

William Averell Harriman Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 03/13/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: William Averell Harriman
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Biographical Note

Harriman was the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, 1943 to 1946, and to the United Kingdom for a short while in 1946; the Secretary of Commerce from 1946 to 1948; the governor of New York, 1955 to 1959; Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1961 to 1963; Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, 1963 to 1965; the chief American negotiator at the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty discussions in Moscow, 1963, and the Vietnam peace negotiations in Paris, 1968 and 1969; and an adviser to Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson [LBJ]. In this interview Harriman discusses his role in the State Department and how it developed over time; Robert F. Kennedy's [RFK] work on the Special Committee for Counter Insurgency in Latin America; various criticisms of RFK's travels and his work on the counter insurgency committee, especially by the younger generation; how LBJ supported RFK in his 1964 Senate campaign; RFK's trip to Africa; and RFK and Vietnam, among other issues.

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William Averell Harriman – RFK #1
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Oral History Interview

With

WILLIAM AVERELL HARRIMAN

March 13, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By Larry J. Hackman

Also present: Mark Lincoln Chadwin

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

HACKMAN: Can you recall when you first met Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]? Did you have any contacts with him prior to the speech he made at the Democratic State Committee dinner when you were governor of New York?

HARRIMAN: When was that?

HACKMAN: Well, I got that from your first interview with Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal]. And there's no date there. It's simply sometime in the '54 to '58 period.

HARRIMAN: I think it was the latter part of that period. I think it was between '56 and '58 that we had a large Democratic State Committee dinner in Albany in the Armory, which is an enormous place. It was very hard to talk. The acoustics were appalling, and the noise is resounding. But we asked Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] to come to be the principal

speaker, deliver the principal speech. It was consciously done. We knew he was one of the coming leaders in the Democratic Party, and it was both to give him an audience in New York state and also to have a man that attracts, an interesting speaker. We'd had a number of other people such as President Truman [Harry S. Truman]. I've forgotten why the Senator begged off, but Bobby and Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] came. They stayed with us at the executive mansion and I think that was the first time Mayor Roos [S. A. Roos] met Ethel and Bobby. They have become great friends afterwards. He had the great common sense to realize that people wanted to hear Jack Kennedy and not Bob Kennedy and that no one has ever been condemned for making a short speech. As I recall it, the great quality of his speech was its brevity which.... In the first place, nobody could hear what he said very much anyway. But it was not a.... As I recall it, the substance of it was not shattering. But it was a very

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pleasant occasion. That's about all that I can remember about that. Of course, he always received people well and everyone enjoyed meeting him, but he wasn't a very well known figure at that time. He was Senator John F. Kennedy's brother.

Do you want to shut this off now? [Interruption] I don't really recall just when I got to know Bob Kennedy so well. I had increasing respect for him because I realized that he was playing an increasingly important role in almost every aspect of the Kennedy Administration in supporting President Kennedy. His value was in his most extraordinary loyalty, his understanding of his brother's objectives and his fierce instinct to protect him in every way that he knew how and also to further the objectives. One thing about him that I liked was his intolerance. For some reason or other he saw a useful colleague in me, just when I don't know. As you know, I started in this odd position of Ambassador at Large. The objective of it was to be one of the three leaders of the

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State Department, which was Rusk [Dean Rusk], Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] and myself. And it was understood to Rusk, with the President's approval, that I would be the traveling man. I think the President didn't like the idea of his Secretary of State competing with the mileage that Dulles [John Foster Dulles] had done. But oddly enough that didn't work out at all, although it seemed to be accepted. There was even some talk at that time of having a new position created. There was talk of a Minister of State which would give it a certain status. And I said, "No. I have an old fashioned notion of an ambassador. An ambassador represents the person of the President and as such I've never had any difficulty in being accepted." So I didn't want to have this thing argued, my title. But the situation in Southeast Asia was very hot. I remember President Kennedy spent, it's reported, his first talk with President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] after he became President was, a very considerable part of the time was spent on Laos. And President Eisenhower had indicated the

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great importance that he placed on Laos. Anyway the Secretary of State, Rusk, decided he'd go to the first SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] meeting. And I said, "Dean, it's absolutely all right with me. I'm not at all keen to be a traveling man, but all I can say is if you go to this meeting, you'll go to them all." And that's what happened. And therefore the original conception of my job was not....

I did make some rather interesting trips which this isn't the moment to go into. But in February, wasn't it, March, I visited about a dozen different countries beginning with England, France, Germany, Italy. They had an extraordinary interest in the new President. And I had particularly interesting talks with some of the leaders, including General de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle]. That's off this subject. I did some work at that time which was quite useful in bringing to some of the principal leaders of principal countries the interpretation of President Kennedy's objectives, and I received some information

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in return.

HACKMAN: Is there any indication that early that Robert Kennedy would play an important role in foreign affairs?

HARRIMAN: No. Then I got involved in Laos; President Kennedy asked me to take on Laos. So in a sense I got exiled at that time from here, and I was very much involved in that during the course of '61. But he did ask me to be Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs one of the times I was here, I think the autumn of '61. And as I think he realized the.... And I agreed to do it. I had made a speech at Arden House, The American Assembly in which I had pointed out that I thought that the regional assistant secretaries were as important as—that there was probably more important work to be done by them than the Secretary of State did prior to the '30s. They ought to be men of experience and breadth of experience in the same manner as the Ambassador to the United Nations was selected. And the Secretary of State should preside over a

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small cabinet of senior men who would be the five regional assistant secretaries. And therefore I suggested the title of Secretary for Latin America, Secretary for Europe. So when the President asked me this, I didn't hesitate for a minute. I thought this was worth doing. Something happened, and Rusk called me up a few weeks later and said, "The Secretary wants you to go to the Far East." Why that was done, I don't know. But in any event when I did come back, I was involved here and I began to see more of Bobby then and began to realize the role that he was playing. He made several trips abroad and I think I asked him to make one or trips, a trip to Indonesia because I thought he was useful.

HACKMAN: Did he handle that well?

HARRIMAN: One can't tell. He certainly stirred up Sukarno [Achmed Sukarno]. To say that he was blunt with Sukarno is the understatement of the year. But I think he jarred Sukarno into realizing that there were certain things the United States would do or not. He got

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away with it, but it was during a period when we thought Sukarno was being far too aggressive in his attitude towards Malaysia, the Philippines and other countries and we were afraid of his getting out of hand. So that I thought it was a plus, but if you go to the State Department Archives, or if any Foreign Service officer commented on it, I think he would not think it was the correct form of diplomacy.

HACKMAN: I think they have.

HARRIMAN: But in any event, something happened. I don't know why. But there was some pressure that came on the President, perhaps himself. I always thought it was Bobby that felt the President was not getting the service from the State Department that he wanted and needed. And for some reason or other—either President Kennedy or Bobby, I thought it was Bobby, or both perhaps—Bobby was pushing me because he saw my willingness to face things as they were. And in his own way—I use the word fierce because he was a tigress that was

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protecting her cubs—Bobby was protecting his brother. And he saw in me the same, not fierceness, but the same kind of loyalty because I've been trained that way to loyalty and the achievement of the President's objectives. To try to understand them.

HACKMAN: You're speaking in reference to your appointment as Under Secretary then?

HARRIMAN: Yes. So that I moved up very fast. Within the year I was Under Secretary. And then I began to see more of Bobby. I've been rather hesitant up till now because I don't recall seeing him too many times, but I saw him more and more when I became Under Secretary and I particularly.... He asked me to take on the chairmanship of the Special Committee: CI [Counter Insurgency]. Alex Johnson [U. Alexis Johnson] had been chairman of that and Alex Johnson was trying to do everything he could to have that committee abolished. He thought it was an appalling ordeal to go through. I hadn't been chairman very long before I thought it was one of the best

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committees that I had ever sat on in the many years I'd worked in Washington. And the reason for that was Bobby—or call him Bob, whichever you wish. His intolerance was the

important thing. He had the conception.... The procedures had been worked out before I got there, which I think Max Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] had a good deal to do with, and I don't know who else designed them. But they had these country programs in the areas where there was a possibility of subversive danger, and these country programs were submitted. And either the ambassador or someone from the Department, desk officer or the assistant secretary or deputy assistant secretary the case may be, presented the program. If the man knew what he was after, he got a very sympathetic questioning from Bobby. If Bobby got the idea he didn't know, he really wasn't well briefed, he treated him as if he was a witness of the stand and he exposed him. And it was not a very pleasant experience. But I'd only say that no one came there before that

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committee a second time without being briefed. Bobby insisted that the Departments that were represented there were represented by men who could take decisions. In Defense, for instance, the Under Secretary Vance [Cyrus R. Vance], I think at that time, used to come frequently. McCone [John A. McCone] used to come himself frequently or someone who was qualified to act.

HACKMAN: Dave Bell [David E. Bell]?

HARRIMAN: What?

HACKMAN: Did Dave Bell?

HARRIMAN: Dave Bell would come frequently or Gaud [William S. Gaud] who was his deputy. Buz Wheeler [Earle G. "Buz" Wheeler] would come for the Chiefs of Staff or he'd have a capable officer. McCone would come or he would have someone. They came sufficiently frequently. And then Ed Murrow [Edward R. Murrow] from...

HACKMAN: Right.

HARRIMAN: And where there was a need, we had extraordinary ability to get things done. Usually—I learned when I was Secretary of Commerce—that in most

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cases the interdepartmental committees are used by the Department to find out what other people want to do and then prepare to see how their Department could stop the other Department from achieving its objectives. I'm not joking about this. This was back in the days when I was Secretary of Commerce. It was not a modern.... But so that this committee.... I took certain steps when I was at the Department of Commerce which I won't bore you with, but we made the committees I was on effective.

But this was the most effective committee because the important thing was not only the procedures, which were developed, but I think it had a great deal to do with changing the Defense Department's instructions to our men that were supposedly training Latin American countries—let's say, prior to this committee's activities, at least I think it was—they used to teach Latin American countries conventional warfare. And to send a conventional army out to get guerillas was about equally applicable as the Red Coats used

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to go after the American Indians. I don't know any better way to describe it. This was reversed, and I think this committee had a good deal to do with it. They were training the police officers in the kind of intelligence they had to get. The police was the first line of defense; you only went to the Army after that. And the extraordinary thing.... And then it came to a question of material. Now in almost every case the things that were important to get were in short supply, particularly because the Korean War was going on. Communications equipment was vital. Helicopters were one of the most difficult things of all. I know we got a couple of helicopters for Colombia, as I remember, which meant the difference between the Colombians being able to get at the guerillas in the mountains. And all in all I gave.... If you go through the record of recent years, Peru was able to capture the most people. And even Bolivia with the relative lack of competence in that, they were able to capture this

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fellow....

HACKMAN: Che Guevara.

HARRIMAN: Che Guevara. And in Venezuela which was one of the worst, they were able to capture the big men before they were able to get going. They picked them up along the coast I think. I think that was Venezuela. A number of these things look like luck, but I think if you go through this type of operation, luck goes to the people that are competent on the job—in other words, these chance meetings or chance opportunities to prevent things. So I would think that Robert Kennedy—to him was due more than any other person the ability of the Latin American countries to deal with this guerilla terrorist activity, which as you know was organized by Castro [Fidel Castro] with the support of the Soviet Union for a while. I don't know how much they're supporting it now. The activity involved taking young men from the different countries and training them in Cuba and sending them back.

I want to differentiate between what's going on in

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Guatemala, which has been going entirely separately. I know that this kind of activity is not very highly thought of nowadays because of some reason or another. I think because

Ramparts wrote an article about CIA. I had a great deal of respect for it and I've had some experience in dealing with the Russians. When I came back from Moscow in 1946, I was going to go back to private life and I was going to make as my avocation—I was going back to business—my avocation was trying to understand the manner in which the Communists were operating in this country. So a number of people including Hoover [J. Edgar Hoover] at that time had had a good deal of knowledge, before the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] period, of the rather inept things that they were doing. I followed it throughout the world most interested in the manner in which they operated. So I had great respect for what developed in this committee and its techniques and in the kind of training they gave.

Before I go forward

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and explain something about Guatemala which I have.... I think we're paying the dividend of the previous Kennedy Administration there. But the drive that he put in this forced the embassies to do a thorough job. It forced each Department to give high priority, whether it be USIA [United States Information Agency] in terms of information that was needed—I mean the information program, whether it was the CIA and the manner in which the country teams worked, or then the manner in which the Defense Department provided not only education to the people, but provided the critically needed material. If it hadn't been for this committee, there would have been some very nice reports which would have gone around and I can assure you that Colombia would not have the helicopters yet. This was a painful procedure if you didn't thoroughly believe in the cause, and Alex Johnson wanted no part of it. I found very little difficulty in this and I don't think he was ever quite as rough when I was there,

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although he could be very rough because he felt I was following through. And the chairman had to follow up and see that these different people did it. And I think he found that it was my habit to follow up what we've done and I think our work together just brought us together in terms of method of operation and this was.... Probably I'm dwelling on this particular committee because I saw him in action more frequently and as the center of the stage on this committee than in any other activity. And I highly endorsed his objectives and highly endorsed his methods, although I think very few people except a brother of the President could have gotten away with it. It was counterproductive on punks, and it stirred the right kind of people to take the right kind of action.

HACKMAN: Can you remember foot dragging around the government that particularly upset you and Robert Kennedy?

HARRIMAN: Oh, everything! All procedures! The whole procedure! Everything to do with everything in

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government was [Laughter].... As I say, when I was Secretary of Commerce I recognized that the interdepartmental committees were used by the other Departments to find out what another Department wanted to do and then use its energies to sabotage what that Department wanted to do. This is the interdepartmental committees. So that this was.... Number one, the presentation of the problem had to be clear. The questions as to what was going on within the country—there had to be answers to them. The specific needs of the country had to be clearly defined. And the first thing that he [Robert F. Kennedy] insisted on was that the presentation of the country's requirements had to be capably done and presented by a man who understood it. He was intolerant of sending someone on just to go through the motions. The fellow had to know what he was talking about. And then, of course, the thing the committee did was to offset the things that usually happen. That is that people get together and say, "Well, it's a good thing.

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We ought to do something about that," and then nothing ever happens.

But I mentioned the helicopters because of all the equipment that we were short of, helicopters, with the demands in Vietnam, were the shortest. And yet we got from the Defense Department two helicopters within a rather few months. And, of course, two—I think it was two—maybe he got.... Well, I think he got two. Anyway, this is the kind of thing. The same was true of detailed requirements which was the allocation of funds from AID [Agency for International Development] in order to be able to do this. It wasn't just one Department, but it was every Department. Each Department had to carry out its functions. Now we had a staff man who was very good—I've forgotten what his name was—who carried through on this, and I was in constant touch with him and if I hadn't seen.... I knew that if I hadn't seen that the decisions of the committee from the previous meeting were carried out, I knew that I would be on the tapis.

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HACKMAN: This is not Jorden [William J. Jorden], is it?

HARRIMAN: What?

HACKMAN: Jorden? Is that the fellow who was...

HARRIMAN: Bill Jorden?

HACKMAN: ...working for you on this? Nope.

HARRIMAN: Darned. Who is the fellow? He was quite a good man. Oh, yes. I can't remember. I remember he was.... Well, we could probably find out. But anyway this was my normal procedure, you know, to get things done and the fellow was capable, followed it through. There was an officer that worked for General Taylor that kept the minutes. But the man who worked for me, was my assistant on this, was

a very capable young man and he saw that he did the job to see it carried out. But Bob could be very rough. Intolerance was one of his strong assets because he was never intolerant except in a good cause. His judgment was good enough so that I never saw him.... I saw him be a little bit more cruel than he had to be. But if you're intolerant, you've

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got to be sure that you're on the right track, and he was on the right track in these cases.

HACKMAN: Well some of the people, I think, whom he gave a hard time to, probably these people reacted saying, "He came to these meetings very poorly briefed, very poorly prepared." Does that gel with what you recall at all?

HARRIMAN: You mean...

HACKMAN: That Robert Kennedy came.

HARRIMAN: Well, he obviously didn't know very much about the details of the situation, but he had a very clear idea of the objective that he wanted to achieve, that this committee wanted to achieve. He'd helped architect it with Max Taylor, I believe, before my time. And he would start in and ask questions. He didn't know a darn thing about the subject, if you came in to talk about Peru. He didn't know anything about Peru. Why should he know anything about Peru? The man was supposed to come to convince us about Peru, but he could immediately pick the flaw in the man's

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presentation. And obviously he asked questions which in probing for information that may have gone afield, but he was trying to give the fellow a chance to say what he knew. And the less he knew, the more he probed. And the fellow was undressed before he got through. You know, the intellectual clothing that he had was gone, and it was not a very pleasant experience. Now a number of the questions that he asked might have been irrelevant if you had known exactly everything about it, but his questions were directed in such a way that if the man knew what he was talking about, he could give adequate answers and he could get Kennedy's support if he made his case. Now he didn't support helicopters for Colombia because the fellow asked for them. He asked questions. "Why was it needed?" "What is the situation?" "Why have they let these gangs, these guerillas in the mountain form?" "Why did they permit this to happen?" "What was it that's wrong about it?" He was penetrating

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and forcing the fellow to make the case for what he needed as well as make the case for the fact that his program was an adequate program. So I thought it was an effective job. Now if the man said—I'd be interested to know the kinds of things they said—when a man begins to probe you don't have to know anything, you're trying to find out. And of course, this is the

technique of a cross examiner and the fellow didn't like it very much; it wasn't a very pleasant experience, if the fellow didn't know. And sometimes it was a little unfair because the Ambassador for some reason or other didn't show up, hadn't arrived, so some poor fellow in the Department was sent down without having had a chance to be briefed. And he was a little cruel on some of those people because he didn't understand the manner in which the Department worked. He assumed that when the Department sent Mr. X in there to present the Peruvian country program that they would send somebody competent. And in some cases it was not the

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fellow's fault, but it was the fault of the direction of the bureau in not giving the fellow a chance to get briefed. But what kind of things did you get on your other talks?

HACKMAN: I can't tell you that. I wouldn't tell what you're telling me to anyone else.

HARRIMAN: No, no. But you've heard some of these people say he was not...
[Interruption] I can well understand why some people resented this. But it was so clear that Bob Kennedy had no other objective than to achieve the objective of the United States' government and the objective of his brother's Administration. I did see him on a number of occasions. I can't quite remember which. But there were all sorts of things that President Kennedy asked me to do including such unusual things as asking me to be the—out of the ordinary things—to negotiate the test ban agreement. I've always heard there were a number of different people suggested. I had the feeling that Bob was the one that whenever the subject came

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up, whose belief was that I could do the job better than the other people, that's why it was done. I did not have the impression that there was any resistance from President Kennedy. I think that because I did what he asked me to do in Laos, and the things that I did for him were done and clean and achieved and were much more thorough, I think, in getting after what he wanted. It had been my feeling that when this subject came up, it's always easier for the President to decide in a way that he has leanings, if he has people that support him. It's rather hard for him to go against the recommendation of Secretary of State or someone else who's in rather high authority.

HACKMAN: Can you remember conversations with Robert Kennedy about the nuclear test ban treaty or really the idea for it? Not much there?

HARRIMAN: No, I can't do that. I know that he looked upon it as a major objective and he looked upon it as a major achievement. But a number of these situations were dealt with. One of the development of

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it was done before I became associated with it. I was not involved in that brilliant speech of...

HACKMAN: The American University speech?

HARRIMAN: ...June tenth at American University, which was a brilliant analysis of peace as well as a brilliant.... He picked up a very small indication from Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] and announced that he wasn't going to test and indicated his desire not to test. My own guess is that the fact that he picked me rather than routine negotiators—and this is no disrespect for Bill Foster [William C. Foster], who's a great friend of mine—was that my reputation with the Soviet Union is one that I have always been fair. They know that I am always vigorous in determining American interests, but they do recognize that I do understand some of their own problems, have always tried to. And I think the fact that he picked me did mean something to Khrushchev. Now whether that had an influence

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on either President Kennedy or Bob I have no idea, but I think it was one of the contributing factors to the speed with which we got an agreement.

HACKMAN: Now many people in writing about the work of the Special Group: Counter Insurgency assume that that group look very much upon Vietnam as its main concern and as really a testing ground. What can you remember from the time about...

HARRIMAN: It did nothing about Vietnam. It was not involved in Vietnam, as I recall it. That was separate from that and Laos. The operations were entirely separate from it when I got into it.

By the way, I want to put in the record about Guatemala, why I think that's quite a different situation. I still recall my emotion when I heard Foster Dulles' fifteen minutes on radio—this is before the days of television—in a very truculent voice boast about the fact that the Communists had been defeated. And I made a number of speeches to this effect. And I waited for fifteen minutes

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to hear one word about the responsibilities of the new government and the responsibilities of the United States in dealing with the social problems which had given the fertile ground for the Communists to take hold. Not one word did he say about responsibility which the government that we were supporting nor the United States had in that respect. Now this was something just as foreign from Bobby's thinking as from mine and also President Kennedy. They were always thinking about social and economic conditions. I think I happened to be in Latin America about the time Bobby was there on that last trip of his. I've forgotten what year that was though.

HACKMAN: '65. December of '65.

HARRIMAN: Well, I was over there. I don't know, I think I was over there because I was with the Rio Conference representing.... Mr. Rusk could only be there for a few days and I stayed through the two weeks. But Bobby was in and around at that time, and I got the most tremendously favorable reaction to his being

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there. He had a stronger understanding of what people thought and what their hopes and aspirations were. So we're still suffering today in Guatemala, which—you follow the newspapers, don't you, and you see what the recent kidnapping of.... Well, our Ambassador [John Gordon Mein] was killed. It has its seeds in the fact that when we somehow or other.... I don't know what the CIA was doing at that time. But this was the type of conniving that I was utterly opposed to, in other words, playing politics and supporting people just because they might be able to beat the Communists in the polls. It was important to be trying to build the countries up themselves, so that they could deal with them and also develop a social policy. If there had been a committee of this kind of deal with the political and social problems of Latin America, we would have made a hell of a lot more progress in the Alliance for Progress than we did because he would have seen that.... He's been criticized by some of the young people today because he's been associated

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with this sort of activity. They don't understand it. And of course they have come to think that.... They no longer recognize that Communism is out to destroy everything that they themselves believe in in terms of development of individual and so forth. But Bobby had a clear understanding of that. This was the machinery that destroyed the subversive action which.... I suppose you get a lot, don't you, criticism of this activity around the country. It's the popular thing among, isn't it...

HACKMAN: The New [New Left] historians?

HARRIMAN: You've been in college recently. They think any activity of this kind.... I have heard people tell me the one thing they don't understand about Bobby Kennedy is how he could have been mixed up in this Counter Insurgency. It's purely naïve if they don't understand it because he was not interested in enforcement of law and order for the sake of law and order. He was interested in it because of the opportunity that it created and because

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it was necessary to achieve other objectives.

HACKMAN: You mentioned that '65 trip to Latin America. Do you remember any criticism of Robert Kennedy coming to you from within the State Department or from the White House because he was traveling, for instance, in Latin America?

HARRIMAN: Well, most people didn't dare talk to me about Bobby Kennedy because they knew how I'd feel. There was no question about that. On the other hand, I do know there were rumblings about this and lack of understanding of it and terror on the part of some of the embassies that he was going to come. And of course it was not easy for an embassy to have Bobby and Ethel and the entourage arrive. They were difficult physically to deal with and handle, and they never kept to their schedules and they always did something else. And they disturbed the orderly life of any embassy and I can well imagine the.... And I was conscious of the fact that there were all sorts of criticisms which related to the utterly unimportant part, namely the

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procedures with which he achieved what he was after. I would not commend his procedures, but they happen to be his style. He simply took advantage of every opportunity. I still know the Ambassador [John Moors Cabot] whose automobile he stood on in Warsaw and that is still one of the things held up. But Bobby Kennedy could not have talked to that five thousand group of cheering people in Warsaw if he hadn't gotten up on that automobile, and my answer to it is, well, as long as you've got Bobby Kennedy as the political leader of the country, you better strengthen the roofs of your cars. But, no, there were lots of criticisms of him because.... But I never knew any place on these trips where he didn't do an awful lot of good, where he didn't stir up the right kind of emotion. And of course it was not only Bobby himself, and Ethel didn't do any harm, but also his brother was so.... President Kennedy was, when he died, known all through Latin America, all over the world.... The only two men I know in my lifetime

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that the world mourned was Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] and John F. Kennedy. And the fact he was President Kennedy's brother gave him an introduction which he used.

Well, were there any other questions you wanted to ask 'cause I'd go on. This Guatemala business, we can't take the time here to do it, but the manner in which we handled Guatemala was exactly what we shouldn't do. And I still don't fully understand why we're not doing a better job there. But these other cases have been to eliminate subversion which made it possible for the right kind—take Venezuela—for the right kind of democracy to have a chance. In some cases the right kind of democracy didn't come along, but that was not the fault of stopping a Communist takeover.

HACKMAN: You said that the Special Group did not concentrate on Vietnam.

HARRIMAN: No, it was not only that we didn't concentrate. It was not involved in Vietnam.

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HACKMAN: Right. Okay. What can you remember about your conversations, if any, with Robert Kennedy on Vietnam, particularly '63 and around the time of the coup, Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem]?

HARRIMAN: I can't remember any. I can remember some talks with President Kennedy. He was very strongly against becoming militarily involved in Laos and he told me specifically. He had a habit, you know, of calling on the telephone. And once or twice he called me after meetings and said—he used to call me “Governor”—“Governor, did you understand that I wanted to have a negotiated settlement?” or “Did you understand that I'm ready to accept Souvanna Phouma as the compromise candidate?” I would say, “Yes.” He wanted to make sure. And I got the impression in '63, in spite of the optimism of the military, that he was already.... See, I was then Under Secretary and Roger Hilsman was Assistant Secretary; Mike Forrestal was the White House aide.

HACKMAN: National Security [Affairs]...

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HARRIMAN: ...who had spent more time in Vietnam than Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] did. I kept close touch with him throughout that period. I had Bill Sullivan [William C. Sullivan] as my assistant. They were in constant touch with him. And so by May of 1963, I was quite convinced that that whole strategic village program was a numbers racket and was not succeeding and that Diem was.... I'd originally felt we'd try to get rid of Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu], and then I realized by that time that Diem and Nhu were one and the same thing and you couldn't separate them, and that this was the situation which was not a viable situation. It's my belief that President Kennedy before he did was already concerned that we were getting too deeply involved in Vietnam. Now what he would have done, I don't know. But I do know that those of us who felt we were overly involved were pushed aside. Roger Hilsman was pushed aside. I was pushed aside. I was exiled to Africa. The President asked me to take on Africa. This is off the

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record, I mean it's not for publication, but I was about ready to resign—and then the President asked me—from being Under Secretary. And he asked me to take Africa and I thought that was an important enough job to carry on, so I did, I stayed. And then he got me involved from December '65 on in peace.

And President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had two strong urges. The strongest was to win the war. He had so many people whispering in his ear, “No American President ever lost a war.” This wasn't a war, you know. This was use of military force to achieve a political

objective. I mean there was no such thing as winning the war. But he didn't see it that way. And the other was that this was so foreign from what he wanted to do. He was so involved in his domestic program. He realized that it was destroying everything that he was a real supporter of.... He was a real disciple of Franklin Roosevelt. What he was doing was the unfinished business of the New Deal. And, as you well know, on the domestic front

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he started, he made things move as no President has, got legislation. So he wanted a peaceful settlement, but there were two groups that were working and he never quite.... One of the problems was he didn't go one route or the other. He was moving between one and the other. He was moving between one and the other. I think that Kennedy would have kept the people and encouraged the people that were for getting out, and I think a program would have been developed rather than this program of getting deeper and deeper involved.

Now Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] will not tell you this because he recommended to Johnson the sending troops in in '65, and so I think he would have been on the tough line. But certainly a number of us were already very much concerned in '63, and I think we probably would have played a greater role. How we would have worked out of it is a very difficult thing to see. And Bobby would have been on the side of working out of it. I don't know just when he began to move in that direction. The interesting thing about him was that he always had a sense of

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responsibility of getting out of Vietnam in a responsible way. He never adopted the Gene McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] cut and run tactics. It was a responsible withdrawal which is what my present position is. I've opposed the Goodell [Charles E. Goodell] type of thing. Where and how he developed his own conception of what should be done, I cannot fully tell you. There were certain moments when we.... I remember working with him over his speech that he made on nuclear energy. I've forgotten what that speech was. I've forgotten what it was all about. But I got Adrian Fisher [Adrian S. Fisher] to help with it. It was a very good speech as it was finally made. It was a fairly amateurish job when it first came in. The objective was right. Can you remember the speech? I can't remember it.

HACKMAN: I believe it's pretty early in the Senate period, 1965, one of his first major speeches.

HARRIMAN: And we worked on that. Adrian Fisher—you know him, don't you?

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HACKMAN: I know who he is.

HARRIMAN: He was my counsel when I was Secretary of Commerce and I knew him very well. He's one very fine fellow that's in government. This speech

was a first-class speech. That I remember working with him on, but working more with his staff on it actually. But then he did accept it. But I don't remember. I don't recall. These things were such slow movements, you know, there wasn't any abrupt moment that you suddenly woke up. I do remember in May '63 that I was quite convinced the "strategic hamlet" program was not going to succeed. But that was due to a number of reasons, and that was at the time when we were losing the incumbent Ambassador...

HACKMAN: There weren't many contacts with Robert Kennedy on Vietnam policy from '64 to '68, let's say? Do you...

HARRIMAN: I must have talked to him about it. I don't recall. I really don't recall. I did have a good deal to do with his.... Well, I tried to have—I don't know how much good it did, but

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I tried to have a good deal to do with his decision to run for the senatorship in '64. The obvious job for him to run for was governor of New York, but that was impossible because of the five year.... That would have given him a year out of the government and given him a chance to be in New York and campaign and establish himself, but that was impossible because of the five year residence requirements. But the senatorship was not, and I was very strongly for it in the winter of '64.... When did he resign as....?

HACKMAN: Well, his resignation was September of '64.

HARRIMAN: Yes, but he was already in the winter beginning to think about getting out, and I was never for his being Vice President. I never knew.... He knew that I was opposed to it and I told him I was opposed to it. He never told me that he was for or against it and I never discussed it. It is not my habit to inquire into things which weren't relevant to some action to be taken. I never had the curiosity to know—which, as you

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look back and historians would like to know—whether Bobby really wanted to be Vice President or whether he didn't. I never inquired. I didn't know. I told him, "This isn't your...." I was perfectly direct in telling him this wasn't it, that he would be very unhappy in doing it. And yet there seemed to be some evidence that he was toying with the idea and wanted to be Vice President. His relations with Johnson got more and more strained. And what little I did in regard to it was to keep open.... Long before he ever gave any indication that he was going to be available to be Senator, I used what influence I had in the state to keep it open, keep his name alive and keep forward the idea that he would be the ideal candidate for the Democratic Party. And I think that was of some value.

HACKMAN: What had to be done? Can you remember who you had to...

HARRIMAN: No. It was just the.... You get too much involved in New York state politics. It's talking

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to a few people on the telephone and finding out how different people thought and if you found they were all right, you didn't bother them. If you found out they weren't, you talked to them. That's the political procedures. There wasn't much difficulty in that because he was the one candidate that seemed clearly could win. There was another candidate that was.... You remember Sam Stratton [Samuel S. Stratton].

HACKMAN: Stratton, right.

HARRIMAN: During the Convention he behaved very badly. But during the campaign, I went around with him on a number of occasions. He was a tremendous campaigner. President Johnson, I think, it ought to be recorded, if it hasn't been otherwise, went beyond the call of duty in supporting Bobby. I was with him on one occasion. We started in Rochester. I still remember the speech he made. It was early morning. We came in by plane, came in from Washington. President Johnson met Bobby there. I've forgotten. Anyway, President

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Johnson's speech was entirely Bobby Kennedy's qualities as Senator, and he was a senator and he knew why New York needed Bobby Kennedy as Senator. And he went into very great details as to the quality that Bobby had which was the essence and importance for the state of New York to have him. And he said, "Your job is from now on to, if you're interested in your state, is to...." And he did a superb job. You know, Johnson when he wanted to could do it first-rate. And all he said about himself was, "Oh, and by the way, while you're voting don't forget to vote for me." Remember that speech?

HACKMAN: Yes.

HARRIMAN: Then he came through Brooklyn, and I was in one of the later cars, he and Bobby together right through the heart of Brooklyn. And he did everything that he could in New York to support him. Now, of course, it was a landslide victory. I think President Johnson got a larger plurality than any President, even more than Roosevelt's,

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'36, one of the biggest. I think he got about, if I remember rightly, closer to two million votes in the million and a half vote majority. Bobby had about eight hundred and thirty or forty thousand. He won very comfortably and easily. But Johnson was a politician and when he

made up his mind that he was going to support Bobby, he did it. I don't know he'd made up.... You know, I knew what was going on between the President and Bobby in a general way. But I was never involved in the final discussion in which the President told him he was not going to support him. I was sure the President did that because he was afraid of what happened.... He was intelligent enough to know what happened in Atlantic City. If the President hadn't made up his mind well in advance and picked his candidate in advance, which is not the sort of thing Johnson usually does.... You know, Johnson usually likes to leave everything to last minute. He likes to surprise everybody. He likes to keep people on tenterhooks.

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And very frequently with appointments, when he had in mind making appointments, and the gossip appeared in the paper that an appointment was going to be made, he changed and put somebody else in. So this was against his normal procedures to tell Bobby he was not a candidate. But he knew what was going to happen because there's no doubt if you.... Were you at Atlantic City?

HACKMAN: No.

HARRIMAN: Well, I can assure you that if Bobby Kennedy's name had gone into nomination for the vice presidency, nobody could have stopped it. You know, he stood there for thirteen minutes, when he was.... Stood there. I've never seen in any Convention such an automatic, spontaneous ovation. Most of these ovations are bought and paid for, but this one was completely spontaneous. But I think it would have been a very unhappy life for Bobby to be Vice President. It seemed to me he had to make his own reputation. And so when he became

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Senator of New York, he did that and I think he was extremely effective.

HACKMAN: Did he talk frequently about what he thought of the Senate being the Senator from New York?

HARRIMAN: No. I don't know. Neither of us had the habit of talking about things which were not pertinent to the moment, you know.

HACKMAN: What did you usually talk about with him in that period then? Can you recall some of the things that came up?

HARRIMAN: It might have been the pertinent thing at the moment. I don't recall. I do remember this one case of the speech on, as an example, his speech on nuclear weapons. I think he used to ask me occasionally whether I thought it was opportune to make a speech about one thing or another. And sometimes I'd say no and

he'd forget it, and sometimes he would go ahead anyway. But he was not then his.... His trip to Africa we talked about. I was opposed to it because I thought it could only do.... I didn't think he'd get away with it.

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I thought that he would leave behind a trail of young people who would; because they were carried away with their enthusiasm of him, I thought he would leave a lot of ruined lives behind. I think there was one man who had been head of the students' movement who...

HACKMAN: Robertson [Ian A. Robertson].

HARRIMAN: ...that could be said of. But he went ahead anyway. And of course, it was a fantastic success. Robertson was the man's name, was it? He was the one...

HACKMAN: He was the head at the time of the students' association [National Union of South African Students] that invited him. I don't know if that's who you're talking about.

HARRIMAN: He was the one that.... I think it cost him his career, didn't it?

HACKMAN: I don't know. I had heard recently that he was at Harvard doing something.

HARRIMAN: Well, as far as...

HACKMAN: But in South Africa....

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HARRIMAN: He went someplace else...

HACKMAN: Yes.

HARRIMAN: ...but he was forced to leave the country.

HACKMAN: Right.

HARRIMAN: Well, I thought he would leave a trail of a number of people that would be—knowing the cruelty of that and the vindictiveness of that South African government—that he would leave behind him a trail of people, that he really wouldn't fundamentally do any good in South Africa and that those that were advising him to do it were advising it because it would be good for Robert F. Kennedy. And I didn't think Robert F. Kennedy should be involved in things which weren't right to do in

themselves, even though he might gain some political.... I have very strong feelings about that sort of thing and I'm satisfied that an easy publicity is the most costly kind of thing. And I think it troubled him a bit that I was opposed to it. I think he always, I had the feeling that he weighed what

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I said, but obviously I didn't make a major issue of it. But I did point this out to him. As it worked out, I think his trip was enormously valuable to our country because we.... It's a very great difficulty to convince the black Africans that the United States is concerned for them. There's nothing we can do in their battle in South Africa or Rhodesia.

Incidentally, I was very glad that this Administration for once has done something worthwhile in closing the consulate in Rhodesia. Our committee filed its statement criticizing them very roundly for not closing the embassy and then between the time we said it, it was closed. But there's very little actually that we can do in helping the black cause in these South African white countries, the three principal ones, the Portuguese and so forth as well as the South African. They don't understand that. It's very hard to the black Africans to understand why we can't with the great power the United States has.

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And that's one of the things they don't understand about Vietnam: How could we send American boys to kill Vietnamese when we aren't ready to send American boys to Rhodesia to kill whites? Now these are the homely things of life which you have to face up to. But Bobby's trip had enormously good repercussions wherever he went. His sincerity was so good. The things he said were just right. He had the ability to sense the very sharp political emotions that people had and say the thing which appealed to people with sincerity. How he got that, I don't know. It was certainly not the advice he had. He listened to everybody's advice, and then he did it himself.

HACKMAN: Do you remember discussing with him the '67 Vietnam speech? It was in March of '67. This is after he'd gone to Paris and there'd been the furor about the so called "peace feeler" and then he gave a speech in March of '67.

HARRIMAN: I don't think there's any doubt we talked about it, but I don't remember what we were doing. I was in

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this very normal position of trying to get, of trying to get fight within the Administration to get.... And we did have a lot of good associates. McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] from end of December '65 on was for peace, and John McNaughton [John T. McNaughton] in the Defense Department was. So that there—George Ball [George W. Ball]—there were a lot of us that were working on peace. And I did not want to get too much

involved in what he did because I had my job to do and he had his job to do, and I didn't want to come into any intellectual conflict. But what I did admire him in this period was his opposing the easy route that I had nothing but contempt for, which Gene McCarthy did, of cut and run. He always kept in whatever he said—he aroused the youth—but he always kept his position that our withdrawal should be a responsible one.

HACKMAN: Would the President ever ask you to discuss something with Robert Kennedy concerning a speech or a speech he knew was in the making?

HARRIMAN: No. They never had.... I think he did in the

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summer of '64, when I asked the President to help Bobby in New York. And he did say some things about Bobby then. He was quite unhappy. President Johnson told me that he didn't like the way Bobby behaved. When he called him in and said, "I have decided that no one in the Administration's going to be Vice President"—remember that?

HACKMAN: Yeah. We're just out of tape.

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

HARRIMAN: President Johnson explained to me that he didn't think that Bobby had behaved very well when he had told him that he was not going to support him for the vice presidency, in fact he was going to oppose him. And he was critical of the fact that Bobby didn't say, "Well, yes. All right. That's it." He left leaving Johnson with the feeling that Bobby thought his decision was wrong and he resented it. And that Johnson resented and was an indication of the fact the two men never really saw eye to eye. That's one reason why I emphasize so much the fact that Johnson did go beyond

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what I called the call of duty in supporting him in New York. He knew that I was very close to the Kennedy family. My relations with Johnson personally were always very cordial. And I was never involved in any of these major conflicts one hears about. He was always extremely courteous. And whenever he asked me to do something, he did it very directly. And I remember on a number of occasions I asked him, "Well, now how do you want me to handle this situation?" or "Who do you want me to see?" And he'd say, "Well, you know better than I do." He accepted my friendship with the Kennedy family as being part of me, and he accepted me. That was all. So we never talked about it. I would never have thought of raising the subject. He never did that I can remember, except this one time when he showed really very deep seated annoyance with Bobby for not having understood that it was a tough decision for Johnson to have made. And he thought he'd been honorable in the way he'd called Bobby in

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and Bobby ought to have said, “Well, if that’s your decision, I accept it.” But he didn’t. He left the room—at least this is according to Johnson—he left the room giving Johnson the feeling that he resented this action that Johnson had taken.

HACKMAN: Were there any conversations from ’64 to ’68 about New York politics? I’m thinking, for instance, who should oppose Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] in ’66 when O’Connor [Frank D. O’Connor] finally ran that time?

HARRIMAN: Well, we were up in the.... Yes. Well, we had some talks. I went up to the Convention in Rochester in what year was that? Was ’66, was it?

HACKMAN: Yes.

HARRIMAN: I was up there and Bobby wanted to.... There was a question of who to support, the two candidates, whether to support Robert Morgenthau [Robert M. Morgenthau] or O’Connor, and they both had rather heavy support. And Bobby finally decided—I’ve forgotten just why—with Wagner [Robert F. Wagner], both of them. I came up rather late and I went along with them.

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They had had some polls which gave them some thoughts that Morgenthau was stronger than he turned out to be. He was really one of the poorest candidates that we could possibly have. But there wasn’t a lot to pick from. You know, he was a fine fellow personally, but he just had no experience or ability to project himself. We discussed that and I rather thought.... He was quite loyal to Buckley [Charles A. Buckley], although I did tell him that Buckley was on the way out. But he had loyalties which were.... Buckley he thought had helped him get the nomination, get Kennedy the nomination which was a lot of nonsense. Robert Kennedy had the support of New York regardless of Buckley and Crotty [Peter J. Crotty]. They did more harm than good if anything, rank and file of New York Democrats, as far as organization was concerned. Well, anything else you want to ask?

HACKMAN: No, not unless you can remember anything, any discussions?

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HARRIMAN: Can you think of anything Mark that’s in this period?

HACKMAN: Nineteen sixty-eight. Any last conversations or discussions of.... Did you ever talk to him about that Vietnam peace commission idea that was sort of floated around the days before he decided to run?

HARRIMAN: No, he didn't talk to me about it. I didn't think much of it. I couldn't imagine how he'd gotten involved in it. I couldn't conceive that it had come out of his mind. It sounded more like Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], and why he went along with it, I don't know. It didn't sound like any practical idea. He was reaching, I think, a little bit for something to take hold of which could get us out and something which would help Johnson. But it was not a very sensible idea and it was not typically Bobby Kennedy. Bobby Kennedy had a very practical look at things. He was an idealist. And he undertook and achieved things because he followed his ideals, and he could put it over and got audiences to accept things which were very

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hard to put over. But he was not the kind of fellow that went for this kind of a scheme to.... I thought that he would be.... My wife, of course, was very fond of Ethel and had a very strong friendship with Bobby, and we had a very intimate relationship with the family. But neither he nor I were the kind of people that when we saw each other we would be.... There were some people around who would be interesting or amusing to talk to and about and there was no.... They gave me the famous seventy-fifth birthday dinner, you probably remember. They had a group of people. Our relationship was one of friendship as much as one of sitting down and talking about political matters. We'd be more apt to talk about things of current interest. And he was interested in about everything in the world, so that our conversations largely related to that rather than some critical issue that was up at the moment. I was not being involved in this Administration.

I was not involved in his belated campaign, nor did he talk to me about

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his decision to run. I think the subject had come up and he told me he decided not to do it. And my interest was him, as to whether things were the right thing for him to do. What's extraordinary today is that all of this enthusiasm that was misplaced in Gene McCarthy and properly placed in Bobby has evaporated. I never thought that I'd see a time when a punk like Agnew [Spiro T. Agnew] would mute public discussion about a major issue like the war in Vietnam. Can you explain that?

HACKMAN: I don't think I can.

HARRIMAN: I think the top's going to come off of this. I think it's going to be a major issue again before very long. It's being so completely mishandled. But it's firmly true that the youth of the country today have.... They lost confidence in McCarthy because he was a one issue candidate and didn't satisfy them, and number two Bobby's gone and there is no one to take that place. Don't you agree with this, Mark?

CHADWIN: Yes.

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HARRIMAN: Nobody that turns them on.

CHADWIN: Yes, I'm afraid so.

HARRIMAN: They don't even seem to be very keen about the eighteen year old voting anymore. They don't seem to be very keen about anything just now. But Bobby would have.... You know, Bobby filled a need for the young generation, and it was a real thing. I think he would have gotten the nomination in '68, and I think he would have been elected President if he'd lived.

CHADWIN: You mean '68?

HARRIMAN: I mean '68, yes. In '68.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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