn't say anything at first. Then he said, "O.K."

STEWART: Was that, I assume, his only contribution -- financial -- to your campaign?

SALTONSTALL: Yes.

STEWART: And you lost, of course, to...

SALTONSTALL: I lost to Curtis by about five thousand votes, roughly seventy five thousand to seventy thousand. I was leading until about 3 a.m. when the hand ballots came in from Newton. And in those days we didn't have a state law that required observers from both parties inside the polls, and I've always wondered about that. As a matter of fact,

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I figured by around 10 p.m., on the basis that I was going to lose Newton by four or five thousand votes, that the way the Boston returns were coming in I was going to narrowly lose the whole thing. Actually, I lost in Newton by about seven thousand votes, so it was even more decisive than I had supposed.

STEWART: The ADA had no problem in '58 endorsing Kennedy, did they?

SALTONSTALL: No. Of course, you had a no-account opponent, Vinnie Celeste [Vincent J. Celeste], but I think that some of the negative quality of the '52 endorsement had been alleviated by that point.

STEWART: President Kennedy made the statement (I'm not sure exactly when, but I think it was sometime 1958, '59, or '60) he came out -- it was famous later -- about never being really comfortable with liberal types, and that he didn't come into his liberalism until later in life, he just never felt very comfortable with liberal types. One, did you ever find that, as far as you were concerned, or many people you know who had any association with him?

SALTONSTALL: Well, I don't know whether he felt comfortable with me in those days or not; we were certainly not intimate. But I liked him, not only in the sense of liking most of what I knew of his political and public career, but also in the sense of what they used to call in the 1920's "personal magnetism" -- I mean the chemical sense; I liked him that way too. I suppose he may have had some similar feeling for me; I just don't know. But we didn't really talk doctrine very much; I think most of the time when we would talk it would be either about politics or political personalities or kidding a little bit about something or other. So that maybe, despite the fact that I was a liberal, that wasn't the sole basis on which he thought of me.

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STEWART: Moving on (getting to be 5 o'clock) is there much about the 1960 campaign? I assume there is. Do you want to cut it now and pick it up later or?...

SALTONSTALL: Well, why don't I tell you about it in broad outline. In April of 1959, having given the matter some thought, I came to the decision that Kennedy had a really good shot for the Presidency. I was grateful for what he had done for me in '58; I was interested in the idea of becoming involved in a Presidential political campaign where I knew the person involved to some extent. So I made a trip down to Washington -- I've forgotten whether it was the sole purpose of the trip, but it was certainly a major purpose -- and I called Kennedy out from the floor of the Senate. He came out, and we sat together for about fifteen or twenty minutes. I think he was carrying a cane at the time, and I think it was in the early stages of his work on the labor bill. I remember seeing Archie Cox [Archibald Cox] down there at the time, whom I had known for some time. Anyway, I said to him very directly and simply, "Look, I've been thinking over your situation, and I think you've got a very good chance, and I want to help you. I'm here to volunteer my help." So he said, "Well thanks a lot. I think I can use you."

I think that I made several trips down to Washington and talked with him and also talked with Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]. It was decided that I would be kind of an advance agent for some of the liberals around the country. I was put to work on specific situations, the principal one of which was to work on specific situations, the principal one of which was Wisconsin, where Jim Doyle [James E. Doyle] was the State Chairman at the time and a personal friend of mine. I had several conversations on the phone and a long meeting with Jim Doyle at Martha's Vineyard island during the summer of '59 on the subject of whether some agreement to split up Wisconsin could be made with Stevenson. I'm not sure, come to think of it, whether he was still the State Chairman at that point. He may have been succeeded by somebody else.

STEWART: Do you mean the state ADA chairman or the State Democratic Chairman?

[-14-]

SALTONSTALL: No. State Democratic Chairman. Jim Doyle was the State Democratic Chairman at one time in Washington, and I cannot remember whether he still was. I think he was. In any event, I wrote a couple of reports about this to Kennedy, and I in fact transmitted an offer of a sort of a vague nature, which it was decided to turn down on the basis that Kennedy would rather take his chances in a primary than make a deal on such a basis as that. I probably could find some of that correspondence if I looked hard enough. I was also sent to New York...

STEWART: Excuse me, could I ask you -- I'm not quite sure I'm clear -- the proposal by Doyle would have been what, to.... How could they put it, how would they get around not having a primary? I'm not that familiar with Wisconsin primary laws, but you're saying that the proposal was to split the delegation three ways between Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], Kennedy, and Stevenson?

SALTONSTALL: Yes. I'll have to refresh my recollection on that, and maybe the next time we have the time I can give you more on that.

STEWART: It's all right. I'll see if I can find out anything because it seems to me that we have interviewed Doyle, but I haven't seen it. It would be an interesting point.

SALTONSTALL: Then I worked on various people in New York and tried to get an organization, a pro-Kennedy organization, going among the liberals in New York. I dealt with Tony Akers [Anthony B. Akers] and some people that Jim Landis [James M. Landis] had suggested to me. I think one of them was a law partner of Jim's. I talked with Finletter [Thomas K. Finletter] quite a bit, various other types. Then I worked on various academicians around the country whom I knew, or when I picked up people, I got them to work on others. I think that some of the early pressure that I

put on Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] and Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] and Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] might have had something to do with their...

[-15-]

STEWART: Galbraith and Schlesinger...

SALTONSTALL: And Bundy, yes. Of course, they'd all had previous contacts with Kennedy from time to time over the years, but it took a while to persuade them to abandon Mr. Stevenson. Well, I've got to run.

STEWART: Yes, okay.

SALTONSTALL: I had an interesting experience later on out in California. Bobby asked me to go out there about ten days in advance of the Convention to try to work on some of the CDC [California Democratic Council] types out there, again without very much success. But I never saw Jack, except to wave in the distance at the Democratic Convention. It was all Bobby that I saw then. Well, let me see if I can recall....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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