

John F. English Oral History Interview – RFK#3, 12/19/1969
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John F. English – RFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

JOHN F. ENGLISH

December 19, 1969
Mineola, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: Why don't you recall for us the occasions, conversations, in '65, mainly '66, '67 and early '68, that you discussed with him [Robert F. Kennedy] the possibility of running for the Presidency and anything else that he had in mind for his future?

ENGLISH: Well, in '65 I do not recall any discussions. If there were any, they were remote, and I don't think that he really seriously considered that in '65 or '66. I suppose from time to time there may have been some general discussion about it, you know, just to the extent that it could never be done. But that's my total recollection of it. To me it was not something that he was seriously considering at that time, in '65 anyway, or that anybody else was.

GREENE: If not in terms of '68, did you usually regard him as a potential presidential candidate throughout this period?

ENGLISH: Oh, yes, definitely. I think we were thinking about '72 at all times. I did, and I assume that he did.

GREENE: Well, when can you remember your first serious discussions about this matter?

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ENGLISH: Well, in '67, of course, then that discussion did come up regularly. And I can't remember, but it was late in '67. I don't exactly remember when. We had a lot of discussions about that. And he was parting more and more with the President [Lyndon B. Johnson], particularly on the war, and there was a very great uneasiness with all the Johnson people, both in the administration and the political leaders, about it. They were very wary of Kennedy. I think the Johnson people were more worried that Kennedy was going to run, put a lot more stock in it than Kennedy ever did that he would. They did all sorts of silly things. The thing that turned that sort of around, when things were really at their peak of hostility and untrustworthiness and suspicion, he came back from – I don't know where he was – England or something, and Johnson was at a dinner in New York, and Kennedy said nice things about him. Is that date June of '67?

GREENE: That sounds right.

ENGLISH: Everybody was sort of startled by that. And from there down....Then it turned the other way again.

GREENE: Did he have any objections to you or other people that he was politically close to raising the subject of the Presidency? Was that something he was willing to discuss if you wanted to? I know with his staff members he tried to avoid the subject to some extent.

ENGLISH: He tried to avoid the subject. It never came up in terms of the Presidency. It came up in terms of Johnson, and the attitude of the Administration toward the war, and the attitude of Johnson toward him, and his attitude toward Johnson; and the word presidency was never mentioned, but it has to be beyond there. Certainly Johnson, their people were very....They always thought that Kennedy was going to run, which the Kennedy people – I'm sure the Senator himself never really thought it was a very practical thing. I'm talking before '67. Before the Tet offensive, anyway, it was not very much of a possibility.

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GREENE: You had mentioned previously that in the early days after the President's [John F. Kennedy] assassination that the Johnson people tried to keep in fairly close touch with you and they were interested in winning your favor. What happened to that? Did they continue to woo you?

ENGLISH: No, that deteriorated.

GREENE: Because of your closeness to the Senator?

ENGLISH: I don't know why. It was really kind of silly anyway, and I suppose that it was some sort of a charade. And not only that, they made changes. No, I would put that into the – probably when Marvin Watson [William Marvin Watson] got down into the White House and started running things. He was, you know, very hostile and very conservative, and my contacts with Watson were poor. Before that he had people like – Cliff Carter [Clifton C. Carter] was over at the National Committee [Democratic National Committee]. Carter used to do a lot of that, but he got out of there. It was changes in personnel. Obviously it became....Not only was the President's attitude toward the war changing, but the installation of Watson as a political adviser was a disaster to any liberal. I mean we had no use for him; he had no use for us.

GREENE: Did you do any surveys in this period, informal, or polls more formally, of Robert Kennedy's political strength in the state?

ENGLISH: There were polls done. They weren't done by – you know, every time somebody would run for something you always put that in, so you'd see polls from time to time about the Kennedy strength, but they were never taken by him. They were taken by someone who wanted to run for governor or someone who had some other aspiration. And whenever Quayle [Oliver Quayle] or Harris [Louis Harris] or somebody would test, they'd test the President and Kennedy and whoever else they were testing.

GREENE: Was he interested in the results of these things? Was it something that he followed pretty closely?

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ENGLISH: Oh, he was very interested. He followed them very closely, and he was always very interested. He was constantly....Now, during that period of time and before, he was constantly saying, "Well, how am I doing? What do they think about this? What's your impression of what I've done about that?" He did that with everyone. I mean if he were going to be in a trip, say, around the state and visit four or five areas and, you know, drive in the car from one stop to another with different people, he would ask every person a different question, but all basically about his performance.

GREENE: Do you think this was at least partly a means of escaping conversation, asking questions almost defensively to avoid having to reveal too much of himself?

ENGLISH: Well, it would depend on who he was with. I think that's more so when he was with a stranger or someone he didn't know that well. But, no, I think a lot of it was that he was aware that people in high office get insulated and that the staff is telling them one thing and the people are thinking

another thing, and the only way to do that is to try to get the opinions of as broad a spectrum of people as you can. I felt sure that he believed that that was true.

GREENE: Did you ever discuss with him, or with other people who were advising him, the vice presidency in '68? Was there anyone who seriously thought that was worth pursuing?

ENGLISH: I don't really think so. No, I can't remember a serious discussion about that. There was an impediment to that, anyway. Kennedy liked Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], always liked Humphrey, always said nice things about him.

GREENE: You never got the impression that Humphrey was concerned about Kennedy in this respect? I had heard that he was.

ENGLISH: I suppose he probably was because, again, Humphrey was living with the Johnson people, and they were very suspicious.

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GREENE: Do you remember any occasions when he would discuss either a speech or a trip or any of his other activities that he was planning with you either in advance or in follow-through in terms of their political impact and how they ought to be handled from a political standpoint?

ENGLISH: In New York State do you mean?

GREENE: Well, even nationally. For instance, his speech on Vietnam where he broke outwardly with the President, were you consulted on that?

ENGLISH: No, I was not consulted.

GREENE: Was there anything else like that where he wanted to know what the political repercussions were?

ENGLISH: Well, oh, after the fact he would ask about it, yes. But he'd never ask me before. Well, you know, "Should I do it?" and "What kind of results develop?"

GREENE: Can you think of some that he was concerned with afterwards?

ENGLISH: Well, he was certainly concerned with that speech. I suppose I was concerned, too, on his comments on the Kerner Commission [Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders] reports – the two major things that I can think of.

GREENE: Well, before we go on with the presidential thing, let's talk about the Senate race. What do you remember about the development of his feelings on a candidate for the Senate in '68, who he favored, and who he had initially tried to get, and the reasons that this might not have come off the way he wanted it?

ENGLISH: Well, he was a little bit removed from that whole situation, and as he got further and further involved nationally politically, he was more inclined to extract himself from that but realize that it was an important thing for his own candidacy. And therefore he was in it and out of it, not really spending all of his time about it, and was

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much more inclined to take the advice of other people. There was no candidate....To begin with, I think that the people up here, including himself, thought that Javits [Jacob K. Javits] could not be beaten, which was a major problem: to get a candidate who would run in that circumstance, because everybody sort of agreed to that.

We talked about Sutton [Percy E. Sutton], and he was interested in that. Of course, it got a very bad reaction from upstate from some of the more conservative leaders, but he had talked and Steve [Stephen E. Smith] had talked and I had talked to Sutton about it and Badillo [Herman Badillo], who sort of was acting for Sutton. He asked me about Lowenstein [Allard K. Lowenstein], whether it would be a possibility of ever getting that through the state committee.

GREENE: What was your reaction to that?

ENGLISH: I told him it couldn't be done through the state committee. It could go into a primary, but....And one of the things was that he thought that he could get O'Dwyer [Peter Paul O'Dwyer] out, which was probably a mistaken judgment. I think O'Dwyer said that. You know, the impression was maybe he would if Kennedy asked him to, you know, for someone else. But I doubt it because within the Coalition [for a Democratic Alternative] there was a fight going on for control of that, and it was Lowenstein people against O'Dwyer people.

GREENE: What did he think of Lowenstein in general? Do you know how seriously he took him?

ENGLISH: He thought highly of him. He thought highly of his advice, particularly on the national level, you know, with the students. He thought Lowenstein had a constituency which may have been as broad as Kennedy's constituency in the limited area.

GREENE: What about Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson]? Was he interested in trying to get Nickerson to run?

ENGLISH: Yeah, but that was sort of futile because Nickerson wasn't going to run. You know, I, in particular, was against Nickerson running, so he never really pursued that because he didn't think it was very realistic.

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GREENE: There were a couple other people I'd heard mentioned: Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and Ted Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel].

ENGLISH: I don't think....I cannot remember Ted Kheel for Senator.

GREENE: Well, he apparently came up frequently for different things.

ENGLISH: Yeah, we were always talk....Kheel was mentioned many, many times for governor, actually; and therefore, it may be that he was mentioned for Senator. It doesn't have a real....I constantly associate that with governor.

GREENE: Yes, governor. What about Bronston [Jack E. Bronston]?

ENGLISH: For United States Senate? I don't really think that was seriously considered.

GREENE: These are names that I've seen, you know, in the press, mentioned as being interested in the job.

ENGLISH: No, I remember having no discussion about Bronston.

GREENE: And Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.]? Was there any conversation with him?

ENGLISH: There was because this kept popping up, but Wagner, we knew, didn't want to run against Javits.

GREENE: What about Sorensen? I understand there was a meeting with Sorensen and you and Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno] and Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan] and Burns [John J. Burns], vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel]. I'm not sure of the date of it. It was in New York.

ENGLISH: For the Senate? I have no recollection.

GREENE: No.

ENGLISH: That was about the Senate?

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GREENE: Yes. This is in Sorensen's own book, I believe. Yes, I think it's in his book. It might have been in an interview.

ENGLISH: Well, my recollection now – I'm not very good – is that Sorensen didn't want to run against Javits either. I may be wrong about that. I don't remember that meeting.

GREENE: Okay. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe what he was really saying was that it was at a meeting on something else where this came up. That might have been it.

ENGLISH: Well, I'm sure that that...Of course, we would have, constantly, meetings between those particular people, and it may have come up. It made no great impression upon me, that's all.

GREENE: Okay, then what about Robert Kennedy's role in finally getting Sutton to run and then Sutton dropping out?

ENGLISH: No, I discussed this with Sorensen – and people who were mentioning Sorensen, as a matter of fact. But Sorensen didn't want to run. There were meetings, and that may have been the meeting where he was specifically asked to run, and he indicated he had the matrimonial going on at the time and said he couldn't do that. You know, that was silly to discuss that. That was his attitude.

GREENE: Okay, then what about Sutton and how you finally convinced him to run, or he decided on his own and then dropped out?

ENGLISH: Sutton decided that he would run, and I think that it became evident that a lot of his friends who had promised a lot of money if he ran for this and that – they wanted to have a first black fellow. That money was going basically from a lot of people who would not give the money in opposition to Javits. I think he was disappointed and so he cooled in reaction to the reaction to his candidacy.

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GREENE: Do you think it was largely the money, or also I understand he said that he couldn't get the Liberal Party nomination, and that was a big blow.

ENGLISH: That was a big blow. That was a big part of it. And also the reaction within the party upstate, which I'm sure he was aware of, was negative. I mean there weren't too many people who thought it was a good idea. I

happened to be one of those who thought it was a good idea, but he didn't just want to go out when he found out he couldn't get the Liberal Party endorsement, he couldn't raise the money, and there was some reservation about him upstate, I mean, that he was going to be a black fall guy.

GREENE: Was the objection largely to his being black?

ENGLISH: Oh, yes. Some people were quite frank about it. But you know, they said, "You fellows don't know what you're doing. You don't know what this will do to us upstate." It was a lot of baloney because we had run Ed Dudley [Edward R. Dudley], who was black, for attorney general in '62, and he ran the same as the rest of the ticket. He didn't run any better; he didn't run any worse.

GREENE: Did you do anything to try to get the Liberal endorsement, or was that already out of reach?

ENGLISH: I think it was already out of reach – no matter who the Democratic candidate. It had nothing to do with Sutton.

GREENE: They had just made up their minds...

ENGLISH: They had made up their mind that Javits was going to win, and what was the sense of getting into that?

GREENE: Okay, then how did you finally go about putting it together in about twenty-four hours or less for Nickerson?

ENGLISH: Well, it was kind of...Nickerson was on his way

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for a vacation somewhere in the Virgin Islands, as I remember it. And there was no candidate. And the candidates would have been Resnick [Joseph Yale Resnick], who was knocking the hell out of Kennedy, whose aim really was to kill Kennedy rather than get elected, and Pike [Otis G. Pike]; and, of course, O'Dwyer was going to be a candidate, although he didn't go into the state committee, chose not to.

I remember being in the Hilton, I guess we were, and talking – Nickerson called on the phone and asked me who the candidate was going to be. I said we didn't have one, that Sutton had pulled out and so forth. And he said, "Well, you know, it'll just be a disaster. Should I run?" I said, "Well, Kennedy would be very happy if you would do that, but as far as you yourself go it's just going to destroy – you're going to lose to Javits by a million votes." It's my opinion he would have. "But, you know, as far as supporting Kennedy and the rest of the ticket in the state, it would be helpful to have somebody rather than to have Joe Resnick. We would just be destroyed by having...Kennedy would constantly be on the defensive." So he decided to do it.

Then we just ran around lining up the votes, which wasn't hard because there was no candidate.

GREENE: Had there been any effort to get O'Dwyer to run on your side and get him to go through the state committee, or was he totally disinterested in that?

ENGLISH: Oh, he didn't want to do that, and I think that the old-line leaders wouldn't have done that.

GREENE: Who worked on the telephoning with you, besides the chairmen, getting the votes together?

ENGLISH: I suppose there were a lot of people who did their thing. I don't even think there was that much on telephone. I did a lot of it personally. A lot of that happened the day of the committee meeting. I went over and saw people an hour before the meeting. I remember going over to see Baranello [Dominic J. Baranello], who was Pike's leader, and telling him that Nickerson was going to be a candidate.

The reform people in the state committee came to me; it was Jack Shea [John J. B. Shea] who came. He said, "Well, will

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Nickerson stay neutral? We'll support him if he says that he will not take a position as between McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] and Kennedy." I said, "He can't do that. He's already taken a position," which he had, that he was for Kennedy. He announced immediately that he was for Kennedy. I said, "It would be hypocritical. No one would believe him if he says he's not going to take a position." So they said, well, on that basis they would abstain, which is what they did.

Then, of course, there was the problem with the Johnson people, with the people who were supporting the administration. It was Resnick and Pike. Pike had more votes. He would have got a substantial number of votes, and he would have been the second candidate who would have been qualified by the state committee, except that the Johnson-Humphrey people passed the word that it should be Resnick because they wanted to shoot down Kennedy. You know, it was kind of a vicious thing. And Pike, of course, was very, very disappointed. He would have been a much better candidate.

As things turned out, Pike might have won that primary. You know, this is all—assuming there was an assassination. Of course, he wouldn't have put the money in that Resnick did, but he would have run moderately and wouldn't have gotten into name-calling and would have gotten a lot more of the moderates than, say, Resnick did because he lost a lot of the administration people who could see that that would hurt the bottom of the ticket. All he was doing was just – his sole motivation was to bury Kennedy.

GREENE: Did you have any direct contact with the Senator on this at that point when you were making your decision to get Nickerson in?

ENGLISH: Yes.

GREENE: His reaction was...

ENGLISH: I did it mostly with Steve, though. I don't remember now. I'm not sure that I'd say direct or not. That happened so fast I'm not too sure I ever....No, I don't think that's right.

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GREENE: Then while the Senator was campaigning, most of your contact on it was also with Smith?

ENGLISH: Yes. Except when he would call once in a while, but, no, that was mostly through Steve. No, I'm almost certain now that that...Oh, I had talked to Kennedy like the day before, you know, during the Sutton thing, a number of times. And I think he had been up here shortly before that. I think in the twenty-four hours that Nickerson got into it I don't think I ever did talk to Kennedy about that. I'm pretty sure that's true.

GREENE: In matters like this Smith was the first person after the Senator that you would see? He had the authority in New York?

ENGLISH: Oh sure. And I would rather deal with Smith anyway because he was there. You know, he has good political judgment and you know that when you come down to a tandem kind of an operation, he's the fellow you're going to have to talk to. Kennedy had nothing – at that point it was never going to have anything to do but with mechanics. So that's a matter of telling somebody what you're going to do. I mean he would never say, "Don't do that," anyway. I mean he was no longer in that business. Unless you were going to do something which was really disastrous and personally acknowledgeable, he would basically delegate that kind of thing, that you were doing the best you could.

GREENE: What about Bruno on this? Was he helpful on getting the votes?

ENGLISH: Yes. All the Kennedy people were.

GREENE: Well, what about the assembly leader contest in '68? For one thing I'm wondering how Travia's [Anthony J. Travia] – you know, how they were inspired to nominate Travia for the federal bench? Was this an effort to get him off the...

ENGLISH: Kennedy and Travia developed a relationship, and Kennedy always said that he liked Travia, and Travia now wanted to become a judge. He didn't want to

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become judge as much as Steingut [Stanley Steingut] wanted him to become a judge, but they both wanted him to become a judge. And Kennedy sort of liked, really liked Travia, developed a relationship. He constantly said that he wanted to do what he could for Travia.

Now, it lagged, and I must have talked to Kennedy fifteen or twenty times about that situation. And it used to annoy him because it constantly came up. Everytime we were in another subject, Steingut would bring up the minority leadership, and it was constantly getting into unrelated conversations like Who are going to be the delegates? Who's Brooklyn going to be for? Steingut would always come back to, you know, How was Kennedy going to handle Travia? And it really was a very difficult situation because it's a presidential nomination and Kennedy really didn't have that much to say about it.

GREENE: What effect did this type of annoying persistence have on Kennedy?

ENGLISH: He got very disturbed a couple of times. I remember being up in his apartment one day, about it. And he screwed up his face and "shh...", said a lot of unprintable things about it. You know, "Why do I always have to get back to that? Once I'd like to talk about something else. Look out at the river and talk about pollution or something."

GREENE: Did it kind of hurt his relationship with Steingut, make him want to avoid him?

ENGLISH: Well, Steingut, of course, at the same time was always talking about, "If Kennedy wants my help, he better do something about this," that kind of a thing.

GREENE: Then Weinstein [Moses M. Weinstein] and Meade Esposito got in on it, and how did you finally...I get the feeling that there was a certain amount – on the one hand, they wanted Travia to get out quickly so they could have an election and Steingut would be elected. On the other hand then they decided, it seems, to delay it so that there wouldn't be a fight in the assembly, as there had been, which could have hurt Kennedy.

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ENGLISH: Well, that constantly was the problem because Kennedy would say, "Well, has he got the votes?" And we'd say to Steingut, "Where are the votes?" And he'd say, "Well, I have the votes." "Well, where are the votes?" We'd count them up, you know. And then he'd say, "There's a Republican." "Well, what

Republican is it?” “Well, I can’t say.” And we constantly got into this business of counting, never knowing that Steingut had the votes – and Steingut never knew he had the votes either.

Even when he finally got it, he didn’t have it until we sat around the room and all the people in the room said they would give the votes; then we knew the votes were there. But during the period of time we’re talking about in ’68, he did not have the votes that we could count, which is another thing. If you’re going to create a vacancy, and then have a fight which you couldn’t resolve, and mess up the Democrats again all through ’68, this was a concern to everyone.

GREENE: And by that time the Senator was in the race himself, too.

ENGLISH: By that time the Senator was in the race himself, and he didn’t know what Johnson was going to do...

GREENE: Do you know about his...

ENGLISH: ...or what Javits was going to do. The thing is the Senate confirmation could be held up; and there were a lot of mechanical, technical things, you know: When did the vacancy occur? If the assembly was not in session, it would automatically go to Weinstein. If it was, they’d have an election, and no one really wanted an election in the middle of the session, in the middle of March. Kennedy was about to announce, and mechanically it was very difficult.

GREENE: I understand he tried, actually had meetings with Weinstein and Steingut together, to try to work it out. And Steingut was agreeable and Weinstein wasn’t.

ENGLISH: That’s true.

GREENE: Were you present at those?

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ENGLISH: Yes, I was present at some of them. And that constantly went on with all sorts of formulas and counterproposals; and Weinstein said he would be bound, and then he wouldn’t be bound. You know, we never trusted Weinstein’s word. We’d trust Steingut. If he said he would be bound, we knew he would be bound. Weinstein – we knew it because of the ’65 thing – would say he’d be bound one day and he never would. All we wanted to do was get a situation they would agree to where we could say, “All right. If the Democrats caucus and one fellow has the majority, well, you’ve got to abide by it.” Well, Weinstein wouldn’t agree to that. Steingut did.

GREENE: Well, it probably would have been favorable to Steingut, to his advantage.

ENGLISH: It would have been. It would have been. I think he would have agreed.... You know, he may have prolonged it, but the thing is I think he might have even agreed that way, too, or he wouldn't be promoting.... If that were true, I don't think he would have been pushing to get Travia out.

GREENE: Did you have any contact with the Administration later, after Kennedy got into the race, to try to hold up the approval for a while?

ENGLISH: No, I never had. My contacts with the Administration were the worst of any living human being. They were probably worse than Kennedy's. At least he was a Senator and they had to talk to him from time to time. They never had to talk to me.

GREENE: What about through...

ENGLISH: Weinstein?

GREENE: I think the chairman had some contact with Dolan, getting Dolan to use his connections in the Committee to hold it up.

ENGLISH: Oh, that went on. Yeah, that whole business went on.

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GREENE: Did you work that way, too?

ENGLISH: Well, yes, we were constantly talking to Dolan about that. He was the fellow who was the expert, because he had come out of Justice [Justice Department] too, about how that could be, how long it could be delayed down there.

GREENE: Was Steingut aware that you were holding the thing up?

ENGLISH: But we weren't giving any advice on that. That's just a matter of Dolan telling us what could or could not be done.

GREENE: Was Steingut aware that you were holding this up?

ENGLISH: I think so. Well, I can't really remember. It was very confused, and I think we changed our position about six times.

GREENE: Anyway, back to Robert Kennedy himself.

ENGLISH: See, Steingut had contacts on the Johnson side through Weisl [Edwin L. Weisl, Sr.] and through people in the White House, too. He knew what was going on.

GREENE: It would seem to me that since it was to his advantage to hurry the nomination up, that he would have felt he was being double-crossed if he knew that it was being held up, or at least encouraged to be held up, by the people who were sponsoring him.

ENGLISH: Well, I think it depends on what month that was and for what purpose. You know, the purpose was not to force something through in the last week of the session. I mean everybody was against that, and you never let one personality, for his own benefit, destroy the whole Democratic Party.

My recollection was like to the last month Kennedy's kind of people were in favor of pushing it through, providing Steingut could show he had the votes, which he never could.

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And I went through that doubletalk so many times, and it always came down when they would count up the Democratic votes, we never had them. It was always he had a Republican who was going to do it. But he couldn't tell us who it was, and he'd say it was Duryea [Perry B. Duryea], or he'd mention a Republican. I'd go out and check with the Republicans, and, of course, they were amazed.

GREENE: Well, anyway, back to Robert Kennedy. What about the October meeting in Salinger's [Pierre E.G. Salinger] suite? Were you present at that? I've never really been able to find out.

ENGLISH: I made a mistake. I said before minority leader, ended up being minority leader. We were talking about acting speaker at the time in '68. That's the problem. With a minority leader we wouldn't have had to worry about that. Anybody with plurality of the Democrats would be all right, but we needed the whole House because it was the speaker that we were talking about. And we thought we'd be right back in.... We had had the experience in '65 and we knew that the Republicans would be.... Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] did not like Steingut, and the Republicans didn't like him, including the Republican chairman here in this county, who I talked to. He said he'd never be for Steingut. We knew the Republican votes were all going to go the other way, so we had to depend on Democratic votes; and it means that you really had to get about 90 percent of them, and we didn't have them.

GREENE: They just could have joined with the Republicans the same way that they had done in '65?

ENGLISH: And that's what we felt.

GREENE: And they would have supported Weinstein?

ENGLISH: Yes. Weinstein had a romance going with the governor, which he had all along, and it was very evident to Republicans, even if an individual Republican or someone said they preferred Steingut, that the pressure would come from Rockefeller and they would collapse. We had been through that once before. Now Steingut would be willing to take

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that risk, but we couldn't do that.

GREENE: Were you present at the October meeting in Salinger's suite, the Regency, according to the books, the first official meeting where the Presidency was the purpose of discussion?

ENGLISH: No.

GREENE: What about the one in the shipping firm in December?

ENGLISH: I wasn't there. What shipping firm?

GREENE: One of vanden Heuvel's clients'. The meeting was in two parts. This is according, well, to several books. You were supposedly placed at the second one.

ENGLISH: I wasn't there. I gather those are the vanden Heuvel type of meeting I'm sure of which.....There are a lot of meetings going on. But no, I was never at any shipping firm. I know that.

GREENE: Well, there are several books that have you there. Mistaken. Okay, then in January....I don't know how much there is. Do you have anything between the end of '67 and the beginning of January, prior to that meeting of state chairmen that you went to?

ENGLISH: Well, no. At that point, you know, during that period of time, we started seriously now to discuss Kennedy running for the Presidency with Kennedy. And I discussed it with him many times during that period of time and with other people in his office, on his staff. Dolan started to look around at what would happen. So it was growing to a possibility which should be looked at, and I'm sure that's the period of time when Dolan started to check around the country.

GREENE: How did you see the reasons against Kennedy's running? What were the big things that he was concerned with?

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ENGLISH: Well, of course, I knew nothing about national politics, and I had never traveled extensively outside of the state and didn't know many politicians outside the state except people who were Kennedy people, that kind of thing. So I wouldn't know the laws of Missouri or the laws of Kansas or who you saw and how you put delegations together. My concern was in the field in which I knew something. And I was worried about New York State that, because of the nature of the machinery here, that with an incumbent President, these old-line leaders would go with the Presidency because somebody wrote in a book or their mother told them, "You know, the rule says you don't dump an incumbent President." That would run very thick through them, and there would be no way of converting many of them. And I was worried about that, about if he decided to do that that he would be stymied, hurt, and embarrassed in his own state.

GREENE: So you were fairly strong, then, in your advice against running?

ENGLISH: No, I wasn't. No. No, I never took that position. No, I was saying my concern was to tell him that I thought he had problems in his own state, if he did that, which he might not be as aware of as I was because I had talked to a lot of leaders about that and a lot of leaders had talked to me about that, you know, "What is Kennedy doing?" And a lot of people like to get him anyway, and that was one of the ways they could get it. But I just meant that we would have problems in this state which would not be common, maybe, in other states.

GREENE: Did he ever ask you outright in this early period about how you felt? If you had to give your advice, would you suggest he run or not run?

ENGLISH: I don't think they were in those terms, but it was discussed in generalities about what the – you know, you don't have discussions about, "What do you think?" if you're not thinking about it anyway, and we had a lot of discussions about, What do you think might happen?

GREENE: Who in the state was in favor, at this point, of his running?

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ENGLISH: We're talking about November and December?

GREENE: Yes, and early...

ENGLISH: Not too many people. I would say the real doves are all, and they weren't in the establishment. Now, there were plenty of people who wanted him to run badly, but they were not the people who held party or public office at that time. You know, they were the people who turned out to be the Coalition people or who were... The Coalition was already formed. But I mean there was a lot of that. There

were people, really a lot of them, not so much out to support Kennedy, but to get Johnson, and they thought he was the best vehicle.

GREENE: What about once McCarthy came out? How did that change the picture?

ENGLISH: Those people then who thought that Kennedy should run and talked to me about Kennedy running, they immediately shifted to McCarthy and got down on Kennedy.

GREENE: At that point do you think that if he'd come out he could have gotten some of them?

ENGLISH: If he would have done it earlier, he would have gotten all of them. I mean they certainly would prefer Kennedy to McCarthy because they wanted to win, and they thought that Kennedy was a stronger candidate who could run a better campaign, who was better organized, who had more money, and whose positions corresponded to theirs.

GREENE: Well, in January you went to that meeting with Chairman Burns in Washington of the state committee-men.

ENGLISH: Was that in January?

GREENE: I believe it was. I don't have the exact date, but I'm pretty sure it was...

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ENGLISH: My private calendar would show the date.

GREENE: Yes, that would be helpful.

ENGLISH: In January, did you say?

GREENE: It's very possible it's wrong.

ENGLISH: I think that's wrong.

GREENE: If it wasn't January, it must have been February, wasn't it?

ENGLISH: Well, my.... You know, he, Kennedy, at that time, was going to announce, although we still.... I talked to him at that time – I think it was a two-day thing – and I went (Burns was not with me) over to Kennedy. I was over there for three or four hours. I knew he was going to decide to run, although he was still debating it with me and with himself, you know, walking up and down the room. And we had Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] on the other phone, but there was no doubt in

my mind that he was going to run.

GREENE: Oh, well, then I have been misled on that.

ENGLISH: So, you know, that is not January.

GREENE: Okay. We should have the date. That would be helpful, if you can give it to me. You don't have to get it now.

ENGLISH: Well, let me see. [Interruption]

GREENE: Okay. So we've established that the date of the conference was March 5th and 6th.

ENGLISH: Well, what happened was before that they had this...[Interruption] Prior to that time what had happened was Johnson was tooling up and so they had this meeting of state chairmen in Washington. It was by regions, I think; I don't think it was all of them. And they asked the

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state chairmen and the executive directors of the state committees. Now, there is no executive director for New York State, none provided for in the by-laws. And so Kennedy had suggested to Burns that I go to that. So Burns called me and he said, "Going?" I said yes I'd go. So they sent my name in and Burns started getting calls from right up to Watson. They just kept calling. "What does he do, coming down here for?" and, "This is for state chairmen, executive directors." "Well, we don't have any." And they kept...They never stopped. They just had different people keep calling, and the idea was that I was unwelcome. So when we got down there, we were at the Watergate, and we were just to get a feeling of how these state chairmen feel," and we were trying to find out. Now, none of them believed that Kennedy would run. Even those who were inclined and subsequently did support him did not think there was any chance of his running. So the discussion was kind of funny because this was not something they were considering. And my recollection was there were like only two chairmen, Oregon and....

GREENE: Ohio?

ENGLISH: No, Ohio, you know, was favorable, liked Kennedy and wanted to meet him because he wanted help for Gilligan [John Joyce Gilligan], but not really on the Kennedy thing. And there was a fellow from Maryland, was not the Maryland chairman, who was over there who personally had an interest. He was a dove. I can't remember who else it was. But at any rate the National Committee people and the Johnson people double-teamed it. They came down to our suite. Bailey [John Moran Bailey] was there every night. And they'd stay until 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. When we wanted to talk to anybody, we'd have to go in the bathroom to talk to them. They were

all over the place. They had Criswell [John Criswell] and all of those people, and they just watched us. It was really kind of funny, you know; this is spies.

So anyway, when Kennedy asked me to come over and I went over to his office, I think it was the second day. Maybe it was the first day. And he started to....This is when I realized how serious he was. And we went over at very great length and detail what might happen if he decided to run. And at one point he got Kenny O'Donnell on the phone and he wanted me to talk to him. I was going over leader by leader in New York. And Kenny

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like knew Jimmy Wilmot [James Wilmot], and I talked about who we might have problems with.

I remember Kenny saying, "Well, you can never tell what the reaction of a political leader will be until you announce, because if you say, 'Should I run?' they'll all say no. But if you announce you're a candidate and then ask them, now you're in a different position because they have local constituencies, they have local elections, and they're put on a spot. Nobody wants to buy trouble. But you give them trouble by announcing, and then you don't know which way you'll go, but you're going to get a different answer and a decisive answer."

So we talked at very great length about particular personalities and who might be against Kennedy and who might be for him. And this went on for hours and he paced back and forth. There was nobody there, just Kennedy and myself. I think he left from time – yeah, he left. And I think he came back. And we talked to some other people besides Kenny. I remember the Kenny conversation when he just walked around the room. But it was obvious he had committed himself and he was in the total situation of being very thoughtful about it. You know, he could have pulled back, but I mean he was over the line at that time.

GREENE: You think O'Donnell favored his running then?

ENGLISH: Yes. He wouldn't have said what he said to me if that wasn't what it was, and it was an impressive argument because we were talking about particular people that I was wary of. He said, "Well, some of those people, you know, you've just got to put them on a spot." Some of those people that I talked about were much more friendly to Kenny than to me, some of the old-line type that he had known through the Kennedy administration who, you know, were interested in government contracts and things like that. Then Kennedy said to me, "Well, listen, Burns and Steingut, you know, have been asked to go over to see the President." And he said, "I want you to go with them." So I said to him, "Well, I can't do that." He said, "Why not?" "Well," I said, "I haven't been invited." I said, "This is different to come down here," I said, "but I can't just go into the White House." He said, "Well, I want you to do that for me." And I said, "I can't do that. There's just

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no way.” I said, “What am I going to do?” Jump over the fence?” He said, “Well, you’re very resourceful.” So I said, “Well, listen. I’m not going. I’m telling you I’m not going.” But he said, “Well, look. Listen. I want you to think about it.” So I said, “I’m telling you I am just not going to do that.” I said, “I’ll do anything, but I’m not busting into the White House.”

So anyway after I left there – Burns didn’t know where I was all this time. I go back over to the Watergate and I walk in, and Burns is at the entrance. He’s been trying to reach me all over. He’s very excited and he says to me, “I’ve got to talk to you right away.” Then he said, “Kennedy just called me and he wants you to go over to the White House with me.” And he is very uptight at this point. I said, “John, let me tell you something. Don’t worry about it. I’m not going.” He relaxed a little bit. Anyway, when they went over there nothing happened. It happened that had something to do with Podell [Bertram L. Podell] and there was sort of a state kind of a thing.

I think later the same day actually I went over there with the whole group, and they sat behind us and watched us, including Sam Houston Johnson, who gave us a hard time. Everywhere we’d go to talk to somebody, you know, they’d come in and they’d stand and listen to the conversation if you’re having drinks. And then we sat down. The President talked to us all, and he compared Kennedy to – not by name. He made a speech and compared the people who were urging de-escalation any way or a different policy in Vietnam with the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in 1939 who urged that we abandon England, you know, and withdraw everything to Canada. And he actually made that analogy. He was saying this is really what Kennedy’s position was.

GREENE: Without mentioning...

ENGLISH: Oh, he never mentions names.

GREENE: You and Burns and who else was there?

ENGLISH: Oh, at that thing? Oh, there were all these state chairmen from all over the country plus the executive directors and White House staff. I mean there were a hundred people at least. We went over by bus. There were at least a hundred people.

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GREENE: But you were convinced that early that he was definitely going to do it?

ENGLISH: I was absolutely certain that day after spending three hours with him. I mean I knew that there could be some push the other way, you know, maybe if something were done about the war or, you know, there was some movement by the administration, but he was obviously inching toward that line. That day he was over the line. We were making plans. You know, you don’t go over leader by leader if...

GREENE: Did he give you anything to do when you got back to... [Interruption].

ENGLISH: ...New York State, but in addition to that we still had the thing going back to the Watergate. He wanted a report on all these national, which we made cards out of and gave him that package on every single person that was there, what their opinion was, which were friendly, which would be committed, which one would be hostile and did that so that we could follow up on them. But to me, I mean I started to get ready for a full-scale primary back in New York.

GREENE: All right, what was involved in that? Did you do that on your own, or did you actually consult with him as far as...

ENGLISH: No, I just did it on my own, just started to talk to leaders. Now, it was funny because they still did not believe he was going to run. Some of his best friends didn't think he was going to run at that time, but I knew he was going to.

GREENE: Who else do you think knew at that point, or at least felt fairly certain?

ENGLISH: Oh, I think O'Donnell knew that he was going to. Dolan knew that he was going to. Now, he never said that. He never said it, but I mean the conversation was entirely different. You know, instead of arguing all the reasons why you shouldn't, obviously the emphasis is on all the reasons why you should.

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GREENE: Did he cite polls, the Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh] poll – I'm not sure that was in quite that early – or some of the other things up in New Hampshire or McCarthy's campaign?

ENGLISH: Yes. Oh, the Unruh poll. Oh, definitely. That was an important part of that. And you know all these legal dates were going by. The California date was coming up.

GREENE: That was March 6th, I think.

ENGLISH: So there you know that March 6th was the California date. We're talking about that time where obviously you had to get those three old ladies to file. I mean you could have let it die, but you don't go through those kinds of things. I mean you're holding your option, but in addition to that the emphasis has got to be that you're going to do it. And the whole trust of his conversation was maybe he couldn't win, but that he would have lost the faith of all sorts of people and he would be destroyed in the future himself. In addition to that, the war would go on; no one was going to make a major contest out of it. And it was necessary to speak out at that time, even if it did damage to himself and to the party at that time, or else no one would believe you.

GREENE: Did he ever discuss what his brother's advice was at that point? That was supposedly a big factor in holding him back for quite a while.

ENGLISH: We never discussed that, no, at that time, at that meeting.

GREENE: Was it discussed at other points?

ENGLISH: Well, it was then subsequent to the meeting when Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] was still against doing it.

GREENE: Was it your feeling that he was against it practically if not up to the time that he announced that he...

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ENGLISH: Well, he was still sort of against it on the day, you know, the day before he formally announced it, the day that he really announced, which was when we were up in the apartment. I think Teddy knew that he was going to do it, and at the time he was still against it.

GREENE: Well, now that I know that this meeting was somewhat later, in fact, considerably later than I thought, let's backtrack to February 15th when then Democratic state committee met and passed that resolution...

ENGLISH: Oh yes.

GREENE: ...backing Lyndon Johnson, but not mentioning the war at all. What do you remember about your conversations with him prior to that and your efforts at the state committee meeting to pass a resolution that would be as favorable to Kennedy as possible?

ENGLISH: There was a lot of preparation for that meeting and about that resolution because we knew that resolution was coming and we did not want to face that resolution head-on. In addition to Kennedy and the President, we also had just a peace and war kind of thing which was there, and we spent a long time trying to get a compromise resolution, which is what it ended up to be.

GREENE: Was he most concerned with avoiding any kind of resolution involving support of the war?

ENGLISH: Oh, yes, we were very much involved. We didn't want to get ourselves involved in passing a resolution which would indicate that you were supporting the President. I certainly didn't want to be involved in that kind of thing because the possibility at that time of Kennedy running was growing every day.

GREENE: Did you have the feeling that you were getting yourself into a bind that might later be a problem?

ENGLISH: Oh, yeah. We were very conscious of it, and we thought we had the votes to head that thing off. And I remember walking into the room and

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Sedita [Frank A. Sedita], the mayor of Buffalo, told me....Crangle [Joseph F. Crangle] – I think it was the same resolution – was for heading that off at that time, you know, not getting into....We didn't have the votes, and we didn't want to get into a confrontation position where we have to take a position for the President or against him. We didn't want it. And I remember Sedita saying to me, "We've got to go for this resolution." Because the original resolution was a war – you know, it was really all the way. It wasn't only Johnson, you know, this was a full and outright endorsement of the war.

GREENE: So you realized that you couldn't avoid at least supporting the President, so that was kind of a least offensive thing?

ENGLISH: What we were doing is watering it down so that we didn't get into the....

GREENE: What about at that point? How did you feel he stood at that point? Did you feel he was out of it when you were making the negotiations on the resolution or did you feel there was still a good chance he might run?

ENGLISH: No, I thought the chance was growing that he might run. It was just a matter of keeping the options open, if that was a possibility. In addition to that he didn't want that anyway because the McCarthy thing was going full-swing. We have all sorts of doves on the state committee, and it was a totally offensive resolution to me personally. I couldn't vote for that damn thing anyway – I didn't have a vote – but I mean it was not the kind of resolution you'd want to be associated with, even if you were for Johnson.

GREENE: Was Resnick the big sponsor of that?

ENGLISH: Yes, he was. And that's right, we had Resnick up in the room. That's right, we had Resnick and his county chairman, and I spent time up in the room with them – Burns was there for a while – to get him to tone down his resolution. That's right.

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GREENE: In this interim...

ENGLISH: And then we had to work on... We had two problems. We had the Resnick one and then we had the peace people on the other side who had a real – you know, condemning Johnson, pull out, which was the other way. And I mean it wasn't a temperate kind of resolution. We could only get maybe fifty votes for, and we didn't want that, to be beaten two hundred and fifty to fifty.

GREENE: Who was representing the dove side?

ENGLISH: Well, it would be like Sarah Kovner and Jack Shea and the people on the West Side, the West Side people. They have a caucus before every state convention.

GREENE: In this discussion with Robert Kennedy in early March, did he raise the question of McNamara's [Robert S. McNamara] resignation, and particularly the way it took place and the replacement of McNamara with Clifford [Clark M. Clifford], and the 200,000 more troops that was all under discussion in that period? Were those factors he raised?

ENGLISH: Well, I remember him saying that Johnson had now got himself into an irrevocable position, that he had hoped that he would turn back and reverse the situation. But it was evident now that he was going the other way, he was going for escalation. He was getting himself into a hopeless bind where he could never be able to negotiate, and he was just convinced of all the things that had happened since January first and were happening on a graph, you know, when that graph was up. And, you know, I mean he indicated, without saying it, that the President was – and the word is not deranged, but that the President had flipped. You know, he had just gone, and these acts were no longer rational acts. He didn't use those words. I don't know how he did it, but...

GREENE: But that was the impression?

ENGLISH: It was irretrievable.

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GREENE: Was there anyone in the White House at this period that he still had contact with, had a good relationship with?

ENGLISH: After McNamara was gone?

GREENE: Yeah.

ENGLISH: I don't really think so.

GREENE: Okay, then according to Jack Newfield – again I’m not sure that this is accurate – Ronnie Eldridge, Steve Smith and you began on March 8th, and this is the way he says it, “the difficult task of securing the [Kennedy’s] fragmented home base delegation.” Was this what you were speaking about before in terms of contacting all the leaders and...

ENGLISH: Yeah.

GREENE: ...finding out where they stood? What kind of a response did you get from that survey?

ENGLISH: Very mixed. It remained mixed for a long period of time. We made progress, but it was some people with immediately; others were immediately against us; and others wanted to be shown.

GREENE: Were there any surprises among those people? Did they come down pretty much where you expected?

ENGLISH: I would say they probably came down pretty much where we expected.

GREENE: Do you remember any discussion with Robert Kennedy at the time of the New Hampshire primary, the next day, about the results? Did you speak to him on the 12th and 13th?

ENGLISH: Oh, yeah. I did speak to him both those days.

GREENE: What do you remember?

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ENGLISH: Well, the thing is I don’t think we spoke so much because now we were so much into announcing and the strategy of announcing, we spent all our time about that, and what New Hampshire meant in respect to that, and how you could do that in a reasonable fashion and still file in California. That’s the way the discussion proceeded. He was here in Nassau County the day...

GREENE: The day before, the 14th.

ENGLISH: The 14th, which was a...

GREENE: 15th. He announced on the 16th.

ENGLISH: I thought it was Saint Patrick’s Day. He announced on Saturday. He was here on Friday.

GREENE: Right. That would be the 15th.

ENGLISH: Well, of course, it was a funny story that came out. On the day that he was here we had him at this "fall guy" luncheon.

GREENE: The Garden City Hotel?

ENGLISH: At the Garden City Hotel. And Len Hall [Leonard W. Hall] was the president of the "fall guy" luncheon. And it was a funny day anyway because he shouldn't have been doing that. That was something we had planned months ago, but he went through with the schedule and practically announced at Anita Richmond's house that he was going to do it, and of course there were now two hundred newspaper people. It was frantic. And then they had these sort of, not quite, topless girls, you know, from some show, and their breasts were all bared. He had his head down in his plate, and he wouldn't look up, and it was hysterical. And we had some funny pictures of that where he wouldn't, he just wouldn't, look up. And then it turned out he was sitting there at the table, and, of course, the microphones are turned off, but Danny Meenan [Daniel F. Meenan] from WMCA had an open microphone there and his whole conversation with Len Hall was recorded and it was, "You know, I'm going to announce, Len. Do you think I'm nuts?" And Hall says, "It depends." And the

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whole thing was all recorded.

GREENE: You were at Smith's, I just realized, the night of the March 13th. That would be the day after the primary.

ENGLISH: Yes.

GREENE: Did you already start to put things together on New York that night?

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ENGLISH: Well, that was the meeting at which, you know, Sorensen was still saying he shouldn't do it, and Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] had reservations and was saying that he should, you know, give McCarthy his chance. And he wasn't aware of the dates. Teddy was still playing it rather close to the chest. Vanden Heuvel had some ridiculous plan. I couldn't even remember what it was, but it was sort of, "He shouldn't do it now." And we were all discussing this thing for hours. The Senator was supposed to come up, and he got fogged in or something. And finally it was 6 o'clock and we turned on television. There he was saying...

GREENE: Walter Cronkite.

ENGLISH: And so our conversation was rather academic. Well, we went into the dining room. We ate. And while we're eating he came in, and they were still talking about this as if these fellows were going to make this. And he walked in and he said, "What the hell are you guys doing?" He said, "Will you all get off in a room and decide what you're going to do." So Teddy got up and he said, "I'll take bumper strips." We all marched off into different rooms. And then we started to do – like we did New York, and Kenny started working on nonprimary states, and we all started that night.

GREENE: You and Bruno and Smith took New York – and Chairman Burns – is that right?

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ENGLISH: Well, Jerry also worked outside of the state, too. He did more than just New York.

GREENE: This particular night?

ENGLISH: I think he did even more that night.

GREENE: Did you actually start calling people then to tell them that the Senator was very seriously considering, or something of that nature?

ENGLISH: We had done....No, I don't think so.

GREENE: You'd been doing that.

ENGLISH: We had been doing that before. No, I didn't make any calls from there. But that argument was the same argument being made in that room that had been made months before. You know, people were still saying that he shouldn't run, and others were, "Wait a couple months." And some of them were saying, "Well, let McCarthy go into all the primary states and you wait and you pick up the pieces."

GREENE: Who, besides the people you've mentioned, were still of that feeling? Particularly I'm thinking of who was favoring supporting McCarthy and then trying to take it from him at the Convention. Remember?

ENGLISH: Oh, I think that was vanden Heuvel. Schlesinger, I don't think that was exactly his thing, but you know, that he should lay back, I'm pretty sure, was his idea. Sorensen was really to hold back completely still at that time. Teddy was....Well, no one would have done it the way it happened. No one. You know, my position was that you have to get your committees going in those states, in those primary states. But even if a week goes by, you know, you file your committees and you just let a week go by in which you say nice things about McCarthy.

GREENE: Nebraska was the one that was most pressing at that point, wasn't it?

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ENGLISH: It was, and I remember Sorensen made points about Nebraska, too.

GREENE: He wanted him to go in?

ENGLISH: Yeah. Well, he didn't want him to run at that time, not that night.

GREENE: But if he did, he wanted...

ENGLISH: Yeah.

GREENE: Was it your feeling that with this Cronkite – and there was a previous interview the same day of the same caliber – that he actually just blew it, impulsively said more than he intended to, or did he deliberately want to undercut the publicity for McCarthy?

ENGLISH: I think he just made a mistake. I think he and Cronkite were....That's a guess. I don't know. I suppose somebody could establish that with certainty. My impression was just that he had a great relationship with Cronkite. Cronkite was a total dove and, you know, wanted to press Kennedy into it and, you know, was constantly trying to get him to do that kind of thing. And he just, you know overstepped himself, timewise.

GREENE: Well, do you want to continue a little bit now or do you want to stop?

ENGLISH: I really can't. I'm sorry.

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