

Kenneth P. O'Donnell Oral History Interview – RFK#2, 05/06/1969
Administrative Information

Creator: Kenneth P. O'Donnell

Interviewer: Larry J. Hackman

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Biographical Note

Appointment Secretary to the President, 1961 - 1963; Special Assistant to the President, 1961 – 1965, Campaign Manager, Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] presidential campaign, 1968. In this interview, O'Donnell discusses RFK's senate campaign in 1964, his relationship with President Lyndon B. Johnson, and his decision to run for the presidency in 1968, among other issues.

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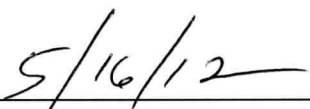
Kenneth P. O'Donnell


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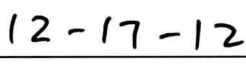
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Kenneth P. O'Donnell – RFK #2

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Second

Oral History Interview

with

KENNETH P. O'DONNELL

Boston, Massachusetts

May 6, 1969

By Larry J. Hackman

HACKMAN: Last time you remember we concentrated primarily on '68. I thought maybe we could go back to '64 right after ^{the} John Kennedy assassination and get you to talk about your conversations with him, with Robert Kennedy in that period, about what your own future would be, your decision to stay in the White House and then follow up with the discussions about the Vice Presidency in '64 that I know you were involved in at the White House. First, I guess can you remember discussing with him your own future and what you might do?

O'DONNELL: You have to go really back to the assassination. Bobby getting on the plane, etc. He really wasn't around for a long period of time, and when he was around, he wasn't much with it. I didn't go back to the White House ^{really} except to clean out my desk, and the President ^{had} spoke ^{to} of me on the plane about remaining ^{on} which I made no commitment. I stayed home really for about three or four weeks. I talked to Bobby once in awhile on the phone, but I found that the worse ⁺ two people in the world to have a conversation were he and I. I felt worse after the conversation, and I presume he felt worse. I think we mutually agreed that we wouldn't even talk. Upon one occasion he and I ^{had} a conversation, ^{the} one thing that seemed to disturb him most of anything else was he found some of the-- which someday I'm going to write-- those fast friends that he had made really weren't fast friends at all, that they really talked to him because he was the President's brother. It upset him very much. People who had called him everyday

and whom he would call on the phone and the
 reply would come back in about twenty seconds
 and never returned the call at all. I'm more
 callous than he is. I understood that. The
 transition of power is the transition of power.
 It was all over. It took Bobby a little while
 to realize that it was all over, which is natural.
 The few times that I saw him I would say in
 January and almost up to March maybe, I used to
 go over and see Jackie about every afternoon.
 Once I went back to the White House, I had a
 conversation with the President. I never discussed
 it with Bobby and I agreed to stay through the
 campaign. We made a verbal agreement that I'd
 remain through the campaign of 1964. He was very
 beseeching. Number one, he had no one who knew
 anything about politics; he had no staff at all.
 Johnson and I had been reasonably close through it.
 I had been probably closer than any of the two
 because that was one of my jobs given to me by
 the President. But anyway I felt I had an
 obligation. He said to me very clearly as I recall

were when I would

and

body

that

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and I'm sure he said to Sorensen and O'Brien and those that he cared about that stayed that we had an obligation to the country, that if we all walked out, that obviously his position was going to be jeopardized and the Democratic Party, but Bobby was not involved in any of that. I talked to Jackie about it. I don't think any of the Kennedys probably were very happy about it but at that moment. . . . I think we went down that Christmas, as a matter of fact, and I went away. We stayed down in Palm Beach and we went over and we had dinner with Jackie and Stash Radziwill was there and I think Bobby was there. They were staying down at. . . . We got in a great discussion about obligations to the Democratic Party which I have a different view I think than a lot of-- I have felt very deeply that I had an obligation to the Party beyond Lyndon Johnson or anybody else and that's the way the President would feel. But we had a bantering sort of discussion about it. I think that's the first time that they realized that

that I had full intention of remaining through the election. Bobby came back, I think around, I came back to the White House maybe in the middle of January, and I think Bobby probably didn't come back to the Attorney General's department. I'm sure that's a record that you can easily find, perhaps February or March, but he was in another world. He was, as he should have been, he was a very distraught boy who had lost his brother and I don't remember any sensible conversations with him. Nothing really interested him very much anymore at this time politically or otherwise, and I don't think he concerned himself much with his own career. I think his feeling at that moment, as I get it as sort of a memory now, is he just wanted to get out. He didn't know how to get out. He didn't know what route to go and he didn't really want to talk about it.

HACKMAN:

You say he wanted to get out of the Attorney Generalship or he wanted to get out of politics altogether or he wanted to get out of. . .

O'BONNELL: I think he just wanted to get out of Washington and get out of the swim. Nothing was very important to him. Now the press meanwhile is whipping up this great Kennedy for Vice President bit. President Johnson had from the very beginning in his own political fashion had moved immediately to stop Bobby even the choice of who sat in his booth at the-- was just totally political. Dick [Richard J.] Daley, [R. Sargent] Shriver, anyway it was quite clear that his effort in everything was to stop Bobby Kennedy. He had a fear of him that was beyond belief. Bobby Kennedy had no part in it whatsoever it just was strictly a one-way operation but now that press began to conjure up whether there would be a confrontation between Robert Kennedy, which makes a great story, and then when he's just about coming around to talking politics and sense and the New Hampshire thing begins to boil up. Johnson obviously took that as a direct challenge from Bobby. Bobby and I discussed it, and this is our first political discussion as

I recall, and he told me he had no part of it. He understood that there were friends of his that were involved in it, and they were all Kennedy people, they were Jack Kennedy people, and like all the rest of them, they didn't want to give up the White House. Bobby was the heir apparent to them, and they don't know or care about Lyndon Johnson. They've been opposed to him for ten years, and it's sort of an emotional transfer. But Johnson had his people reporting in to him who had chosen now to go on the other side. They had been the minority in New Hampshire, ninety-nine to one, and now suddenly they had the President, and so, therefore, they began to plant stories in Washington about how much the Kennedy people were involving themselves in it. I don't want it to be more a story about Ken O'Donnell than Bobby Kennedy, but the point is I was the most suspect person in town. I'm sitting at the same desk. The President wanted me to become National Chairman at that time and be his political-- he really didn't

know two political figures in the United States of America, and He thought I did, but this obviously created a very suspicious relationship between the President and myself. He couldn't believe that the [William] Bill Dunfeys, [Bernard] Bernie Bouzins, and John Kings, that they weren't getting instructions from somebody and I didn't know what Bobby was doing, and I wasn't about to ask. But there were those up there that were planting these stories, fortunately they were planting them with Walter Jenkins who--- he and I had a great relationship, and Walter would come to me, and I told Walter what I knew about, which was not, I did not inquire of Bob Kennedy except upon one occasion he called me and asked me about it, and I told him I thought it was asinine whoever was doing it, that they ought to tell them to stop, and then we had a discussion about him making a statement, and I said, well, if you're not involved in it, then you shouldn't make a statement. I think that just magnifies it. I

think you ought to tell the President of the United States you're not involved in it." So the President wanted him to make a statement, and I said, "I think it's a hell of a mistake. It magnifies something. Why should he deny something that he isn't in, and if he asks me, I'm going to strongly suggest he doesn't make it." Well, Johnson needed me more than I need him at that moment, so that was about where we were. Bobby ultimately did issue a statement saying he had no involvement in it but it began that a) he was seeking it and then they had a great fight over Paul Corbin, a distinguished gentleman, who Bobby and I had a fight over Paul Corbin subsequently. I think Bobby was wrong, and I told him I thought he was wrong. Ethel and I had a fight over it. But he was distraught at the moment. He said to me that I owed him the loyalty to say that Paul Corbin was a good fellow and I said, "I don't owe anybody the loyalty to tell a lie. I don't think he's a good fellow. I never said he was a good

fellow, and as far as I'm concerned, he isn't a
good fellow. I told Lyndon Johnson that and I'm
working for Lyndon Johnson at the moment and when
I can't work for him, I'll quite and if the conflict
arises between you and Lyndon Johnson, then I'll
quit. I may not go with either one of you, but I'll
quit." So that blew over. Now Bobby is trying to
clean up his problems in the department of Justice,
and now he's beginning to think of his own life.
We still used to meet mostly at Jackie's. These
are the moments when they were making a decision
on the [William] Manchester thing which was
such a disaster, and the reason it was was because
both Bobby and Jackie were totally distraught, and
Dave Powers and I used to go over there every
afternoon. Dave used to go over and play with the
children, and I would talk with Jackie, and Bobby
would usually join us and I must say, if the
conversations were ever put down, we'd all be put
away for the gibberish that we discussed, but it
was just a matter of letting off steam and everybody

[David Fo]

was pretty hysterical for a long period of time
but that period of time had ended now and Bobby
had decided he had to think of. . . . The President
was dead. He had to think of his own future and
the thought of running for the United States Senate
first entered his head at that moment. I'm sure
suggested by friends in New York more than ^{him} himself
and the newspapers had made the Vice Presidential
thing a cause celebre now for a period of four
months. So we chatted about it back and forth and
to be frank with you, ^{I was . . .} Bobby downgraded the Vice
^{I think} President mostly because the people around him did
and I think mostly because Lyndon Johnson had been
Vice President, which I was very irritated about.
The Vice Presidency of the United States is the
second most powerful job in the world. I said,
"You're brother ran in 1956. He tried to kill
people to be elected Vice President of the United
States. When have we reached the moment of arrogance
in our life ^{that} when we say it's not important? I don't
mind you not wanting it, but let's not downgrade
it to that position." But he was just not politically

the type . Now, *period of* my position during this time, the President is leaning on me very heavily and I think he thought I was the only one of the Kennedy people that at least he could trust my word. He may not like me. [Theodore C] Sorensen had ^{had} resigned by then. [Arthur M., Jr.] Schlesinger resigned by then. The only ones he had any confidence in really were [Lawrence F.] O'Brien and myself and [Richard J.] Dick McGuire *who* was then Treasurer of the National Committee and I think there must have been some amongst ^{them} saying "Why don't O'Donnell and O'Brien leave". That's human nature. But Johnson's relationship and mine is pretty good. He kept insisting that I go over to the National Committee and I kept very frankly, usually after we'd have a few drinks at night about ⁶ six o'clock we used to go in and have a few drinks, and I told him over and over again, I think he'd say that if anyone were to ask him, if Bobby Kennedy decided to run for Vice President in a direct confrontation with the President of the

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United States that I would have to resign from
 the White House and go to work with Bobby Kennedy
 because that's where my loyalty would be. I would
 recommend against it. So therefore I didn't want
 to be placed in a position where I'm at the
 National Committee talking to [Richard J.] Dick
 Daley and Jess Unruh and [William J. Jr.] Billy
 Green and my friends and the President might in
 fairness think I was talking about something other
 than his problems and it was too much of a
 compromise upon me. I was being selfish about it.
 I told Bobby the same thing that I'm just not
 going to-- if he decides he's going to run-- that
 we're going to make a clean cut. He didn't want
 to run. He really didn't want to run. He didn't
 want to be Vice President of the United States
 and he didn't feel that he could associate
 with Lyndon Johnson in that basis. He didn't
 think the job was important. He thought it would
 destroy his ability to do anything and he was more
 and more inclining toward the Senate. It seems

to me somewhere between April and May of that year
he really made up his mind he wanted to run for
the Senate, and we had a meeting at his house which
was attended by, the ones are recollect very
clearly, I think [Frederick G.] Fred Dutton was
there, [Stephen E.] Steve Smith was there,
[Edward M. Kennedy] Teddy was there, Larry O'Brien
and myself. They were all- Teddy was the strongest--
Bobby ought to run for the Senate. Teddy had
three of four discussions ^{with me} on the matter that Bobby
just couldn't-- he had to get out and run for the
Senate. It was very clear he could have the nomina-
tion for the Senate anytime he wanted it because the
leaders up there felt he was the only one that could
win, very properly, they were correct. And there's
a lot of background maneuvering going on between
[Robert J.] Wagner and other people who don't want
Bobby in New York, most of which I'm privy to and
which I had always said, "I'm going to tell him, so
don't fool around on that score." But I don't think
there's any question he could have the nomination

when he wanted it. [#] But we had this one meeting ⁵
and O'Brien and I prevailed on Bobby, Bobby was
morose, [^] he didn't want either one of them ⁵ to be
frank with you. He just didn't know what he
wanted, but we, I think I, prevailed upon him
^{that} the fact [^] if we didn't do something to hold
our position ^{off}power in the dealing for the
Vice President ^{that} we [^]'re going to end up with
a John Connally or the President's going to pick
some Mickey Mouse [^] he doesn't want any Vice
President [^] he just wants to be President [^] and [^] he'd
be all alone [^] and he'd be all alone [^] and that we had
an obligation to our constituency in the
Democratic Party [^] which is the liberal wing of the
Party [^] to see that one of ours was the number two
[^] man, [^] Lord know [^] what happens, we [^]'s seen what happens.
Teddy was against it, [^] Steve was against it, [^] Dutton [^]
as I recall [^] was reasonably silent, Burke Marshall
may have been there. Bobby was. . . . But he finally
came down with us [^] that he would refuse to withdraw

his name from the nomination, so that went a moment
of silence for about two weeks while Lyndon kept
dropping bon mots all over down about who was
going to Vice President, from Eugene J. McCarthy ^{here}
to Shriver, the whole purpose of it was to get rid
of Bobby, smoke him out in some way and get him
to announce for the Senate, get him the hell out
of the ball game, and then Johnson would have done
what he was going to do anyway. And Bobby
dutifully remained silent. So Johnson finally is
in a position where he's got to make the decision
himself, and now Barry M. Goldwater is the sure
nominee. Lyndon Johnson told me himself, he said,
"Look it, if I need Bobby Kennedy, I'll be the first
guy to ask him. We'll wait around and look at this
situation. If I can't win the election without a
Kennedy on the ticket, I'm going to take Bobby
Kennedy. I'm not that proud but I don't want to
go down in history being elected by a Kennedy if
I can help it. I'd like to be President Johnson."
which I thought was very fair, no complaints which

I told Robert Kennedy, he told me that on the way to Bill Green's funeral in December of 1964, Ethel was there. And now he's sure he can't lose. He's afraid of [William W.] Scranton. He's afraid of [Nelson A.] Rockefeller they'd cut into the liberal constituency that had been ours there's no question about it, the blacks and. . . . Once it became clear it was going to be Goldwater his position was insured, then he could pick anybody he wants now for Vice President. So he called Bobby over to the White House. This was the showdown. I left the White House and went over to the Sans Souci restaurant. Mr. O'Brien and I sat there and Bobby had his confrontation with the President for which there are two different versions and then he came over to the Sans Souci and he had a drink with us and he told us he was in a very good humor, and the phone rang and it was the President of the United States calling me and said, "I just talked to your friend and told him he's out and we got to write a statement." and then

q he started on what had really happened and I said, Mr. President, for your information, I am sitting now with the Attorney General of the United States so I don't want to be talking out of two sides of my mouth at the same time now." He said, "Oh fine, would you come over here? I want to work with you on the statement." So I went over and sat down with him and he told me what he says Bobby said and Bobby told me the exact opposite. And then we wrote the statement, I wrote the statement, which was the great historical statement where we knocked the whole Cabinet out. He was trying to think of some way not to knock Bobby out, so we put in everybody from dogcatchers to. . . . They called poor [Dean] Rusk and these guys all over the country and said "You're not a candidate" and they all said, "I never knew I was." It was a comedy, a comedy, and that's the way I treated it frankly. But the stories on Bobby were he. . . . ^{James Cox} Scotty Reston and these guys wrote about it afterwards. He took them upstairs and talked about Bobby licking his lips and all that

sort of stuff. He taped the conversation, Johnson, there's no question and I had warned Bobby before he went in there. "He's going to record every word you say so judge yourself accordingly." and I'm sure he did so I'm sure Bobby's version was the honest one. That was the end of that. Bobby went up I believe that next day ~~the~~ ^{as a} President matter of fact, said to me that night, "You want Hubert Humphrey don't you." I said, "If it was not Bobby Kennedy I'm for Hubert Humphrey, yes." He said, "Alright, ~~then~~ ^{Robert} he's the candidate." The Humphrey story is one of the jokes of all time as it ultimately emerges in Life magazine as Hubert is the first to know because it was Hubert and I head to head as we had these conversations with the President but anyway.

HAEKMAN: Do you have a time, well let's see the meeting with Robert Kennedy was July 29th so it was right after that.

O'DONNELL: Yeah, and that day as a matter of fact which is

not appropr of what you're doing at the moment
that day the President committed himself to Hubert
Humphrey and that night I got a call from Hubert
Humphrey and Hubert Humphrey and I met in the
Mayflower Hotel. We had a long conversation and
I said to Hubert Humphrey, "You're going to be next.
He doesn't want any liberal on the ticket. He wants
no one with a constituency of their own. He's an
insecure man and the only other guy that's got a
constituency is you and if you got a constituency
you'd better go out and get it, which means you
better go to George Meany and go to Walter Reuther
and go to Jack Conway and go to those guys you'll
have the Kennedy people with you and you get the labor
people and between the two of us he's going to take
the guy we want but otherwise he'll cut your throat
tomorrow morning and what he said to me I took for
a grain of salt worth nothing and I was ultimately
very correct." But anyway, Bobby went up the next
day to see Hubert Humphrey and told him he was for
him, which was on T.V., radio, they took pictures
and everything else that he was supporting Hubert

(a)

Humphrey. We talked spasmodically^d now he's^o devoted to New York^s and he's spending a lot of time up there trying to put that thing together^o and he kept himself loose until Hubert was in pretty good shape^o and it was one of the great services that Robert Kennedy ever did for the United States of America^{and} meanwhile the press are knocking his brains out. He wouldn't have taken the Vice Presidency if they gave it to him on a-- but he was doing what we had asked him to do and I^o didn't just speak for me, I spoke for Walter Reuther and for Meany and for all these guys^{they} that were all Humphrey and all felt that that Bobby was the only threat^s that Lyndon would take anybody but Bobby and if he had to go second choice he'd take Humphrey and Bobby played the game perfectly and got murdered for it, then and afterwards.

HACKMAN:
O'DONNELL:

Who else knows this? [?] Does Sorensen and people like this are in ^o this? ^o D^o they know the game ^{what} ^{that's} is being played here?

O'DONNELL: Sorensen's ^{is} gone ~~now~~ He's left the ~~White~~ ^{on} House and was writing the book. He was down ^{at} the Cape so Sorensen is totally. . . . but ^{was} Sorensen's never ^{is} now political. He was out. Fred Dutton knows it. Ted Kennedy knows it. Steve Smith knew it. Larry O'Brien knew it. Hubert Humphrey knows it. I know it. Jack Conway knows it. Walter Reuther knows it. We were meeting very regularly. Bobby was the weapon ^{but} he was not in on most of the strategical conferences about how we were going to work the thing out ^{but} I felt pretty free ^{once} the President committed himself to Hubert Humphrey to me ^{that} I could work for Hubert Humphrey ^{which} ^{he} I told me I could. But anyway, now Bobby is removed. My agreement with the President ^{is} that I'd go to the National Committee only after the Convention. Bobby's out of it pretty much. I think he announced just before the Convention. He had a reception in Atlantic City which Jackie came to ^{then} and he was ⁵ nominated about a week or ten days later ^{which} I'd always told him he had the nomination anyway.

He could wait till the last minute. They wanted him. He didn't want them. He was the only candidate that could be elected to the United States Senate, and they wanted a Senator, and he wasn't eligible constitutionally to run for Governor so it didn't make any difference. He only had one choice.

HACKMAN: Were there other things he was interested in? Would he have been interested in Governor?

O'DONNELL: I think he would have been more interested in Governor than Senator, ~~and he~~ but he was not constitutionally eligible to be Governor of the State of New York. You have to live five years in the State and be a registered voter, so he had no choice, he either ran for the Senate or he retired from politics. We talked steadily through that period of time. We was never happy to be a candidate. He wasn't sure of himself as a candidate. He hated to be trading on the Kennedy name as a candidate, but he had decided, and he went back to

New York as soon as the Convention was over. I don't think I saw him again until he was elected. I talked to him on the phone quite often. I then moved over to the National Committee and became Executive Director of the National Committee and he and I in that guise talked quite often. I sent a lot of people up to work for Bobby in New York, most all of the old Kennedy crowd went up there. We raised some money for him. But he ran his own campaign, Steve and those fellows. Really the next time I saw him was after the election when he was in the United States Senate.

HACKMAN: During that New York Senate campaign, can you remember getting involved at all in any problems between Robert Kennedy and his campaign and the Johnson people in New York ^{Edwin L. Jr.} and all these ^{Weisl} people?

O'DONNELL: Oh yeah. They were fighting like mad, fighting like mad which was the only role that I really played that was of any assistance to Bobby because they

needed me. Frankly, Johnson had great confidence in me. I set up the C⁺itizens for Kennedy-Johnson and they fought tooth and nail. Steve Smith was in it with me, and Bob Wagner was a great help and strangely enough Bobby Kennedy was in trouble with the very groups that had been his greatest support and that ^{who} should have been with him all the way. He was in trouble with the Negroes and he was in trouble with the Jews and Johnson who had always been in trouble with the Negroes and the Jews, was in great shape with the Negroes and the Jews. It made no sense at all to me but Louie Martin said to me one day, I had [Andrew J. Hatcher up there working with the Negroes and I very honestly as Executive Director of the Committee he's a Democrat running for the Senate, I had a right to intervene with our people anywhere we choose to money or any other way and I was never called on it, now question about it, although Weisl called every day and advised me of doing it and called Johnson every fifteen minutes and called [Abraham J]

Abe Fortas every half hour and called Walter
 Jenkins who was one million percent for Bobby
 so it didn't make any--- all of the Johnson people
 in the White House were for Bobby they all liked
 Bobby, the young fellows. Ed Weisl hated Joseph P. Kennedy
 Joe Kennedy not Bob Kennedy, they had a fight about
 whether Joe Kennedy called him a kike one day and
 Ed Weisl told me that himself, that was the
 fight with Bob Kennedy which made about as much
 sense as. . . . But anyway we had a hell of a time
 setting up the campaign. They didn't want to have
 any joint thing whatsoever. Many of those that were
 the Citizens for Keating, Democrats for Keating,
 were people who were almost all planted there.
 There is no question in my mind that that part
 of the Democratic Party which again is like we
 were talking about in New Hampshire. We had ninety-
 nine percent of the Party and then we lost our
 President and the one percent who had been out like
 an Ed Weisl now suddenly were the dominant and they
 wanted to dominate the ninety-nine percent and there

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them 5 but

were very, very few of ~~they~~ ⁵ they were all now in a position of power ⁵ and political people ⁵ being political people will ⁵ gravitate to where the muscle is very quickly. Again, another one of Bobby's disillusionments. I could have seen it from nine thousand miles. It's my business ⁵ but they really tried to give it to him ⁵ and they just wouldn't take a Citizens for Kennedy-Johnson-Humphrey. ⁵ I went up to see Wedel in his apartment in the Hampshire House or wherever ⁵ the hell he is up there ⁵ and sat down with him, and his answer to me is, he said, "In the 1960 campaign you didn't do it." And he said, "Bobby Kennedy was running it. It was Citizens for Kennedy-~~Johnson~~. You never put any local ⁵ figures on ~~at~~ ⁵ Governors or Senators. You just want to change the rules." I said, "Yeah, we do ⁵ we want to change the rules." Bobby and I had a hell of a fight over ~~it~~ ⁵. I got an agreement out of him to do it, ⁵ and I left and went to Chicago ⁵ and I got a call, ⁵ I was out to see Mayor Daley, and I got a call in my hotel ⁵ and the time difference

being what it is it must have been about ~~six~~
o'clock in the morning, he was hysterical and
I said, "Bobby, the trouble is they're using your
rules and it's pretty tough to fight and the only
hope we really got is a guy that your guys are
knocking his brains out and you're knocking his
brains, that's Bob Wagner and I think I can get
Wagner to go along. Everybody's knocking his
head off and why don't you leave the man alone. I
find him a pretty good guy." So I flew back to
New York and we had a meeting at Wagner's house, ^{that}
Wagner called. . . .

HACKMAN: Robert Kennedy is at the meeting?

O'DONNELL: No, Steve Smith was at the meeting and Weisk and
Steve got in a fight as I recall and Wagner
finally said he was for Johnson-Humphrey-Kennedy
and that was it. I said. "Set up
another Committee, have a Johnson Committee and you've
got the Keating problem and everything else, but if
you do it this way we're all going to be fighting
amongst ourselves." The President, I never heard

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two words from, but I knew Weisl was acting as his agent. Weisl's son now is—and that was Eddie Weisl's lone ambition in life is to take care of that kid that he finally planted in the Justice Department. So anyway, that problem we solved. Okay, now we come to scheduling which is really my primary function and we schedule the President. Now I send up all the advanced men to schedule. My brother, Warren O'Donnell, was in charge of it for the President and a fellow named Matty Ryan, who's a District Attorney from Hampden County, was with my brother and we had about ten guys down there, and their job was to take care of Bobby and to make sure any time Johnson was there that Bobby was there if Bobby wanted to be there. They did Pennsylvania and New York and a lot of these other places. So we weren't trying to cheat the President any, he was the Democratic Candidate, but we knew that there were those people up there, whether the President liked it or knew it or not, were trying to give it to Bobby whatever the

hell they did. Johnson is going to beat Goldwater by twenty million votes so they're pretty free to move around hard on us. So it went along pretty well as a matter of fact they hung Eddie Weisl or threatened to hang him out the window of a hotel one night, Matty Ryan and my brother, My brother weighs about 205 and Matty weighs about 195 and they both could lick seventeen wild cats and Eddie Weisl is not a very pretentious fellow. He finally called me one night and he actually told me he was in physical fear of his life over the visit of Bobby Kennedy's-- Bobby Kennedy never knew this as long as he lived-- They were going through Brooklyn and this is about the last week of the campaign and they're plotting the campaign so the Senator gets the best exposure and Weisl is resisting it so they threatened to break him in half and he called me in panic and anger, more panic than anger, and said it was a waste of the President's time and the President was tired and you know, I said, "Can't I be a judge of that. I know more about it than you do. You're just up in

in New York." ^{Wcis!} SO his father called Lyndon Johnson, I think he was in Denver, Colorado, and Johnson called me and said, "Kenny, I don't mind doing everything for Bobby Kennedy. I know you're working for Bobby and you should be but I don't have to spend a whole day campaigning for him. You've got me all over the city of New York." And I said to him, "Mr. President, can I be frank with you? I don't think he needs you. Did you read the latest Daily News poll? He's going to win easy and if I were him, and I suggested it to him just a few minutes ago, he's much better off alone because you're going to win anyway easy but he needs a little more exposure and when you're there you get all the adulation of the crowd and he's just there with you and I told him he's a hell of a lot better to go by himself." "You did." I said, "Yup." He didn't want to do that. He didn't want to do that at all. If there was going to be any crowd there, he was going to go. ^{so} these are the petty little things that were going on. Bobby then wins easily but they fought all the way. If we didn't

have our own fellows in there they would have given Bobby the shaft to his eyeball and the President was in it all the way but the fellows around the President were not so that he had no way to transmit his instructions he didn't dare fight with me at this moment. It all worked out fine. It all worked out fine.

HACKMAN: How is Humphrey on this. Is he anxious to go in and help Robert Kennedy or is this important at all at this point?

O'DONNELL: Well, I'll tell you. It's not important at all at that point because nobody's interested in the Vice President number one and as I said before strangely enough Johnson was so strong and Goldwater was so weak with these groups that are so influential in a New York campaign. If you look at Bobby's strength and you finally end up his great strength was up-state. He ran very, very well in places most Democrats don't. He didn't do really well in the end in the City. He did

Wonderfully to win, but I mean compared to what
a Democrat running that kind of a fight is. . . .
But Humphrey wasn't involved whatsoever. Humphrey
had more trouble involving himself with Johnson
than he did with us because Johnson wouldn't give
Humphrey the right time. [Robert ^E] Bob Short,
who was then running Humphrey-- we used to have
a staff meeting every day in John Bailey's office
and I spent ⁹⁰ ninety percent of my time trying to
save Humphrey from being thrown out the window
because they weren't going to give him anything.
He wasn't going on television and the President
didn't want anybody to know that there was such
a thing so he was never involved. It was strictly
between that little group who had been when John
Kennedy was President out. Ed Weisl, I think was
the only delegate in New York that voted for Johnson
for President. Now suddenly he's the National
Committeeman. As a matter of fact, I tried to stop
him being National Committeeman. I called Wagner

in Atlantic City and said, "You know that's just. . .
You're looking for a fight. Bobby's going to be
the nominee." And Wagner got mad as hell and we
had the only fight we ever had over that because
I knew.

HACKMAN: What about the problems with the blacks in the
campaign? Is there anybody you get personally
involved with that you try to break loose?

O'DONNELL: Well, Andy Hatcher went up to New York and he worked
there all through the campaign, Louis Martin
who was then the Deputy Chairman of the National
Committee worked very hard for Bobby and was
awfully good about it. He's the most knowledgeable
black politician probably in the United States of
America, loyal, honest, decent guy working for
Johnson but he also loved Bobby. We worked up
there. We put money in there. Whatever Louis Martin
ever told me to do, I did because he knows nine
hundred thousand percent more than I know about it.

but he was up there and Andy was up there and they were reporting back and they came around as we started to go, but initially they were very cool. now how far that goes into the blacks or how far we're talking about just the leaders, I don't know who the hell would ever know that. The Jewish groups, his father's record which we backed here in Massachusetts and the fact they had mostly been Stevenson, the ruthless sort of-- they really were able to plan that stuff in there. They were the toughest crowd of all to handle and obviously they spill over because the New York Times was against Bobby, they spill over into the black community because of their social relationships have been so close through the civil rights movement for these years. I don't think it was the blacks, I think it was the liberal Jewish community whose influence within the black community emerges. But anyway he won. He's now the Senator and the next conversation I had concerning him was a call from Lyndon Baines Johnson, he called me in

December of 1964. I was at my desk at the White House and I was leaving to go to Florida on a vacation. He asked what I was going to do, I said, "I'm going to Florida for two weeks." He said, "Well, I want to talk to you about the make-up of the government." He said, "We've got some places we want to fill and I want your recommendations before you go." I said, "Well, what are we talking about?" He said, "Number one, the Attorney General of the United States." He said, "Now, [Nicholas De B.] Katzenbach's a nice fellow but the thing I'm worried about is I wouldn't want poor old Bob Kennedy to be trying to handle two jobs at once and that's what he'd be doing. He'd be the Attorney General whether you like it or not because Nick's a nice boy but he's just going to do what Bobby tells him and that's what he should do he's Bobby's boy but "he said, "I don't think we ought to the day-- do you agree with me he shouldn't with all the burdens of the Senate." I said,

"That's your decision to make Mr. President." I'm leaving anyway, which I did not say to him at that time but I said, "That's your decision to make." He said, "No, I want you to make it. I want a list of five names that you recommend for Attorney General of the United States and then I'll make a pick out of those five names." Needless to say I never sent him five names because that would be the first five guys that wouldn't get the job. He'd figure I just got them from Bobby thirteen minutes before and naturally we both know the same fellow but it's just he was delivering a message from me to Nick Katzenbach. Now I don't know Nick Katzenbach for more I dealt with the Attorney General I hardly know him and I never delivered the message. I did tell Bobby about it and he thought it was very funny. Nick never had any anticipation he was going to be named Attorney General but anyway this was the next. I don't think he had any relationship with Bobby. I talked used to talk to Bobby spasmodically

He went in the Senate in '65. He was just determined to be a Senator and events began to overtake him. As we go into '65, Johnson had that wonderful year ⁱⁿ which he was the most popular man in the world. He won with those tremendous majorities. He passed all that legislation.

He was ~~the~~ King of all he surveyed. *The size of a man* - Vietnam was on the horizon. By the time '65 started to go through, I think ^{probably} this is the first time Bobby ever had any judgment that this guy might not last. I think that's where we run into our other

will you
HACKMAN: Let me run back through a couple things I wanted to ask you about what you've said?

HARRISHELL: Can you remember anything at all, I think that what the Hoffa conviction came ^{through} in '64?

O'DONNELL
HARRISHELL: '64? When Johnson was President? I don't recall.

HACKMAN: I just thought you remembered something about Robert Kennedy's reaction to. ... People have talked about. . .

O'DONNELL: Yeah, Robert Kennedy's reaction. Now I was not in the Department of Justice. I distinctly remember having a conversation with Robert Kennedy who was delighted with the conviction and unhappy that he was going to go to jail. There was none of the what was sort of the euphoria that has been attributed to ^{Bobby} Robert Kennedy. It was exactly the opposite. He had enough tragedy of his own now^s and I think Bobby'd now been around a little. 1957 was one thing, seven years later Bobby had grown up an awful lot, and I don't think anybody exulted in anybody going to go to jail that had been around that much, seen enough jails, seen enough prisons. As a matter of fact, I'm as clear as a bell that he and I had a conversation, ^{and} his reaction was, again, justice ^{must} was triumph, but at the same time the price was higher than a human being ought to pay.

HACKMAN: After you went back to the White House, ^{when} President Johnson was there, in '64, did you get at all involved with urging President Johnson to use Robert Kennedy

in some way, send him on ^{the} trips like the
Malaysian, Indonesian trip any of these things?

O'DONNELL: No. I think Johnson, you're not talking about
Johnson, ^{but} again is much maligned in this moment.
He really felt sorry for Bobby Kennedy, and I
think anything ~~might~~ he could have done short
he didn't want him to be his Vice President, he
didn't want him to be the Vice President, and he
probably really didn't want him to be the next
President because if you look at what he did,
almost every person he was really pushing forward
was another Catholic, and he was hoping that he would---
that's where Gene McCarthy became involved in
the beginning and Shriver and all these other people
that was to get rid of Bobby Kennedy for twenty
years, but at the same time, it wasn't personal, and
he understood it, and I think there was not much
give on either side. Bobby's out of melancholia to
some degree, but Johnson was very sensitive. I'll
just give you one little event which involves Bobby
and all the Kennedys, ^{and} which is what Lyndon Johnson

is to a degree. They had a birthday party for Jackie, I think it was at the F Street Club, and Lyndon Johnson and I went up. Larry O'Brien was with us. We were dressed in business suits because we were going back to the White House. We got there and everyone there was in white ^{tie and} tails, and it was a very important social event, ^{no} [Douglas], [Dillon], [Robert S.] McNamara, [McGeorge] Bundy, and nobody even spoke to Lyndon Johnson. He was sitting there in rather a baggy, old suit like he always wore anyway, and if you ever saw a man that was a fish out of water. And everybody was talking to Jackie and to Bobby, and the poor man finally came to me and said, "Would you mind coming back to the White House with me, ^{and} have a drink?" I said, "No, I'd love to." So he and I turned around and got in the car, we went down and sat down and had a dozen drinks. He said, "Gees, they just don't accept me, ^{do they?} I am the President of the United States." That's ^{now that wasn't Bobby} where that social thing just broke apart. BUT during that period of time, I think he tried to go

half way with Bobby. I think he tried to go half way. After that they began to break apart. I think the trip to Malaysia and these things I'm sure that Mac Bundy suggested them and people like that and I think the President was willing to do what he could to get Bobby out of his doldrums as long as he wasn't going to be Vice President of the United States, he didn't care what he did.

HACKMAN: You mentioned the Shriver thing in '64. I read in that Look article or Life article you were referring to earlier where they have you on the radio when ^{Do} Bill Moyers is calling Johnson? Can you remember how that came up?

O'DONNELL: Yeah, that's not accurate. It's not accurate. In the first place, I'm not that crude. ^{Theodore H.} Teddy White wrote that. You know who told him that was Lyndon Baines Johnson. What had happened was that he was pushing Shriver. He probably would have dumped Shriver in another week. He was also telling Gene McCarthy he wanted him. What he wanted to do was get a Catholic on the ticket which would end the

Bobby problem once and for all. He was chatting with me and I over and over again said to him, "You just can't pick someone that isn't qualified." Not that there's something wrong with Sarge and Sarge could have been great but on the basis of his political track record Sarge Shriver had no more right to be Vice President than I did. And when you've got a guy like Hubert Humphrey around and some pretty significant political figures around that you start talking about. So he said to me upon that occasion, he said Bill Moyers, who was very close to Sarge and his deputy and who was for him for Vice President said that Sarge told me that Bobby the Kennedy family would love it and I said, "Yeah, that's a lot of crap. If there's going to be a Catholic on the ticket, it's going to be a Kennedy, bona fide." I said, "I know this game as well as everybody else knows this game. Sarge is a fine fellow and Sarge gets on the ticket and you're going to win anyway. Sarge is the candidate eight years from now and Bobby's confined to East Chinatown somewhere but I stay with the guy that brought me. I'm with Bobby." I didn't push the guy's button

down. He pushed the button down, and he said to Moyers, "Kenny's here and says you're all wet." That was the extent of the conversation, but Lyndon told Teddy White the story the way it appears in Teddy White's book because it makes a better story in Texas tale-telling.

HACKMAN: What do you recall about Robert Kennedy's opinion of Shriver over the years, the '60 campaign and then the Peace Corps experience?

O'DONNELL: Very high. Very high. Bobby Kennedy was a Kennedy emotionally much more than I think almost all the Kennedys. He's probably a lot like his father in that sense of it, and I think I know them as much as any outsider can know a family. If you were a member of the family, Bobby's opinion of you was one hundred percent, even when you were wrong, it was one hundred percent. Sarge is a very articulate handsome, wonderful salesman, and I don't think that anybody would judge the Peace Corps wouldn't say he took a program and ran it pretty good. You put him in the Poverty

Program, you've got a different ball game. Now
you're dealing with a tough Nutcracker Suite.
It's a different game. But Bobby's judgment of
Shriver was always extremely high. I think Bobby
was hurt, he was hurt that Sarge really, I think, was
romanced by Lyndon Johnson, as a lot of guys were, a
lot of guys were. This picking of the Vice President
was really one of the. . . . If ever a guy wanted
to write a play, he's got the best play of all time
because he was romancing six of them at the same time
and every one of them, falling for it, and I'm sitting
there in the eye of the hurricane, laughing like hell watching
these supposedly sophisticated politicians buying
this stuff that's he's peddling. When he put Sarge
in that box, there was only one message that he was
trying to peddle in the whole world, and then he started
to plant these stories. You've got Bill Moyers who's
been Sarge's deputy and is his personal friend and
all of a sudden Sarge became a hell of a candidate
for Vice President, and nobody in God's world ever
thought of Sarge as a candidate for anything up to
that very moment. Now you're talking about, you've just

seen Lyndon Johnson the President of the United States, you're talking about a guy who's a hell of a nice guy but you know it's got to be a fake.

HACKMAN: Where is Moyers on this? Why isn't he telling Shriver that's it's a game?

O'DONNELL: Well, I think to be fair, from the Kennedy group, I am the closest to Spohn. We used to have a joke about ^{it} I was in charge, and the word was "the care and feeding of Lyndon Johnson" and he and I spent a lot of time together. Walter Jenkins and I became friends. I got Bill Moyers his job. I faked the whole thing and told him that, ^{Shriver ... because} if you leave Johnson, he'd go out of his mind. So we were very, very friendly that crowd. But I know what happens with Presidents of the United States. Lyndon, ^{when} he talks to me he's always talking messages to me, and I'm not one of his guys any more than Bill Moyers would be Jack Kennedy's guy. Of the outsider, I'm the nicest outsider you've got, but I'm not one of the family. I don't eat dinner ^{with} him and I wouldn't if I could, ^{and} He still doesn't know ^{quite} what the hell's going on with me. I

think he made it very clear to the people around him that he doesn't want Bobby Kennedy, and I think Lyndon being Lyndon sees the easiest way to stop Bobby Kennedy is to pick a relative. He got a Kennedy that's not a Kennedy, and I think Lyndon would judge Sarge pretty accurately. He's probably not^a terribly tough guy. He doesn't know an awful lot about politics. He has no constituency of his own. Once he's in there as Vice President, they'll bury him without a trace or he may offer it to him and then have him knocked out of the box by Richard J. Dick Daley or someone else and say, "I tried to get a Kennedy, but the Party wouldn't take him." He was just using Sarge but Moyers by saying to the President the things he wants to hear is also moving into the President's entourage because they were all fighting amongst themselves, the Jenkins and the Carters, all except Jenkins, Jenkins was in Clifton, Co. and he didn't give a damn about any of the rest of them. The rest of them were buzzing around like little flies trying to see who's going to finally end up being the closest guy to the President. I think Bill saw

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Shriver as a... If he could perform this coup, then Lyndon's going to say, "You're a very smart politician."

HACKMAN: A lot of people, going back to the 60's, talked about Shriver and some of the mistakes he made or his lack of knowledge in political things. Do you know if Robert Kennedy dismissed that or if he shared that view in '60?

O'DONNELL: To be frank with you, you know, the President ran his own campaign. And the mistakes you make are mistakes that nobody knows about because the President is running it, and Sarge couldn't make very big mistakes, because there aren't many to make. You make them with people. For example, Sarge had a guy in Chicago who was just persona non grata with the operation out there and the guy for months and months and months until I- Bobby dealt with him for six months-he's a hell of a nice guy, but he wasn't the man to be dealing with out there. I finally found out by total accident because I got friendly with the secretary of the Cook

County Central Committee and I found out that we were going to wrong route and the minute I told the President he said, "Sarge shouldn't be in those things anyway". But Sarge did come from Chicago. But Sarge came from the Adlai Stevenson wing, the social wing of the Chicago Party, not the Daley wing of the Chicago Party and I told Bobby and the minute I told Bobby that was the end of it. I think the thing Sarge did and that he was consigned to do he probably did very well. He meets people beautifully and if someone's going to make a speech I think Sarge does a hell of a job. If you look at what Sarge did with the Peace Corps just proselyting the Congress on a very tough, unsalable program That comes out pretty good at the end but at the beginning that's a pretty tough program. You put him in a tough program like the Poverty Program he doesn't understand that you're dealing with a bunch of ward-
and
heelers. You've got a tough fight going on and you've got to deal a little hard with a lot of people. That just wasn't his background. I'm sure if Sarge stayed

there another two years, he'd learn he's a smart guy but I don't think -- his role in the '60 campaign was rather minor.

HACKMAN: Can you remember anything about Robert Kennedy's reaction to ~~Pierre~~ ^{Edo} Salinger's running in California? Did you discuss that with him ^{at all?}

O'DONNELL: Yeah. I think he rather liked it. I think he rather liked it. It came at a time when he wasn't with it much. I think Bobby went through a period when anything to resurrect the Kennedy "being", anything, trivial little things, he latched onto and I think when Pierre went out to run and the fact that Pierre-- he like^d Pierre very much, and if Pierre was going to win, then it would prove the Kennedy thing was still alive. He was not unhappy with it. He and I talked about it at length. I know he was very, very helpful to Pierre, very helpful.

HACKMAN: What are some of the things you're thinking of when you're saying he got involved in a lot of trivial things?

O'BONNELL: Oh, I don't know. I'm just saying like. . . .
If you really say the Manchester book, it's not a trivial thing, but the fact is it was done to perpetuate a thing. And that any lawyer would allow something to go like that, that's got to be. . . . I resisted that thing to my eyeballs. I refused to talk to Manchester because I knew just where that one was going. I didn't want to argue with them about it, but I couldn't . . .

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE II

O'DONNELL: I refused totally until Jackie finally called me. To be frank with you, I was so damn mad because I put a five year restriction on it which took it through the 1968 election. That book would have come out, if I had my druthers, this year. And he made a commitment to me which I wrote a letter to the newspaper on, too, that I didn't make any agreement with Bobby Kennedy; I made an agreement with Mr. Manchester to his teeth. I got Powers to talk to him and O'Brien, and all three of us made a verbal commitment that nothing would happen until after the election of 1968 because I knew what would happen with it. It just couldn't miss. And Jackie got that commitment out

of Manchester. I got it out of Manchester. He came in and said Jackie had talked to him, and this was the verbal commitment which, of course, he violated totally. This would never ^{have} happen if Bobby wasn't in that sort of-- it was just almost a grasping, ^{that} there's some way we could go back to where we used to be. Those are typical little things, ^{what} we're doing right today. This is to try to perpetuate what was, and the Kennedy Library and some of them that are very worthwhile things, but some of the things also weren't very worthwhile. They were kind of silly things.

HACKMAN: You were saying last time that on the Manchester thing President Johnson wanted you to get involved and deny some of the things that Manchester wrote. Can you remember what some of those were? ^{5 exactly} How that developed, because you really didn't talk specifics on that or do you remember them?

O'DONNELL: I remember them. I don't think it's got much to do with what the hell we're doing at the moment but I'll tell you anyway. The beginning as I got it, of the Manchester

story was number one to say that Johnson asked
the President to go to Texas, and that was the
main thrust of this situation. Now that just was
totally untrue. And the second one is the airplane
incident which the President tells seventy-five
thousand lies out of self-consciousness if he told
the truth, he would be in no trouble at all, but
Manchester had this thing conjured up into a thing
for example, saying that I refused to go to the
ceremony when there's a picture of me standing ^{right} there
as cold and bloody as ice. But he had all these
things in. When I first talked to Manchester I saw
very clearly where Manchester was going, this is going
to be to destroy Lyndon Johnson. I don't have any
love for Lyndon Johnson, but to try to implicate
a President of the United States, you know, ^{where} that
eventually ends up ^{as} a rather macabre sort of
thought. I said, " This just is untrue, and if you
go that route. . . ." I never spoke to Lyndon Johnson
from the day I left the White House. That's the only
fight that man and I ever had in my life. We had a

[Signature]

fight the day I left. I told ^JJim Rowe, who's his pal, I said, "I tell you if he goes that way I will make any statement that the President wants." And I think that's why Manchester took it out because Manchester found out about it but that's where he was going and it kind of pleased the Kennedys at that time they were going through that sort of "we Hate Lyndon Johnson" spring and the poor bastard was just trying to survive himself at that moment and everything he did was suspected in some way of being. . . .

HACKMAN: You said in the first interview you made a statement that Robert Kennedy was never a great Senate man. Can you recall his comments on that period when he was in the Senate what he didn't like, the Senate as an institution, there's not enough powers?

O'DONNELL: Yeah, Bobby was, and his brother was before him, was an action guy. Bobby wasn't interested in the rhetoric very much and he wasn't interested in making a speech for the speech's sake like a lot of guys are in the United States Senate. He had worked for the so-called

McCarthy Committee in '54. He had a lot of experience in the Senate and anybody that sat through the McClellan Committee and listened to Karl Mundt and Carl T. Curtis and Barry Goldwater with their nonentities going on endlessly and never getting to the point and I suppose particularly when you're an attorney when you're trying to arrive at a point and there's three guys making speeches for the T.V. cameras it gets a little frustrating. Bobby Kennedy could have been a United States Senator in 1960 like breaking sticks. All he had to do was say, "I'll take the seat." And he would have been a Senator in '60 but he didn't think that's where the action was. He didn't want to be Attorney General either but Bobby was the kind of a guy that wanted to do things and he saw the Senate as a He didn't have the patience to sit around and deliberate and sort of tell a few fibs here and there about where you're really going. He thought things were too important to do that. He and I talked when he took the Attorney General's job. He was walking around Washington for hours upon a time I was urging him to take the Senate seat in Massachusetts.

He just didn't want to be a United States Senator. His brother was aiming for the Presidency but only for a few years so in that period when he went in 1952 he was so happy to be a Senator that he couldn't see. In 1957 he decided he wanted to be President and then what you're doing in the Senate is-- and it's an open shop-- you're planning and it's sort of an exhilarating thing. Bobby sitting in the Senate in '64 with Lyndon Johnson as President until 1972 seeing eight years of ^{were} ~~resting~~ ^{was} around with these problems and I'm sure it was a very frustrating.

P And this idea of the power in the Senate, the power in the Senate with the guy seventy-five years old and this stuff about you're a Senate man and not a Senate man is just a lot of junk. I mean you're a Senate man if you hang around and do what you're told for about ten years maybe you're a Senate man until you get a committee that's worthwhile it isn't really worth much. To spend his days ^{or any} getting a committee as a freshman Senator when he's been Attorney General of the United States sitting on the National Security

Council and certainly the closest man to the President of the United States. That's pretty tough stuff. I'm amazed he had the patience to do what he did.

HACKMAN: Going back to '60, I know that Attorney General thing was on again- off again apparently. Can you remember what his worries were about becoming Attorney General or what his reluctance was?

O'DONNELL: Yeah, He didn't want to embarrass his brother, period.

HACKMAN: That's it.

O'DONNELL: Yeah. It was and is nepotism. He had not practiced that much, and I think all the concerns that were voiced about him were true. I think he'd admit they were true, and the President knew they were true, and he knew that there was going to be a political storm, and he just didn't want to embarrass his brother, but what were his alternatives? Whatever job he took, he was going to embarrass his brother or his choices were to get out of Washington or take a job in the government. No matter what job he took in the government, he was going to place the President in that kind of a position, but it killed him because

he just was so loyal to his brother he just didn't want to get him in that kind of a— really it concerned him much, much more than it did JFK

HACKMAN: You also said last time that you and Robert Kennedy had disagreements on Vietnam going back to the Administration. I don't know how much you've got for the book or that you've already done on those disagreements or how much you want to get into? Maybe you just want to pick it up in '64 and carry it on to '66 or '67?

O'DONNELL: Yeah. I think so. My disagreements on Vietnam go back to '61 and he wasn't very interested one way or another at that time. I think Bobby fell under the influence of ~~Maxwell~~ Max Taylor to be frank with you in the period of time of '61 to '63 and '64.

HACKMAN: And on the whole counter-insurgency thing.

O'DONNELL: Yeah. I think it just became sort of a— and to be frank with you as long as the price wasn't as high as

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we're paying today that sort of an exercise and
you're almost sort of playing with something. We
don't have any combat units and our casualty rate
is limited totally in the first place to all
volunteers. We don't have any draftees. So you're
almost playing with a counter-insurgency plan, and
exchange in our military strategy and I can see
where a young fellow like Bobby Kennedy 'd get rather
excited about it all. ^{it's a} new concept of ^{it} I was against
it on a total we shouldn't be there at all basis.

Now we come up to '64, he sort of got a half mental
commitment to it but not to the troop concept of
it and he wasn't involved in this stuff. I was
involved in the Tonkin Gulf thing which I agreed
with Johnson on the Tonkin Gulf if in fact ^{in I thought Johnson --} did occur
allegedly ^{what} and there was no reason at that time to
say it didn't occur and I think Senator J. William
Fulbright is probably wrong in that one. I don't
think the military tell that many lies. I ^{I never found} don't find
them that big liars. I think they take you down a lot
of garden paths sometime but they don't come out and

outrightly lie to the President of the United States
maybe their information was wrong but they just
don't do that and I know Lyndon Johnson in good
faith accepted it because I was in on the meetings
at the time and that's rather a cheap sort of reaction
to go in and bomb someone's— that's a nice clean
surgical typical American military sort of a reaction
to something like that. Then you come up to '65 and
when we get now involved militarily and I think Bobby
was kind of half committed in his own mind to the
fact that we had been in it and spent some treasure
there and the "Domino" theory might be true or it
might not be true and I think between '65 and '66 he
was in his own mind vacillating and he and I used
to. . . . I had come under the influence to be frank
with you, number one, Walter Lippman and of Mike
Mansfield, very early so I'd been very clear in my
views and Bobby was not quite ready to be clear and
Bobby doesn't like to argue about things that he
hasn't really made up his mind. I don't think it
was really until 1966 that he began to see that the

thing was just absolutely futile and he's too honest to have pulled off of it and just said it's wrong because he had an involvement. Most politicians just say, "The hell with it. I'm saying I don't even know what ever occurred, ^{when} and I was Attorney General and I don't have anything to do with that stuff." Bobby was too honest to do anything like that so he was always in that ambivalent position where he'd like to say-- and what he ultimately did say was "I was wrong too, but I'm prepared to change my mind." which was an honest approach to it. But we used to battle it back and forth, and when we finally reached some agreement on the military aspect we used to fight anyway about everything, the military aspects of it then refused to argue about the political implications of it here in the United States of America which he wouldn't accept my theories until, really, I don't think until the New Hampshire primary, just how deep this thing had gotten into the American craw.

HACKMAN: Why do you think you were unable to convince him of

that? What was it that he really couldn't see?

O'Donnell: Well, I think if you look at the polls, I'm a politician
now the polls were not properly analyzed by anybody
and I think it's pretty easy to say it's just the
young people that are complaining about it. It's
just like being for Medical Care for the Aged what
everybody forgot was every old man had a son and
a daughter too and every kid that's in Vietnam and
the college kids that are complaining, they also got
a mother and father and they got a grandmother and
a grandfather generally speaking so it just confine
itself to the group that was involved, it confines
itself to the whole gamut of American society.
That's what politics is about. We sold Medical
Care for the Aged by finally persuading people that
look it you're going to have to pay for your mother
and your father and you might as well do it this
way. We sold the young people. We didn't sell the
elderly because the elderly people say, "Somebody's
going to take care of me". They don't worry about
anything. This is what I couldn't get across to him

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Teddy was very influential—you know that Massachusetts is a "hawk" state. That just isn't true. They had been once, but there's not many hawks around when you've got nuclear weapons running around and the Missile Crisis kind of scared people into what we're really talking about. I think that we at last had grown up as a country to realize that the Russians are not all stupid. After they shot that rocket into space, these pictures of them hanging around with those long coats on are really not quite what we're talking about anymore. Just politically they couldn't seem to—I don't know why they didn't get that. Teddy Kennedy took a poll within a month before that. One of his friends up in Lowell, Massachusetts said to me, "They're seventy percent hawks." Well, you know the question was "Do we get out of Vietnam?" Nobody was for getting out of Vietnam. The question is "Do you like Vietnam," "Do you like war?" That was the question and the answer to that is "No." And the second question is "How do you get out," "Does anyone want to withdraw unilaterally?" The answer to that,

"Do you want to run and cut fish ~~you~~ you know, that's Lyndon Johnson's "You Nervous Nellies, you want to run." "I don't want to be Nervous Nelly". I say "No, I don't want to be Nervous Nelly". I might go home and say, "I wish to hell I was a Nervous Nelly" but I don't want to say it in front of nineteen or twenty people and that's what's wrong with the poll. The poll went to a guy and said, "Are you a coward?" and the guy said, "Me, Oh, no." ^{because} But when he left there he was a coward. He probably had a kid twenty years old there and you can't convince him what the hell's going on in Vietnam. Bobby became convinced that it was right ^{really} but he never became convinced that the people understood it as totally as they did until New Hampshire. Which I think is not true of Bobby Kennedy, it's true of ⁹⁹ ~~ninety-nine~~ percent of the. . . . I was there before because I felt it emotionally. I could have been wrong as rain and if I had an argument with him I couldn't prove my own argument and I wasn't sure of it either. I wasn't sure of it. I just felt it but there's no way I could prove it. I never took a poll

which
that showed that they wanted to get out of Vietnam.

I think if you take a poll now and say, "Do you want you withdraw unilaterally from Vietnam"? I think the answer would be "No". I do but the answer would be "No".

HACKMAN: Before he came around to your viewpoint then in '68 I guess would he say who was making the argument on the other side that was particularly influential with him. Was McManara or anyone else?

O'DONNELL: No. I think it was unspoken between. . . . We never got that deep into it to be frank with you. There'd be peripheral discussions. He already knew how I felt. It wasn't like having an argument anymore. But I don't think there's any question that Max-- Bobby named a kid after Maxwell Taylor they all had a commitment to a thing. Bob McManara, now with that in mind, he couldn't believe it was right, couldn't but he didn't dare believe it was wrong. I'll tell you my whole judgment of the whole group. There's only one man I have total, absolute, one hundred

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percent respect for is Dean Rusk who took a position supported it, defended it, and believed it to this very second. He could be right. He could be right. He's a honorable man. He took a position and he never backed off. He didn't whisper to any reporters and say, "I really didn't mean it. It was all Lyndon". You know most of those guys now that they're out of government are saying today I mean Sotty Reston wrote a piece on it, that they really didn't believe it. Well, they should have quite I think that's one of the most dishonorable things in our society. If you don't believe what you're talking about you ought to get out. That's the name of the game. ~~Matthew B.~~ James M. Rodgway quit, Jim Gavin quit, there's a host of them that didn't agree with Dwight D. Eisenhower's budgetary decision and they resigned and got somebody in there that does. That's the height of courage. I just don't believe these guys--- I think they got wedded to their program. How could a Bob McNamara go out and make a speech on the AEM and say that it's against the Chinese. I mean you got to be about

a two year old kid to fall for that. I don't know how they do these things. And he's a nice guy. Rusk, he believes this with a passion, that if Vietnam falls that all of Asia's going to go under and they'll be a ^{try to} in Waikiki Beach in the morning and he believes it and he's never said he didn't believe. That you take your hat off to. Who the hell says whose right? Maybe he's right.

HACKMAN: Did Robert Kennedy ever make any comments that you can recall about ^{how} people can do this, give this kind of speech, the McNamaraa thing or Maxwell Taylor, the whole political courage thing or political honesty?

O'DONNELL: Bobby was a very complex guy. When you get all through with this and you read all of the fellows talking about Bobby, you're going to find he's a very complex fellow. He had extreme loyalties also he never would talk about people. He resented it amongst others. He comes out as the cold, ruthless Bobby Kennedy he was the least petty fellow about other people and the most forgiving of any human being that I've seen in my life. That used to be a bone of contention between he and I

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I'm pretty hard on a guy. When I thought a guy made a mistake, I was pretty tough about it. I really didn't want to give him a second chance. Bobby'd give you a second chance every time. He could think of more reasons why [Robert] Bob McNamara did something or [McGeorge] Mac Bundy or [Maxwell] Max Taylor, or anybody that was his friend than you could ever shake a stick at, and he would get very angry and you lost all ability to discuss with him, particularly if it was a petty situation. But it was very difficult to... It was of no interest to me, so I didn't get into it. But if I said Bob McNamara, which I used to say, Bob McNamara was a great robot for JFK and he was a menace to Lyndon Johnson because Johnson didn't know what the hell he was talking about most of the time. Bobby didn't like someone like Rusk--well, he didn't understand someone like Rusk. Rusk was quiet all the time. Once he decided he liked somebody, if it was me, I don't think anybody could say a word about me if I did the worst possible things in the world. Pierre Salinger took Bobby Kennedy down the garden

path in the worst thing I've ever seen in my — as
a kid, this is 1957. This is Bobby Kennedy. We had
an investigation now the Committee is all over the
bill is written and the belting that every committee
of the Congress of the United States ever took since
Joe McCarthy's time is "You're just trying to get
headlines." And we very capably I think persuaded
the people, "we're trying to get legislation passed."
that's the only reason the committee exists and out
of the McClellan Committee hearings they passed the
Labor-Management Act of 1957. You've now accomplished
your purpose. Bobby Kennedy had made himself a national
hero, John McClellan is known as Mister Clean through-
out the world and you've got a bill on the books
which really probably saved the Labor movement from
destruction. Now you get all done and I'm anxious
to get in the campaign which may have prejudiced me
but I said, "Let's wrap it up. You're ahead now get
out." Pierre came in. Pierre had a case down in
Houston, Texas or someplace about a guy who tried
to kill a guy in the Boilermakers union. I said,

^{give it to} forget it
 "Look, get rid of the cops. The bill's already ~~that's~~
 that's illegal when you try to kill someone whether
 you're not in a union or anyplace else. That is
 illegal." By God Pierre told him. It had a lot of
 sex appeal to it and there'd be another hearing.
 It'd be on television and I couldn't talk him out
 of it no matter what I did. In fact frankly I was
 talking politics. The labor unions going to say,
 "You guys, you just were in there for headlines
 after it's all said and done." So we have the hearing.
 The guy gets up and testifies how the guy took the
 gun out and tried to kill him and goes every T.V.
 camera in the country is on it. McClellan loves
 that stuff. He's the greatest showman of all time.
 Barry Goldwater ^{is} asking how he held the gun and Karl
 Mundt is saying you know, did he do this? It was
 a ridiculous thing. Well, the guy gets up who'd
 President of the union and McClellan gets up and
 stands up with a pointer in his hand and the guy
 denies it and said, "Did you do it?" "No." "You're
 under oath now" he goes through that melodramatic

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baloney, and McClellan pointed his finger at him
and said, "If you didn't do it, will you take a lie
detector test." And the guy said, "I'd love to."
and the other guy
He said, "Good". They take him over to the Navy
laboratory and, naturally, our witness flunks. He's a
liar. The whole thing blows up. This is the first
black eye they've ever had. SO we went out that night
and I said, "Bobby, Pierre belongs in show business.
He's in the wrong racket." You know, so he goes all
through it. Pierre's his best friend. "Poor Pierre;
poor Pierre, we all make mistakes. You're not perfect
either you know. You've made a few mistakes." And from
then on Pierre couldn't do anything wrong. He always
felt sorry for him, "Poor Pierre, remember the time
he you got screwed up on that thing." But that was
Bobby. And he'd say the same thing today if you said
today; Max Taylor gave you some bum advice". "Oh, we
all make mistakes." Once he got to like somebody, forget
it. If you got a weakness, that's his weakness, but that's
a pretty nice weakness to have if you've got to have one.
B^ut he had this outrageous loyalty. *2-10* You go in and

have a fight with the President of the United States over Paul Corbin. That's got to be outrageous. From your own viewpoint, you mustn't do things like that but he'd do that.

HACKMAN: The whole Corbin thing is very strange and a number of people have talked about. How do you account for his attraction for Corbin and his working relationship over time?

O'DONNELL: I think it's one of the only mysteries that anybody knows really totally about Bobby Kennedy. Bobby Kennedy's relationship with Lyndon Johnson ended up being totally beclouded by that argument, and I must say Lyndon Johnson was absolutely right, absolutely right. All he said was, "If he such a good fellow, you pay him. I don't want to pay him. He's around town knocking my head off from one end of Washington to another and has been for three years and I never met the bum in my life, and why should I have him on my payroll? That's all I'm asking is get him off my payroll. I don't want to have to with my money have the guy out knocking my brains out."

"Jesus, Bobby wasn't going to be disloyal to Corbin.

HACKMAN: DO you remember this as far back as Wisconsin in '60 when Corbin first comes on how the relationship comes about?

O'DONNELL: He came on with me. He came on with me. I went out and lived in Wisconsin. Bob never met Corbin in his life. I don't know where Corbin came from. The first time I met Paul Corbin in my life was they were having a meeting as to who would be the ^{Kennedy} delegates to the filed on the slate and our headquarters in Wisconsin. Ivan Nestingen, Jerry Bruno and I were there and they had a vote on Corbin and I think the vote was fifty-nine to one against them. Everybody else is getting forty-twenty and he's fifty-nine to one. That's a pretty unanimous decision right then and there so I said, "I don't know who he is but whoever he is I don't want to ever see him again." And I don't know what happened. I was out traveling with the President and I never saw Paul Corbin again and then we arrived in West Virginia and all of a sudden Paul Corbin arrived

in West Virginia. He was a friend of Patrick J.
Pat Lucey. Bobby liked Pat Lucey. ^{But} I don't
know where he ever came from. We never saw him
again. The President couldn't stand him, but we
never saw the guy again along as we lived. He used
to knock the President's brains out. He used to tell
the press Bobby was really President, and The President
was just sort of hangin' around the White House,
driving around in big cars, and Bobby made all the
decisions, publicly-- U.S. News and World Report
ran an article on it. I fired him three times myself
at the request of the President. Bobby ended up
paying him. But I don't know ^{that} but that's part of this
blind loyalty this guy had, once he decided you were
his friend that's it. ^{His} forgiveness, he'd forgive
a guy just like that. Which is why I think he had
such a loyal staff around him. Bobby was tough as
a son of a gun on them, but they all knew that he'd
stand by them if they got in trouble, and they all
knew that if they made a mistake, he'd blast their
theads off but ^{that he never} I don't think he ever fired anybody

in his whole life, you know. You can go back and
 look at Bobby in 1957 ^{from} on, I don't know anybody that
 Bobby Kennedy ever fired or deprived of a mouthful
 of food in his life. ^P Now his brother wasn't like
 that at all. If you couldn't do the job, ^{he'd just say} "See you
 later, fellows. I got problems." Bobby, very
 compassionate. We used to con him. If you wanted
 to get a guy a job, I think I told you last time
 about it. I sent him over a fellow from the Justice
 Department. We wouldn't hire anybody ^{from} in the Justice
 Department at the White House because they were all
 apolitical. Bobby had more apolitical people in the
 world, and we couldn't live with them. One day a
 fellow wants a job on one of the Commissions, ^{and}
 Bobby, I know, ^{because} doesn't care much for him. He thinks he's
 lazy, actually, he isn't lazy, he's a politician. I said,
 "You just go over and tell Bobby you got five kids
 and you need the money, and give him a little sob
 story." Fifteen minutes later the phone rang, "We
 got to take care of this guy. ^{I will} Would you talk to the
 President and see if you can't, put on this Commission."

I understand there's an opening. He's got five kids and ^Sgees ^Shis wife's sick." You never heard such claptrap in your life. That was Bobby.

HACKMAN: Did you frequently ask him to take people like this?

O'DONNELL: No. The Justice Department was a kingdom of its own. ^{Lange}
They ran their own department. It's the only department in the government that we had no influence in. The only dealings I ever had with the Department of Justice in my life would be judges, United States Attorneys. They really never realized that they had to be confirmed ^o that never entered their mind at all. They just thought you go out and pick the smartest, handsomest ^{best lawyer} lawyer and you don't care whether he's a Democrat or Republican or a Chinaman or whatever he is, and you send him up to the Senate and the Senators just say, "Thanks a million for this bright, smart, charming fellow." And we spent about ⁹⁹ ninety-nine percent of ^R out time trying to bail them out of something they dug themselves into. Bobby understood it, ^{once} but when you got below him, it just became. . . . which is why they never got in trouble to one great degree. They

were all honest, decent guys, but I mean we've got
to live in the world we live in whether we like
it or not, and the President of the United States
doesn't just have ^{the} A Justice Department. He's got
about ten departments and he's got a waff with
the Soviet Union, and he's got an AID program, and
he's got. . . . They thought they were all by themselves
that there was one government over there, and then the
rest of us were all sort of hanging around on the
edges somewhere. They caused us great concern. If
you got him, which is why Bobby and I-- I could call
Bobby, and Bobby'd see it in two seconds flat what the
problem was and it would be all over, but you used
to hate to be calling the Attorney General every
fifty minutes, which I used to say to him, "Do I have
to call you? Won't these fellows check it before they
do it? You know, there's one thing you're coming in the
last of the ninth every time with the bases loaded. I'd
like to get in some day when the first batters up."
You start with a [Byron R.] Whizzer White and you got
a...

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HACKMAN: Yeah. This is the whole thing of appointing Republicans and all this in the early days. Right?

O'DONNELL: Yeah. They just had nothing to do with politics, and in the first place, you'd end up appointing guys that didn't know what they were talking about. [Byron] Whizzer White, Whizzer didn't know what you were talking about. I've got to live with [Robert S.] Bob Kerr, whether you like it or not and whether you like Bob Kerr or not, he happens to be Chairman of the Finance Committee. We're in a depression, we're trying to get out, we've got to get certain bills, you know—we've got to live with him. I spent half my time—the President used to fly down to Oklahoma and sit like a damn fool at his ranch. We all make fools of ourselves. That's the name of the game whether we like it or not. That's the way we've got to play it. But they don't want to play that way. In a sense they're saying, "Well, we got the President's brother." If Bobby Kennedy wasn't Attorney General, the White House would have run the Justice Department. It's the one department of the government that you didn't have... They'd always

say, "Well, we'll go talk to Bobby." AND Bobby would
call the President and what are you going to do.