

John J. Burns, Oral History Interview – RFK#2, 12/18/1969
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Biographical Note

Burns was Mayor of Binghamton, NY (1958-1966); chairman of the New York State Democratic Party (1965-1973); delegate to the Democratic National Convention (1968); and a Robert Kennedy campaign worker (1968). In this interview, he discusses his own candidacy for Lieutenant Governor of New York in 1962, the 1964 New York State Democratic Party convention where Robert F. Kennedy was nominated for Senator, and Kennedy's 1964 Senate campaign, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

John J. Burns

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John J. Burns—RFK#2

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Second of Three Oral History Interviews

with

John J. Burns

December 18, 1969
New York City, New York

By Roberta Greene

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

GREENE: Why don't you begin by recalling your first meeting with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] in the '60 campaign?

BURNS: Oh yes, the first time I met him was in '60. He came into Binghamton where I was then the mayor. We were early announced supporters of John F. Kennedy for the nomination, but we didn't actually meet with Robert Kennedy until the campaign was on in the fall of '60. He came through on a tour of the southern tier of New York State; flew up from Philadelphia in a private plane that somebody provided for him and came into Binghamton and spoke there at a breakfast in the Sheraton Inn in Binghamton on a Sunday morning. We had a very good turnout and made a very good impression. Then he went on to Elmira and some other cities of the southern tier of New York State. That was the first time I had ever actually met him.

Then I didn't see much of him after the election. He was busy being Attorney General, and he wasn't really involved in that level of politics that I was in at the time. He did business politically with the National Committee [Democratic National Committee]. The next connection I really had with him was kind of a—I don't know how to describe it. It was sort of remote, I guess you might say. When Bob Morgenthau [Robert M. Morgenthau] was nominated for Governor of the state he asked me to run as his running mate for Lieutenant Governor, which I ultimately did. Although I never talked to the then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy about it, there was always the feeling there that he was behind this thing, that he was for Morgenthau for Governor and that they had talked about the possibility of my

being the Lieutenant Governor candidate; that he was for that. So, when I was nominated we campaigned a lot together—Morgenthau and I did. Robert Kennedy never campaigned but John F. Kennedy, then President, came in and we appeared with him on two or three occasions. Robert was sort of a man-behind-the-scenes in that situation. We were defeated, and Morgenthau went back to his job as U.S. Attorney and I continued on as Mayor of Binghamton.

It was only a year later that President Kennedy was assassinated in Texas. Then I wrote a letter to Robert Kennedy and urged him to stay in public life. We'd been reading all kinds of speculation that he might not stay in public life at all, that he might drop out and teach at a college. I know he was going through a state of real depression and he was trying to figure out just what his own future, and his own family's future, should be. So, I was hoping that he would stay in public life.

Then there was some public talk of his running for the Senate in New York, so I immediately contacted him by mail again—I didn't call—and told him that I hoped that he would do that. And we publicly—"we" meaning the county organization, of which I was the major figure—came out for him for that. Then he withdrew; he publicly withdrew and said he wasn't going to run for the Senate. So we were not happy about it, and I then wrote him again saying I hoped that whatever he did that he'd stay in public life.

In the meantime, the pot was brewing over who we'd nominate for the Senate. We'd always had a lot of problems in our relationship with Congressman Stratton [Samuel S. Stratton] up there, and this seemed like a time when we could support him; he was the only candidate that anybody around our area knew. So I announced that I would support Stratton for the Senate, but I qualified it by saying.... When I was asked, "How far would this go? Right down to the end?" I said, "Well, until he's either nominated or it becomes apparent that he can't be nominated."

Then Robert Kennedy got back into the Senate thing, so we told Robert Kennedy and his associates that we would ultimately be for him in the convention. We couldn't just automatically publicly jump away from Stratton that fast, but because I had qualified our endorsement by saying that when it became apparent that Stratton couldn't be nominated we'd feel no further moral commitment to support him.

Stratton, at the convention—as you know he opposed Robert Kennedy at that state convention—did not release his delegates even though he knew he had lost. Some of them were very upset about it, wanted to be released, but lived up to their word. We didn't have to because we had said that we would stay with him until it became apparent that he couldn't be nominated.

GREENE: Did you actually see Palmer [George V. Palmer] or any of Stratton's other people about it?

BURNS: I saw Vic Bahou [Victor S. Bahou], who's now the Cortland County chairman, but who was then a Stratton representative in our area. He'd been to Binghamton and he knew how we felt; we felt that we handled it honestly and

above board. When it became apparent that Robert Kennedy could be nominated and Stratton couldn't, we had no problem then supporting Robert Kennedy.

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I was then made what you call the temporary chairman, or the keynoter of that convention, and it was a very tumultuous convention, I might say. It was in an old state armory here in Manhattan on the corner of Park Avenue and 36th, 37th Street—it's along there somewhere. Arthur Levitt, I think, was the permanent chairman. We'd been through the motions of making speeches and going through the business on credentials and so forth, and doing all the things you have to do to make it a permanent convention. Robert Kennedy was nominated and Stratton was nominated; Kennedy won.

Then I offered—in fact, I'd offered my services even prior to that, when we were in Atlantic City the week before at the National Convention—to work for Robert Kennedy, when I saw him down there. He asked me to get in touch with Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith], so I did. They asked me to be the upstate chairman of it. I said that I couldn't just take off from being mayor for two or three months. I thought there was no way I could do that and live up to my responsibilities as mayor. What if I were to give all my spare time to it? Which I did.

I was made the co-chairman of the Volunteers for Johnson-Humphrey [Lyndon Baines Johnson; Hubert H. Humphrey] and Kennedy, which was essentially a Kennedy vehicle—Mayor Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] of New York City being the other co-chairman. Whenever Robert Kennedy came upstate I traveled with him and advised him. Of course, having had been the candidate for Lieutenant Governor just three years before that I knew a lot of the public figures and the Democrats in practically every county. I had kept contact with a lot of them, and I knew a lot of the background of the individuals involved; I knew a lot of the problems of the communities involved; and I was able to advise him on a lot of things as—we'd fly into these different places—what to say and what not to say, and that sort of thing. I'd try to be as useful as I could in every respect. I also sat in on conferences involving his schedule, where we'd have to go and places he would go, the timing and so forth.

Then after that was over, when he won, he came down to New York and he was very nice to recognize me as one of the few names he mentioned in thanking us on the television, radio, and so forth, for being helpful.

Then I went back to being Mayor of Binghamton again. I was then offered a job by.... There was a big fight in Albany between the Democrats. We had this big landslide victory—Johnson won by a big margin. We took control of the state senate and the state assembly for the first time in many years, and the party was divided in a big fight. When the fight was over—I had stayed out of the fight...

GREENE: Did you actually stay out of it, or stay out of it like Robert Kennedy did and actually work in the background? Were you involved in it?

BURNS: I stayed out. I didn't work in the background at all. I kept in touch with Robert Kennedy's office—and with Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman] in

particular—and did various things for him, quite a lot of things upstate for him during that three- or four-month period. Then I was offered a job at the New York State Liquor Authority, which was a Democratic opening: the Wagner forces, who had won the control of the thing up in Albany, offered me this job. So, I called Senator Kennedy and told him I'd been offered the job. I was looking for something better because I have twelve children and I

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was living on the salary of mayor of \$15,000 a year. I was just going deeply in debt, and it was a ridiculous kind of a salary; I just couldn't stay there much longer. So, I was looking for something better and this was a better paying job. But he said, "Gee, I'd like to have you be the state chairman." And he said, "Hold on awhile. Why don't you decline that and then come down to New York and see me?" A few days later I came to New York City and met with him over at the Carlyle Hotel, where he then was living when he was in New York. It was before he moved to the U.N. Plaza Building. He said that he liked Bill McKeon [William H. McKeon], who was then the state chairman, but that McKeon, because of having taken a position on the fight, was in a position where he could not function as state chairman, which I knew, and that there was going to have to be another state chairman. He'd like me to do it. He suggested that I go see Mayor Wagner, with whom I had good relations, and not mention that I had seen Senator Kennedy first; just tell Mayor Wagner—to make him think he was the first one that I had approached—that I was interested in the job of state chairman, which I did. Mayor Wagner was very cordial and typically non-committal. He was very good at being non-committal and encouraging people at the same time—done that for a long time. So the thing began to develop. Robert Kennedy went to see Wagner and they agreed that I would be a good state chairman.

It took Wagner some time to come around to pass the word to his forces that he had agreed to it, but once he did it was all set. At the same time Kennedy was telling his people about it so when the day came, which was in July of 1965, for me to be elected state chairman, it was pretty much unanimous. So, that way I became the state chairman.

Then I became more closely involved with Senator Kennedy than I ever had before. I became one of his closest advisers on politics in New York State—not beyond New York State, but in New York State—and I worked very closely with him and with the people on his staff: with Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno], with Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan], with Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston], Carter Burden and everybody in both his Washington office and his New York City office and upstate office.

Now I'd better get out of here? Okay?

[INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: We might as well pick up at that. During the '60 campaign did you get much of a feeling for how the upstate New York people felt towards Robert Kennedy? Was there any evidence of any....

BURNS: Well, I think that he was a tough campaign manager at that time. He didn't

waste any time; he kept moving. He didn't try to ingratiate himself with anybody; he was really all business. Yes, that kind of thing did develop.

A fellow named Paul Corbin, who was with him at that time, was an effective worker but it was his nature and the nature of his job that he stepped on a lot of toes. People got very upset with him, so much so that when Robert ran in '64 he had to keep him out of there. He was in the campaign but he was behind closed doors and never surfaced because there were a lot of people that just disliked him, considerably.

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But in terms of Robert Kennedy himself, he used to be kind of cool to people and that sort of thing, so they didn't really warm up to him. Then later in '64 was an entirely different thing. He really had fantastic support, crowds.

GREENE: Was he doing most of the work upstate, or was the President himself, in the campaign?

BURNS: Oh, well, the President didn't appear much upstate during the campaign. I've forgotten where he did appear; I'm sure he was in the vicinity.

GREENE: I really mean like political contacts.

BURNS: In '60 you're talking about?

GREENE: Yes.

BURNS: No, most of it was either through Robert Kennedy or people that worked under him. They had a regular task force in the state; they divided the state up into territories and assigned different people to each territory.

GREENE: During the administration how were people like Corbin and Ben Smith [Benjamin A. Smith, II] and other out-of-staters...

BURNS: Out-of-staters.

GREENE: ...in New York? Did you find them effective in what they were doing?

BURNS: In '60 you're talking about?

GREENE: Well, throughout the administration.

BURNS: Oh. Well, they were effective. We had a strange situation in New York State because the then-state chairman, Mike Prendergast [Michael H. Prendergast], was *persona non grata* with the Kennedys. People would normally deal

through their state chairman, who in turn would deal with the National Committee, or with whoever he was assigned to talk to in the Kennedy Administration, but that didn't work that way. We dealt directly with Corbin, generally upstate people did, and Jerry Bruno—he was in with the National Committee people—but mostly with Corbin.

Nobody was very happy in those days with that relationship. It was a combination of reasons. One was that the out party comes in after being out for eight years. They think they're going to get a lot more patronage than there really exists, and so they had to divide it up. And, of course, Kennedy, I think very rightfully, had a talent search and appointed people of great talent and substance to many jobs politicians would have had. So, there were some disappointments along those lines, too. But they set up a pretty good regional relationship in terms of routine things like post office appointments and that sort of thing. We had sort of an

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unusual situation, that I presume they didn't have in other states, because of the Mike Prendergast situation.

GREENE: Did you get involved at all in the efforts to get rid of Prendergast?

BURNS: Not too much. I always liked Mike Prendergast, but we supported the Kennedy move. Wagner was with Kennedy on that to put Bill McKeon in, and we voted for McKeon. So, we supported it, but I didn't do any work outside of my own county on that.

GREENE: Getting back to the governorship, you mentioned that Morgenthau asked you himself to be his lieutenant governor...

BURNS: Yes, right.

GREENE: ...and that the Kennedys were agreeable. Do you know where your name came from, or how much the Kennedys actually had to say in it? How much interest they took in the race as a whole, especially Robert Kennedy?

BURNS: No, I never did know exactly how much, to be honest with you. Earlier that year I decided I would like to seek the nomination for lieutenant governor, and I notified Bill McKeon and Mayor Wagner. Wagner had pretty much control of the convention, and he was then friendly with the Kennedy Administration and was working with them. I think he was the one through whom they were working. I didn't get any commitments from anybody.

I remember at one point they wanted some upstate early announcement of support for Morgenthau, so Wagner called me and asked me if I'd come out for Morgenthau, which I did. Then, when Morgenthau came upstate for the first time prior to his nomination, he came to Binghamton first. We got together and we had quite a lot of publicity on that up in that area. It became apparent, because I was an upstate Catholic, that it would be a good balance on the ticket, as an incumbent mayor.

In my own hometown I started getting a lot of pressure not to run from the leaders of the community, newspaper editors and so forth. They didn't want me to run; they didn't want me to leave the mayor's job. So after a lot of soul-searching I announced that I would not seek the job of lieutenant governor.

Then I went to the convention as a non-candidate, just as a delegate, and it wasn't until Bob Morgenthau was nominated that I knew that they really wanted me to run. He asked me to come and see him. I went to see him, and he talked to me for a long time, several hours. Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman] was in there, and a number of others, urging me to do it. So, I changed my mind and I agreed to do it. But I never talked to any of the Kennedys; I never talked to Robert Kennedy.

GREENE: You mean you never figured out who their representative was, if there was one, in this whole thing?

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BURNS: Well, I felt Morgenthau could name his own slate, and that I wasn't sure who was urging him. I know Lou Harris [Louis Harris] was involved in that, the poll taker; I got him on the phone and he talked to me. I know they checked it out with the Liberal Party.

GREENE: That's what I was going to ask you.

BURNS: Yes, with Alex Rose. They had endorsed me for mayor, and they knew of me through their own local Liberal Party, so I obviously was acceptable to them and they would have nominated me on the Democratic ticket. But I never knew exactly how much actual work Robert Kennedy put into that. I knew he thought very highly of Bob Morgenthau, and I knew he was one of his advisers. That's all I was aware of.

GREENE: Was there any substantial contact with the Senator outside of your gubernatorial race in this period, in that administrative period?

BURNS: No. During that campaign was the time of the Cuban crisis, and contact with him, I think, just stopped on all political matters; he just concentrated on that. So there was no contact on my part. Now, how much there was on the part of others I'm not sure, but I was not aware of much contact of anybody I was connected with.

GREENE: Could you tell, in the Kennedy Administration period, who he was listening to on New York politics, and how much actual time and interest he put into it?

BURNS: Well, I don't think that at that time, when President Kennedy was alive, that Robert Kennedy gave a particularly unusual amount of time to New York politics. I think that they kept their contacts. I know he kept contact, for example, with Stanley Steingut, who was an enemy of Robert Wagner. Steingut had been helpful in getting the nomination for John F. Kennedy, through Ambassador Kennedy

[Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.]. Peter Crotty [Peter J. Crotty], who was then the Erie County Democratic leader, and Charlie Buckley [Charles A. Buckley], who was the leader of the Bronx and a Congressman: he talked with those people.

He had a lot of contact with John English [John F. English] during the time that President Kennedy was in office. John English, I think, was probably one of his closest advisers on what was going on in New York State. I think more with English than with McKeon, who, part of that time, was state chairman.

GREENE: Is there anything else on the administration, that you know about, that we should discuss?

BURNS: I don't have too much, except that when local problems would come up when I was mayor—like to try to get things moved through the Federal government—I had a very good reception in Washington. I could go to the White House and see Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], or I could go to the National Committee on it. Through my contacts, and because I had been a loyal Kennedy man, I was able to get doors

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opened to me down there to get projects moved and get action on things that we were interested in, which helped me in my job as mayor.

GREENE: Do you think that was true of a lot of political leaders?

BURNS: Well, I wasn't really then a political leader; I was an office-holder. I was not a party official; I was an office-holder. I think it was true to a degree. I mean, I'm sure they were fair to every community irrespective of who was the mayor and the people in power. I never talked to Robert Kennedy himself about those things, but I was able to get through to people who were key in the administration from time to time because of that, I think. And I don't know whether they did that all over or not; I just don't know.

GREENE: Let's jump ahead to the time when he was considering running himself. You mentioned this morning that you sent him a number of letters imploring him to run. Did you do anything besides that in contact with Steve Smith or other advisers?

BURNS: We contacted fellows like Bill McKeon, the state chairman, and John English, and people like that, just to tell them where we stood.

GREENE: Did you do any politicking in your own area?

BURNS: Yes, I made public statements and interviews on the air, that sort of thing, for Bob.

GREENE: What was your impression about the attitude towards him in the upstate area, from when it first became a rumor that he might run until the time he dropped out and came back in?

BURNS: Well, I found that there was great public support for him, not only among Democrats, but among independents and some Republicans. And although he had enemies within the party—some people just really didn't like him at all and wouldn't do anything for him—overall I think he was very popular, and he had great charisma. I knew that it was a natural. I thought he'd do very well upstate, which he did. For example, he carried the city of Binghamton; normally a Democratic candidate for Senate never can carry the city of Binghamton. He carried many cities upstate like that and several counties.

He always liked to go upstate. He preferred going upstate than around the city of New York. He always felt people were more open and friendly, less cynical and critical than they are down in the city. He found that people just like him very much and wanted to help him and wanted to be associated with him—and with no particular axe to grind at all. They just wanted to do it because they felt they wanted to be part of his movement. The crowds, the people themselves, were so friendly to him that he enjoyed going there. He kept that all the time he was in office.

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During that time that he was Senator he said on a number of occasions—we always planned places that he should go and things he should do, governmentally as well as politically—he always preferred to go upstate, even though it was Republican basically, a overall Republican domination.

GREENE: Before you switched, after Robert Kennedy apparently dropped out on June 22nd, I think it was, and you went over to Stratton, did you discuss this at all with either the Senator or Steve Smith? Did they...?

BURNS: No. I just thought he was out of it, and so I didn't discuss it with anybody outside our own county.

GREENE: Do you think he lost a lot of ground, at least temporarily?

BURNS: Well, he did temporarily, yes. Commitments were starting to be made, and it's hard to get some of them. But he understood that, and he knew that some men had committed to Stratton; they stuck with Stratton. He didn't want them to break their commitment to Stratton, but once he was nominated they were very friendly to him. And some of them like George Palmer, who was and still is the Schenectady County chairman, was very active for Stratton and a very formidable adversary. But once Kennedy was nominated he went all-out for Kennedy, and they became very good friends after that.

GREENE: I think he was one of those who was urging Stratton to drop out at the convention. Is that right?

BURNS: I'm not sure. There were a number of them that were urging him to drop out because they knew he couldn't win and they didn't want to have to stay 'til the end when there wasn't any chance of winning. They thought Stratton was being unfair about it.

GREENE: Could you get any impression of why Stratton was doing that? Was it a personal grudge against the Senator?

BURNS: Yes, he was very bitter against the Senator for coming in from the outside. Stratton, I think, had visualized that he had the thing pretty well in hand, that he had a very good opportunity of winning it. Here out of the blue comes Senator Kennedy with all kinds of powerful support, and he was just really very resentful about the whole thing. Although, during the campaign, after Kennedy was nominated, Stratton.... First of all, at that convention he wouldn't move to make it unanimous, and I remember Harriman giving him hell about that up on the platform, giving Stratton hell about it. But then later in the campaign, when the Senator campaigned in Stratton's district, Stratton did appear with him and said, "We're going to work as a team and work together." and that sort of thing. He was friendly, but not overly friendly.

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Then, after they were both elected, Stratton started to say things that showed that there was a strained relationship. Of course, Stratton at that point started becoming more and more conservative; Robert Kennedy was becoming more and more liberal. The same thing happened with some other people, too. Then Stratton started opposing policies that Kennedy stood for.

GREENE: Was there any personal animosity on Robert Kennedy's part because of...

BURNS: Stratton.

GREENE: ...Stratton's action at the convention, or lack of action?

BURNS: No. Well, I think he understood that Stratton could feel that way because of the way that circumstances were. I think after they were elected and Stratton started to knock him I don't think he liked that very well and was not too happy about it.

It was just, I think, a year before he ran for President we arranged a meeting—Jerry Bruno and I did—up in Oneonta where we invited Stratton, who represents the district in which Oneonta is located, Congressman Resnick [Joseph Yale Resnick], who was another critic of Robert Kennedy—he was a real bad guy, in my opinion about that—and Congressman John Dow [John Goodchild Dow], who was friendly to Robert Kennedy, a

very fine man. Oneonta happened to be located right near the border line between the three districts. We had a rally up there, and they all spoke and it was a real unity-type thing. Senator Kennedy said a lot of nice things about each one, including Stratton and Resnick, just to demonstrate that he was willing to work with them; to let the people know they were in the same party and they were of the same family; and that although they didn't agree on every issue that they were still friends. I think Stratton responded better than Resnick.

Resnick—he was a pretty sour guy, anyway—didn't respond too well, and he continued after that to keep knocking Robert Kennedy. As you know, he ran for Senate in 1968 as a Johnson hawk, anti-Kennedy candidate—spent a million dollars and got beat—and he attacked all of us. I was one of his favorite targets, too.

GREENE: He was one of the leaders trying to get you to resign, wasn't he?

BURNS: Yeah, he was, yeah. He said I should resign.

GREENE: Do you know anything about how Robert Kennedy's interest was rekindled after his trip to Europe, when he came back and gradually seemed to get back into the thing?

BURNS: I don't know how it was rekindled initially; I know that John English kept working on him and I know Peter Crotty did. See, I wasn't state chairman at that time—I was the Mayor of Binghamton—I wasn't involved in that, so I don't know too much about that.

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GREENE: Okay. Then at the convention in New York I'm not sure I understand the total significance of your being chosen the temporary chairman. Was this an effort to show any kind of unity, since you had come out for Stratton, or was it an organizational maneuver of some kind?

BURNS: Well, I don't know; I think it was to give balance. Arthur Levitt, who's from New York City, was the permanent chairman, so they wanted an upstater. They're always talking about ethnic balance you know; you have to have one Jew and one Catholic on it. So, I think the fact that I was an upstater, I was a Catholic, and was well-known to the party because I'd been a state-wide candidate prior to that, was more involved. I think, because they knew I was friendly to Kennedy, McKeon appointed me.

GREENE: Okay. What do you remember about Robert Kennedy in the course of this campaign? You've mentioned the crowds and the charisma; what about his own mood and enthusiasm or lack of it?

BURNS: In the '64 campaign?

GREENE: Yeah, especially in the initial part of it.

BURNS: Well, he was moody. He'd be very quiet when we were in the plane or in a car; he often wouldn't talk at all, he'd just stare out the window. Those of us who were around him much knew enough not to try to strike up a conversation; we'd wait until he would. He was obviously still depressed about his brother's death and he really, I think, was wondering to himself if he was doing the right thing by running for Senator.

You see, it was a great physical exertion. You would get out of the plane and those crowds would be fantastic. They were clawing at him; you had to fight. It was like watching the eye of the storm to watch him go through the crowds from the plane to the car, from the car to where they were going, and then into some stadium or some school or whatever it is. And it was really brutal with a candidate; they'd claw him and pull at him and everything. Then when we'd get back into the plane he would need the rest then. He was moody.

Occasionally he'd be in a more happy frame of mind, but not too much. He was not a happy man in those days. As he went on, after he won, trips we took subsequent to that, when he was in office, were a lot different. He was fine in front of the crowds. He was serious, but he'd have jokes and some light things he'd do and say as well. But we knew he had something on his mind; he was very deep in thought many times.

GREENE: What about the scheduling of the first part of the campaign? Do you remember that he found that particularly harsh or even unrealistic?

BURNS: It was unrealistic because they scheduled him on the basis that they would some other candidate. By the nature of the crowds and the way they reacted to him, they were much slower, went much slower than they would if someone

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else were running. So, what they were doing, they were holding up people waiting for hours for him, hours and hours. In one place in Glens Falls they waited something like 'til 2 o'clock in the morning for him in the rain; we had a huge crowd waiting for him.

GREENE: Wasn't that the place he went back to?

BURNS: He went back; he thanked them. He was so touched by it he said, "If I win I'm going to come back the day after election and thank you." So when he won that night—I was with him—I remember him giving orders to his aides saying he was going to go to the Fulton Fish Market, then get in his plane and fly to Glens Falls, and then fly to Boston to see his brother Teddy [Edward Moore Kennedy], who was in the hospital. Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] was pregnant.

So after he won we left the Democratic headquarters. We went over to the Liberal Party headquarters and thanked them for their support, then sent Ethel home, and then went on to a party in his behalf at the Delmonico Hotel. He stayed up all night that night. [He] went from the party to the Fulton Fish Market, then to the plane and to Glens Falls, thanked everybody in Glens Falls, and then on to Boston.

GREENE: Did you get much of a feeling in the upstate area for the organization of the campaign? How did it differ from that of another senatorial candidate? Particularly, what did you think of the money matter?

BURNS: Well, it was probably the best campaign I've seen upstate, better than any I've seen for governor or any other office, because it was so well-organized. What they did was to set up their own organization in every area, paralleling the regular county party in each area. Many areas had very bad county organizations that didn't do anything; so what they'd do, they'd be nice to those organizations and those chairmen, but they wouldn't take for granted that they'd get any work out of them. They'd set up their own group and then they divided it up into districts. They'd have a man in charge of each district generally and then they'd have men in charge of each district for specific things like for distribution of literature, for labor matters, all kinds of things; they were falling all over each other in some places. There was some duplication, but it was an excellent campaign all the way around because it didn't leave a stone unturned and every area had the maximum amount of effort that could be made.

It was very difficult because county chairmen are generally very jealous of their prerogatives. They don't like anybody looking over their shoulder and telling them what to do; and they don't like organizations coming into being within the party, within their county, because that could be a threat for their future. So, it's very difficult to do that and not get the county chairmen awful mad, but in most cases they did it without getting them mad. That was by picking good personnel and people that wouldn't rub them the wrong way.

GREENE: Were a lot of the people out-of-staters that they figured if they made enemies would be out of the state soon enough anyway?

BURNS: That's right, yes, they did that. That was a good theory. They did it purposely

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so that the chairman would not look at the guy as a threat if he knew he didn't even live in the state—as a threat for the future. They also would use people from within the state in areas other than their own section of the state, for the same reason.

GREENE: I've heard a lot of criticism of the area coordinators, primarily that they were out much more for themselves than for Robert Kennedy; in some cases they wanted to release them and replace them. Were you aware of this particularly?

BURNS: Not particularly, no. I know there were some of them that people objected to, but I don't remember.... They thought that they were out for their own benefit?

GREENE: Could you recall...

BURNS: I don't recall.

GREENE: ...anyone specifically that they were dissatisfied with?

BURNS: No. You mean the Kennedy people were dissatisfied with?

GREENE: Yes.

BURNS: I don't remember any specific one.

GREENE: Was there anyone that did a particularly outstanding job?

BURNS: Well, Walter Sheridan [Walter J. Sheridan] did quite a good job up in the area of Utica. That was a very touchy place because the Democratic Party there was under the control of a man who was very close to the Mafia, and there was all sorts of hanky-panky going on up there, so they had to steer clear of the regular organization altogether there. Sheridan made the arrangements for Kennedy to come in there and for all the literature to go out and all the different things that had to be done in such a way that it was done very effectively.

The big Italian population—and there was quite a lot of talk about the Kennedys didn't like the Italians. A fellow named Mario Biaggi, who is now a congressman, put out a big piece of literature that was distributed around there a lot—he's from New York up at Utica—put out a lot of anti-Kennedy stuff, and it was libelous stuff. But Sheridan struggled with all that and still did a good job. He covered our area, Binghamton, for awhile, and then they subdivided it. So, I recall a fellow named Bill Maloney[?] came in after that.

GREENE: Was this kind of the beginning of Kennedy's interest in the Utica situation?

BURNS: Yes, it was. And then after Jerry Bruno came in to represent the Senator upstate, to run his upstate office, he and I together worked.... In fact, this fellow that's now the mayor was a Republican. He came to see me and wanted

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to become a Democrat, and I encouraged him and I put him in touch with Jerry. He became a Democrat, and then Jerry took over and organized a primary campaign for him to run against the regular organization. I endorsed him in the primary, which is unusual for a state chairman to do, and I got the Senator to go up to endorse him and speak for him. He won the primary, so it was a very good thing up there, and we were on the right side.

GREENE: Were there other occasions of this type, where he would get involved in a local political fight, either at your encouragement or someone else's encouragement?

BURNS: Well, there weren't too many. The biggest one was in the Silverman-Klein

[Samuel Joshua Silverman; Arthur G. Klein] fight in Manhattan. That had the most significance because we beat the regular organization handily, really almost strictly a Kennedy organization fight, Kennedy versus the regular organization. That put the fear of God into a lot of other leaders that were thinking that maybe he didn't have much strength, and they saw that he had great strength.

[INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: Did his strength at the beginning of the campaign hurt his nomination considerably in that it kind of declined for awhile, reaching its 1968 low point...?

BURNS: Yes, I think the lowest point was when Samuel Lubell's column came out—Samuel Lubell is sort of a poll-taker of sorts who went around interviewing people—and his prediction was that Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] was going to win. And I think that shocked the whole Kennedy organization, the whole regular party, and everybody. I think it was a healthy thing in that I think it really got everybody working a lot harder than we had been. I think a lot of people thought he couldn't lose, and they were just a little overconfident. And I think that he changed his tactics and his style—not his style, but his tactics—and his approach to it after that, too.

GREENE: Becoming more on the offense you mean?

BURNS: Yeah. And they came out with a piece attacking the liberalism of Keating. It was a research job done by Bill Haddad [William Frederick Haddad]. They went on the offensive more. Also, he did, instead of running completely independent, tie himself more with the Johnson-Humphrey slate than he had prior to that.

GREENE: I was going to ask you about that. Your whole group that you and Wagner were co-chairmen of was the Johnson-Humphrey-Kennedy. How did he feel about that? Was there any objection to being linked that closely with the President?

BURNS: Well, that was something that had been worked out over at Gracie Mansion

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with me—that was Steve Smith and Mayor Wagner and Representative [Inaudible]. We worked that out. Steve was there and agreed to it so I presume that he had Robert Kennedy's approval. But he wasn't too friendly with Johnson. You see, Johnson was running so far ahead there was no reason to start campaigning for Johnson anyway; he was in a situation where he couldn't lose.

GREENE: No, but did Robert Kennedy see that he needed Johnson, or at least he could certainly use Johnson's coattails?

BURNS: I think that at that point in the campaign he decided not to take the lone road quite so much. No, he never would say that he needed Johnson, but I think he felt that there were a lot of people who wanted him or supported him that wanted to know that he was running with Johnson and that he would acknowledge it on occasion, which he did. But he never did very much, or he did more after he saw that he was going to win than he had before. Johnson came into the state late in the campaign—and Humphrey did—and they appeared together. And at that time they had some sort of a thing, for their own mutual benefit.

GREENE: Did you have any real contact with the Johnson people on your own?

BURNS: Not too much, no. I didn't pay much attention to them because they—I don't know—just didn't seem to put on a kind of campaign where they'd contact me on anything. I just don't recall having an awful lot of contact with them. I also did some speaking tours in some of the smaller cities where Kennedy didn't go, places like Plattsburg, Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, and places of that size where I would appear on behalf of Robert Kennedy. I would speak, of course, for Johnson and Humphrey, too, while I was there. But I worked particularly for Kennedy, and I made that clear.

GREENE: At this meeting at Gracie Mansion could you get any impression of how the Johnson people regarded Robert Kennedy, and whether they were waiting for Kennedy to beg to be linked with Johnson?

BURNS: Well, you could tell that they weren't.... It was like a meeting where you'd have the Republicans and Democrats trying to work out something. It was like two different parties; it was cordial, but not really. You didn't feel like they were on the same team.

GREENE: What about Wagner's people? Did you work with them at all?

BURNS: I kept in touch with a fellow named Cavanagh [Edward Francis Cavanagh] who later became Wagner's brother-in-law. His sister was Wagner's second wife. He ran an operation over on Fifth Avenue, which I had some perfunctory duties with—I was the co-chairman—and I kept in touch with him. But mostly I kept in touch with Steve Smith.

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GREENE: Were you aware of anybody who felt that Robert Kennedy was wrong in changing the tactics, who wanted him to continue the kind of soft-sell campaign he was running in the beginning?

BURNS: No, I was glad to see him change it. I wanted him to win and I didn't particularly think it was bad to change it. I was glad to see him change it.

GREENE: Was that the general opinion?

BURNS: Yeah, I think so. I think that a lot of people in the party were glad to see it, because a lot of people in the party were not aware of the deep feeling between Johnson and Robert Kennedy. They were mystified by it, and they felt better when they saw them together.

GREENE: Let's see. Well, I know one thing I wanted to ask is if you could tell that Robert Kennedy felt more comfortable later in the campaign, as he did go more on the offensive.

BURNS: Yes, he felt more confident. They were taking polls—we were told about other polls—and I think towards the end he became more confident that he'd win, in the last week or so especially.

GREENE: Were you in on that debate fiasco at all?

BURNS: No, I was not in New York then, but I'd been informed about it. I thought it was just great; it had a great impact. The picture of Kennedy knocking on the door and Keating pointing to the chair made Keating look really bad. That was a big lift in the campaign.

GREENE: Yeah, that's what I thought. Okay. Is there anything else on the '64 campaign?

BURNS: No, I don't think so.

GREENE: Okay. I only have two more questions. For one, you mentioned earlier today that in the period immediately following the Senator's election you were in pretty constant contact with Ed Guthman. You were giving him some—I don't know if you meant advice or you were actually working on his behalf in the upstate area?

BURNS: Well, it was sort of informally. It was sort of an extension of our close affiliation during the campaign. Once he was elected, why, Ed would call me about things and I'd call him. I kept him informed on developments upstate as I heard about them.

GREENE: Was there anything particular that comes to mind that they were concerned about?

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BURNS: Well, for example, when he took a tour of the upstate area after he was elected and had hearings around each city—one was in Binghamton, where I was mayor; and Elmira; and Newburgh; all over the place, he went to a lot of

places—and I helped to arrange it. Tom Johnston did a lot of that work. But I was, you know, consulted; toured with him some of the time.

I remember one day I called him. I knew Peter Crotty was resigning and Joe Crangle [Joseph F. Crangle] was going to succeed on the same day and they didn't know it in the Senator's office. I just called to make sure they knew about it, and I found out that they didn't. So the Senator called Peter because I was able to inform him about it. Ed could call Peter and speak to him the day Crangle took over.

GREENE: Why would Robert Kennedy not have known about that? Wasn't he fairly close to Crotty?

BURNS: He was, yes. I don't know why he didn't know; I was very surprised. I just called to make sure that he did know about it because I wanted him to be sure and communicate that.

GREENE: Did you have any contact with him on that Appalachian amendment that he added to...?

BURNS: Oh yes, yes, I was consulted on that. I went over the various counties with people from his staff and I told them what kind of a reaction I thought he'd get in different places.

GREENE: Did you advise him to go ahead with it?

BURNS: Yes, I was all for it. The reaction was what I expected too, because most of those counties are Republican dominated counties and they didn't like to be put in with the rest of Appalachia because a lot of people looked down on them Kentucky hillbillies. But once it went through they found they had all kinds of money available for projects that they wouldn't otherwise be able to get money for. There are a lot of things that have been built up in those counties because of Robert Kennedy that they never would have gotten. Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] was very lukewarm to us. Javits [Jacob K. Javits] went for it. It was regarded, in the early stages, as some sort of a boondoggle or something by a lot of Republican conservative people, even conservative Democrats, upstate. But later on it was proven to be, acknowledged by many, to be a great stroke on the part of Robert Kennedy.

GREENE: Was he conscious of the political effect it would have on Rockefeller and even his relationship with Javits?

BURNS: Oh, sure.

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GREENE: Did he like the idea...?

BURNS: He was very conscious. I never knew a man better at having a sense of what reactions would be. Great sense of....

GREENE: Did he like...?

BURNS: Did he what?

GREENE: Did he like the idea of kind of getting Rockefeller's goat?

BURNS: Oh, sure, he liked that. Yeah, he liked that. In those days he regarded Rockefeller as the probable Republican candidate for president next time out, and he knew that Rockefeller regarded him as a potential adversary, so they were never friendly. Personally they were friendly, but I mean they were really at arms length all the time.

GREENE: What about his relationship with Javits while he was in the Senate?

BURNS: He had great respect for Javits. He liked Javits, and he showed him deference. He never tried to take advantage of Javits that I can remember.

GREENE: Well, in that Appalachian thing there was a lot of criticism because he hadn't really given Javits any warning on it; it appeared like he was trying to embarrass him on the floor of the Senate and it backfired to some extent. Had he discussed it at all in terms of Javits?

BURNS: No, I never talked to him in terms of Javits. I think he felt that was fair play, that everybody has to have their own.... I don't think he felt any obligation to tell Javits about it until he wanted to make it public. Otherwise, Javits has a great reputation for grabbing things to himself and making them his program, and I'm sure Robert Kennedy was aware of that.

In fact, there's a quote from Lyndon Johnson about Javits, saying that he used to like Javits, but he used to tell Javits something in confidence, and Javits would go out and have a press conference outside the White House demanding that Johnson do something that he told him in confidence he was going to do. And Kennedy was aware that Javits was like that. He's a real political opportunist in that sense—a true liberal. He always looked out for Javits first, and I think Kennedy felt it was only fair play with regard for himself that he'd bring Javits in on it after it was identified strictly as a Kennedy move.

GREENE: Did he consult you at all on the idea of setting up an upstate office?

BURNS: Yes, he did. We talked about where would the best place be and who would be a good man to put there. I finally thought Syracuse would be the best place because it is centrally located. Then they interviewed different people for the

job. At that time I did not know Jerry Bruno; I didn't know him until after he went to Syracuse—well, just before he went, but after he was already selected. He was a great choice.

GREENE: Who else was considered?

BURNS: I've forgotten now, but they were looking around.

GREENE: Okay. I have only one more question, and that is....

BURNS: I know that Jerry wasn't looking for the job; he was over in the Agriculture Department and they pulled him out of there.

GREENE: Kind of had to be persuaded somewhat, didn't he?

BURNS: Persuaded, that's right. This meant he had to move again with his family and the whole works.

GREENE: Who do you think recommended you for the chairmanship or do you think that was just Robert Kennedy's personal preference?

BURNS: I'm sure he talked to people about it, but I think I was high on his list because of my association with him in the campaign. But I don't know who else he talked to. I'm sure he talked to Guthman and probably John English, Peter Crotty, people like that.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1; BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

GREENE: Guthman seems to have been an important adviser on the political level. Was that so in that period?

BURNS: Yes, he was one of the most able men I've ever met, a terrific, marvelous personality and extremely competent, easy to talk to. He could handle any kind of a situation. I was very sorry to see him leave the Senator, believe me.

GREENE: I think that we can stop for today. Actually, I just wanted to ask you for next time, briefly, on some of the things I had in mind, and what else you might add, to talk about. We briefly touched on the leadership fight, but you don't seem to have gotten too deeply involved in that.

BURNS: I didn't personally; I know a lot about it.

GREENE: Okay. Well, we can talk in those terms then.

- BURNS: Yes.
- GREENE: What about the '65 mayoral race and the '66 Silverman and O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor] campaigns? You would have been deeply involved in those?
- BURNS: Yes.
- GREENE: And the constitutional convention, did you get into that?
- BURNS: Yes, I was involved in that very much. Yeah.
- GREENE: And Utica we could talk a bit more about. And what about—I just heard yesterday, when I was leaving practically, about the state committee's project on reapportionment and some kind of study you were making. Did you get involved in that?
- BURNS: Reapportionment?
- GREENE: Yeah.
- BURNS: It wasn't the state committee study. Reapportion was done by the legislature. I was involved in it. Reapportion of congressional seats?
- GREENE: Yes.
- BURNS: I worked with Kennedy on that. I could tell you some of that.
- GREENE: What else do you have in mind that you think would be important to talk about?
- BURNS: What about the state committee activity on what we called "community action," community service projects which Robert Kennedy thought of and which we instituted?
- GREENE: Okay, very good. Anything else? Did you get involved in the Bedford-Stuyvesant project at all?
- BURNS: No, I didn't. I knew of it but I can't tell you much about it. I can tell you a lot about his relationship with politicians around.
- GREENE: That, of course. At any time where that occurs to you we ought to stick it in because we would like as much as possible. Okay.

BURNS: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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