

John V. Lindsay Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 04/21/1970
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Biographical Note

John V. Lindsay was the Mayor of New York City (1965-1973). This interview focuses on the transit strike in New York City, Lindsay and Robert F. Kennedy's [RFK] collaborations on New York City matters, and reflections on RFK's understanding of public life and the cities, among other issues.

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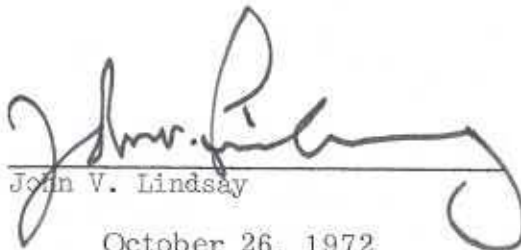
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John V. Lindsay

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN V. LINDSAY

April 21, 1970
New York, New York

By Roberta Greene

For the Robert Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library

LINDSAY: Is it going now?

GREENE: Yes it is. Okay, now it's.... Fine.

LINDSAY: All right. I think that Bob [Robert F. Kennedy] had to, I think that during the '65 campaign, politically he had to make rather token appearances for [Abraham D.] Abe Beame...

GREENE: Right.

LINDSAY: ... around the city and he did. It was clear that it was not a chore that he relished.

GREENE: But you had no personal contact?

LINDSAY: No.

GREENE: Or with his people?

LINDSAY: No. Not during the campaign at all.

GREENE: Well then the first thing that comes to my mind — and I think Judy Freiss and I agreed on this — was the transit strike. There's been a lot written but I've never heard a firsthand account from your point of view and....

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LINDSAY: Well, it's no.... You know recollection on these things becomes hazy, too. That was a long and very difficult period and it was a force-ordained strike that began even before I took office; and as [Michael J.] Quill told me on several occasions when I met him privately before I took office as mayor, that they had to have a strike and that's all there was to it. They had a lot of internal problems and he said, "Don't worry about it, we've got to have it." And Bob came into New York only once during that period and visited us at City Hall, deplored the situation and said, "It was very bad for the city," which it was, but had no specific solutions of any kind.

GREENE: Was... As far as you could tell was he in agreement with the method that you were taking?

LINDSAY: Well, it's hard to tell. I asked him what more we ought to be doing and he didn't have any thought, any idea on it beyond what we were doing which was negotiating as hard and as toughly as we could and dealing in the courts at the same time and all the rest of it. And no, there were no suggestions or ideas beyond what we were already doing.

GREENE: Where do you think that the...

LINDSAY: He was very unhappy about the situation, but who wasn't? We all were.

GREENE: Right. Where do you think the impressions that you were very annoyed at his behavior in this situation came from? Was that just the press room or....

LINDSAY: I think it was outside look-a-book. Yeah.

GREENE: It was not really...

LINDSAY: Yes. Because we met after.... The press knew that he had come in City Hall. Then when we met the press together, it was very clear that he didn't have any idea about what should be done. And before the cameras he kept saying, "This is a very bad thing." And you know, we all agreed. Even the press, who'd been living with it, this time, was amused by that because we

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didn't have to be reminded that it was a bad thing. Everyone knew it was a bad thing.

GREENE: Art Buchwald did a column about that.

LINDSAY: Yeah. And I think that impression was — I never said a word, publicly or privately, on it at all. I said, “I’m glad the Senator is here and that he shares our concern.” But I think that was a press response for the most part.

GREENE: Good. Well, I wondered if you had had any conversations with him initially after your election about how you might work together on city matters? If you’d set up any kind of formal or informal meeting, liaison rather?

LINDSAY: Well, of course, we always work with staffs, generally speaking, and I’m sure that I talked to Bob on a few occasions about city matters over the phone. When we started to meet on a fairly regular basis — this was over the Bed-Stuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant] restoration concept. I don’t know that we had a lot of meetings before that unless.... When did this civilian review board fight come?

GREENE: ‘66.

LINDSAY: Was that before or after Bed-Stuy restoration, do you remember?

GREENE: Well, Bedford-Stuyvesant was announced in December of ‘66 and the review board was voted in...

LINDSAY: When was the review board?

GREENE: ‘66 and it was voted down in November. Yeah.

LINDSAY: Well, we had talked about the review board situation from time to time. And Bob, as you know, took a position on that along with [Jacob K.] Javits and supported the review board concept.

GREENE: Were you satisfied with his support? There was a lot of criticism again that he hadn’t done enough, that his support was more formal than actual.

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LINDSAY: Well, Bob was a very shrewd politician and he knew it was a loser — like I did. I knew it was a loser. As soon as it was on the referendum, I knew we were dead. But we had to wage the fight and we did, as strongly as we could. And I knew that Bob was very edgy about climbing aboard a sinking ship, and I think that he was more aware of what a total loss it was going to be in the election — in the referendum — than others were, including Jack Javits. We all knew it was a loser. I knew it was over as soon as the courts decided it was going to be a referendum — you can’t win on one like that. So he was very edgy about it. Yes. And I can understand that.

GREENE: Well, I knew there was a rather bitter exchange where you made a comment about his “wheeling-dealing” tactics and how Jack Javits had promised to drag him to the meeting or you would not show up. Do you remember that? And then it resulted in an apology and he came to the meeting and I know you were never satisfied with the amount of effort that he put out for this.

LINDSAY: There was a problem about Bob’s coming to some meeting at one point. I remember that. But I don’t think that I got involved in any exchanges; my staff may have. I know that my staff were very unhappy for a while there, and they were dealing with Bob’s staff, but I think it was resolved when Bob came. And....

GREENE: Actually I haven’t been able to find out whether the meeting was between you and Senator Javits and Robert Kennedy, or whether Robert Price substituted for you at that meeting. Do you remember the action?

LINDSAY: No. Well, there were whole levels of meetings. There was one big occasion when we had a television thing and Bob was there.

GREENE: No, this was a private meeting that I’m thinking of, right after this supposed exchange and apology.

LINDSAY: I really don’t remember. I really don’t remember.

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GREENE: But how did a situation like that affect your personal view of him when you felt his support was less than you would have hoped for?

LINDSAY: Well, normally a senator or congressman — I know because I was one — with a lot of Washington duties and obligations will avoid taking on another guy’s fight that is more local and very hot. I think that’s understandable that a guy does that. I think that was true in Bob’s case. In those days, too, I was doing my best, not entirely successfully, in persuading the whole world that we were really running a fusion government — and that we didn’t give a darn about partisanship. Most of the outside world just couldn’t believe that. They’d never seen that kind of thing before and they didn’t think it was really for real. So Bob tended a little bit to look at me as a Republican, and therefore opposition, and he was a Democrat and the twain shall never meet. Javits had less of a problem in that area and ultimately it took some time for us to establish here that the last thing we cared about was the partisan business because our job was to put together a fusion and coalition government here that didn’t pay any attention to the traditional rules of political behavior. It was very difficult to do. Pretty soon it began to come across. The best thing that happened to me — I get denounced from time to time by Republican regulars on patronage, that kind of thing. And pretty soon it began to be clear.

GREENE: Yeah. I wonder how much of his reserve about you, and perhaps difficulty in dealing with you in the beginning at least, stemmed from the administration period, the [John F.] Kennedy administration period, when you criticized him?

LINDSAY: Some of it. Some of it, because I was on Judiciary Committee. I'd always pick on the administration when they came up with legislation that I regarded as disastrous. In the early days of the Kennedy administration they were pretty hard line, you know, on law-enforcement stuff. Some of it stemmed from I guess, back in organized crime hearings, and all those things. But in the first period there,

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there was a lot of legislation that came up that in law-enforcement circles would be thought of as hard-line stuff, ranging from wiretapping to other things. And...

GREENE: Was this something you ever discussed with him?

LINDSAY: ... that all changed later, that is complete.... Remember Bob just withdrew his whole wiretapping thing as attorney general? Start all over again with something that libertarians could live with. And...

GREENE: Yeah, and I think one of the things...

LINDSAY: ... I never hesitated to be a strong voice in opposition. No executive branch people from presidents on down like that, particularly when they tend to run a tough show.

GREENE: Yeah. I think one of the things that I've heard frequently is that the civil rights matter was the most sensitive. That they had the best bill they could get and had hoped that, you know, their supporters would not press beyond what they felt was realistic and that this was what...

LINDSAY: Well,... there are a lot of us who were very impatient over the long, long period of time that went by before any civil rights legislation came up. It took I've forgotten how long, but...

GREENE: A long time.

LINDSAY: It really was a long time. I've forgotten I think it was between a year and two years before anything came up. And we had been pressing very hard for a legislative approach and a lot of work had gone into it. We had sought wherever possible to work together with professionals in the Department of Justice and other areas on the drafting of legislation, I having been in the department at one time. We had tried to put together a coalition, too, on civil rights matters and we'd been working with Clarence Mitchell and all

kinds of people that we put a lot of pressure on. We know how much impatience was brewing in the black community

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in the country and we could feel that. And when the administration bill finally did come up, we didn't think it was a particularly strong bill. I know the hearings became very sensitive because of that.

GREENE: Right. I think it was the open-housing amendment that you were particularly outspoken on.

LINDSAY: I can't remember. I can't remember, there were three or four key items, but I don't know which ones were the ones that drew the most attention.

GREENE: Did you ever get into a discussion with him or the people close to him in later years about this and about how he felt in retrospect about the role you played during the administration?

LINDSAY: No.

GREENE: I wanted to ask you about Peter Tufo who is, was up to recently, your man on the Hill. How much contact did he have with Robert Kennedy's office and how much did you depend on him?

LINDSAY: Well, he had contact with that office and a lot of offices, and he knew the staff pretty well. We used other people, too. My assistant, my special counsel to the mayor, Jay Kriegel, spent a lot of time working with the Kennedy people, too. He knew some of their fellows. So we worked not just through Tufo but through Kriegel and.... Who else did we have? It seems to me we had somebody else in those early days that was dealing directly with Senate staff, with Kennedy staff. And then particularly when Bed-Stuy restoration rolled along, why we had various people who were cranked in, because there was a lot of work to be done on that, and there were several points of contact.

GREENE: Did you find him and his staff cooperative and responsive for the most part, or did you have problems?

LINDSAY: Fort the most part, for the most part. There was some residue of suspicion there.

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GREENE: Really.

LINDSAY: You know staffs tend to take on the coloration of their chiefs sometimes, and sometimes they try to outdo their chiefs. There was a residue of suspicion for a

period of time and I think that gradually ebbed away after time. It took about a year.

GREENE: Would you work primarily with Senator Kennedy's office on certain types of matters rather than through Senator Javits' office? You know it would seem to me that it would be more logical for you to work...

LINDSAY: Well, depending on what it was. Depending on the committee. Usually it depended on the committee role assignment. So we worked with both, but Jack of course had the advantage of seniority and that's a big difference in that place. And they're on different committees, so it really came down to the committee assignment as much as anything.

GREENE: Yeah. Okay, I had one other thing in...

LINDSAY: You did know that we worked together on work release programs? You know about that?

GREENE: Work release, do you mean through the Vera Institute?

LINDSAY: Well, this is the Vera approach on kids who are caught up in the criminal process. We had a program that Bob and I worked together on that gave us some special funding to redirect kids from the criminal courts before they get tried. The case actually even gets dismissed or put aside for a while we see whether they're salvageable through employment. It's a program which is just now in trouble because it's up for refunding and we've got real serious problems whether or not we can get Washington to refund it. But that was a Bob Kennedy program and money bill that he got through. We designed it together and worked together on the thing from the beginning to end — it worked very well, too — and we announced it together and all that.

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GREENE: Would that have been worked out primarily at the staff level also, or did you have a lot of personal contacts with him?

LINDSAY: Well, we had, yes, we had a couple of meetings: we had one meeting together and then we had a couple of phone conversations. Meanwhile, the staffs were working on all the details on it. And then I think when it was announced publicly, as I recall, we came together on it, too.

GREENE: You did, yeah.

LINDSAY: And it worked fairly well, too. It was a pretty good program. It's still there.

GREENE: Did you have any difficulty on this or on other projects where you worked together in getting him to do as much as you felt he should be doing? Was there any accessibility problem or reluctance on his part to push as hard as you would have liked?

LINDSAY: Very often there was caution, great caution very often. But he was very effective, when he decided to move. He was very effective. He could get results.

GREENE: What was the source of his caution do you think? Was it political?

LINDSAY: Partially political. You know, as I said earlier, most congressmen in Washington avoid the jungle of municipal affairs if they can. And when they choose to move in why they try to do it in such fashion that it's one they can live with and it's a winner and it's viable. I think that's partially the caution that everybody has.

GREENE: Do you remember at the anniversary of the Senator's death, June of '69, you did a taping for Dan Blackburn of the Metromedia [Inc.]?

LINDSAY: I don't remember.

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GREENE: You don't remember. Your comments were really very brief, but you did say that you felt Robert Kennedy was one of the few people in public life in this country who understood the cities and...

LINDSAY: That's true. That's true.

GREENE: ... felt it in his gut. And I was wondering, you know, how you....

LINDSAY: That's correct. That's correct. I think he did. I think he really did. He understood the dimensions of the problem and its depth and its width and its sensitivity and how dangerous it was and what it was all about, and there are very few people who understand that, very few. Most political people have very traditional views about black-white problems and about cities and about poor people, and very hard for them to understand why it is that there's been such a tremendous effort for participation and how people would rather have nothing built if somebody else is going to build it and if somebody else does build it they might even tear it down. And most politicians cannot understand that. Bob Kennedy did understand it.

GREENE: Do you think this is something that he came to in the course of your administration or was it something that he found immediately?

LINDSAY: I don't know. I don't know. It's something that he certainly found and I don't think it was there at first in his public career. I'm not sure when it came, but somehow he discovered it.

GREENE: In 1966, in the summer, you appeared before the [Abraham A.] Ribicoff subcommittee. Do you remember that?

LINDSAY: Oh, that's the famous thing on amount of money.

GREENE: Yeah. Now I wonder how you view that little exchange...

LINDSAY: Nah. Well, I think that I rocked them all by...

GREENE: The figure.

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LINDSAY: ... the figure, and now everyone thinks it was cheap, you know. What was the figure I used?

GREENE: Fifty billion, I think...

LINDSAY (Asst.): Fifty billion over a ten year....

GREENE: ... in ten years.

LINDSAY: Yeah. And nobody thinks that's a shocker now.

GREENE: I really didn't when I came across it either.

LINDSAY: No. No. When you consider that the city alone has committed one billion on just mass transit over a ten-year period — what's that figure — over one year just alone. And we could easily, easily multiply that by five, cause you know all this stuff we're doing is first stage, second stage and third stage because we don't have the funds to move as fast as we'd like. When you consider the amount of money that could easily be put in land write downs — which is a subsidy in effect, so you cannot only build but rehabilitate housing stock without killing the tenants — you can get up to that figure in no time at all.

GREENE: But at the time it was more.... a put down to Robert Kennedy, is that correct? For his...

LINDSAY: Well, I did.... No, I was surprised at his reaction to it, because he was, he seemed to be stunned by it and just said, "Sir, that's impossible. You, you can't get that." And I said, "I wasn't expecting to get it, you asked me what it might cost." But he

was horrified at the figure. And again now the figures as you think about it now after the [Otto] Kerner Commission Report and everything, the figure appears if anything to be modest.

GREENE: But just as impossible to get.

LINDSAY: And that's still true; we're not getting it.

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GREENE: Yeah. Did you feel on that occasion that his questioning was a little ridiculous — some people have said it was ridiculous, some have said he was doing it for political purposes. Did it offend you at all personally or did you just think he was doing what he had to do?

LINDSAY: No, I thought it was partially political and therefore, you know, I understood it. That's to be expected sometimes in this business.

GREENE: And things like that didn't really affect the overall relationship? You didn't bear a grudge?

LINDSAY: No.

GREENE: I wondered if you got together at all on the Model Cities Program — I was unable to find specifics on it, but you were both in philosophical, I think, agreement with the program but felt it was totally inadequate — and what you did on a cooperative basis to get funding for New York?

LINDSAY: Well, an awful.... I mean that was a.... I mean it was.... so much work went into that thing and we worked with his office and all the other offices on funding for New York and on the Model Cities Program in general. Very difficult program — and planning process was arduous and difficult, and funding levels were complicated, but generally speaking, generally speaking, New York City was out in front of the county. We were ahead on our plans, we were ahead on our early programming, we were ahead on community consultation and every other darn thing, and though we had massive troubles with it they're much less than the rest of the country. We had our stuff in Washington early and it was complete, it was.... And simultaneously we worked with all of the relevant congressional offices through the Washington office.

GREENE: Did you ever discuss with him, particularly in the later years, how he felt about the [Lyndon B. Johnson] administration's approach to urban problems? Did you get the feeling that he was terribly dissatisfied or....

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LINDSAY: I think he was restless with it — a growing restlessness over the whole subject.

GREENE: What about at the time of the disturbances, particularly in the summer of '67, did you call on him? Did he offer support? How helpful was he to you?

LINDSAY: Well, I really can't remember that terrible summer of 1967...

GREENE: That's the one I mean.

LINDSAY: ... when we were all trying to hold the ship together. We stayed in touch with all kinds of people; we stayed in touch with senators and congressmen and others. And for the most part everyone was saying, you know, "If we can be helpful in any way, we would be glad to do it." But I have no recollection of anything specific here at all.

GREENE: And in matters like this you didn't feel you wanted to call on him?

LINDSAY: No. No, that's not true.

GREENE: Oh, you would?

LINDSAY: Sure. Sure. I think we stayed in touch with Javits, Kennedy, the congressmen, particularly from ghetto areas, and, of course, the attorney general, in the White House. Don't forget there were cities burning up right and left across the country during that period and we were pretty well occupied here in the neighborhoods. How are we doing here? I've got about two more minutes?

GREENE: Do you?

LINDSAY: Yeah.

GREENE: Well, we're not finished. Let me ask you a couple of questions on Bedford-Stuyvesant. At what point did he come to you on the Bedford-Stuyvesant project and how did he explain what he hoped your role would be? And what was your initial reaction?

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LINDSAY: Well, we had a meeting at Gracie Mansion at one point, when I can't remember, but we had a meeting there and we talked about it. It was early stages, there are a lot of questions that had to be asked — that needed answers. And we had another meeting at another point. I think we had two or three meetings all told on the plan.

GREENE: What were your own reservations?

LINDSAY: Well, at that point we were putting together Model Cities and one of the key problems I had was how this was going to fit in with Model Cities. One of the

things that I remember pushing Bob to do was to take on in Bed-Stuy restoration some parts of Brooklyn that were more difficult.

GREENE: You were not particularly pleased then with the selection?

LINDSAY: No, we thought it was a good selection and they had good arguments for taking it, but I had arguments, too, for trying to get them to move over some more and scoop up Brownsville in the process, because it was a much more difficult thing. The poverty was much more extreme and the abandonment was critical and whatnot. Bed-Stuy restoration area is a much more viable proposition, it's pretty stable.

GREENE: Which was one of the reasons they selected it.

LINDSAY: Sure, and they were very frank about that. They wanted to do something that was doable and that could be visible and rather swift, and that was understandable. So they stuck to their guns on it. Ultimately we worked it out. They had good arguments as to why it was important not to go any broader or to shift it over. And in any event it worked out because we knew that we would have to pick up Brownsville and that whole area and East New York in the Model Cities Program. For the most part, it's worked out fairly well. There has been, at the local level, there's been a little bunk with the Model Cities guys and Bed-Stuy restoration, and wherever we found it happening, well, we've knocked heads together to get them to cut it out so they work together.

GREENE: Have there been some valuable lessons that have come out of the Bedford-Stuyvesant project that you've used elsewhere in the city?

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LINDSAY: Yeah. I think one of the best things on that Bed-Stuy thing is that, I mean, it demonstrated that if you have flexible money and enough talent that you can do something kind of quick and visible. There are a lot of people that make fun of the cosmetic approach, particularly when you've got very healthy and strong brownstones to do it on, but I think it's great. I think what you do cosmetically with sidewalks and with the front of things is terribly important to people's morale. You've got to have.... It shows that if you do have flexible money you can do that. What saved him on that of course was the foundation dough they had. I'm not sure that they would have been able to do it if they didn't have that kind of flexible money.

GREENE: Did you agree with the two-corporation philosophy, the....

LINDSAY: Well, again I didn't.... That didn't.... I thought it was awfully complicated, but no problem with it at all.

GREENE: Right. And the people that were involved in it, were they....

LINDSAY: Judge [Thomas R.] Jones I think was a wise choice. I thought at first that he was awfully Tammany-oriented, you know, but it worked out okay because he's provided pretty stable leadership.

GREENE: And what about Frank Thomas?

LINDSAY: Of course he's superb. He was my guy anyway and I thought he was great.

GREENE: Who else did you recommend in that program?

LINDSAY: Well, I've forgotten. We had some guys from the community that we thought they ought to touch base with and they did. Bob Kennedy went out of his way to try to scoop up anybody that we suggested.

GREENE: Can you think of names offhand?

LINDSAY: No.

GREENE: No.

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LINDSAY: No.

GREENE: Did you help in raising funds for that, either corporate funds or private funds? Did you get involved in that?

LINDSAY: No, only to the extent that [Mrs. Vincent] Brooke Astor came to me and said that she would not do this unless I thought it was okay and would encourage it, and I urged her to do it.

GREENE: Beno Schmidt also came to you.

LINDSAY: And Beno Schmidt came to me too, and with the same question, and I said, "I think you ought to do it. I think it's okay — a good thing."

GREENE: I have tons more but I know your time is limited, so...

LINDSAY: Yeah.

GREENE: ... if you have to stop, we could stop here. Do you want to or...

LINDSAY: Yeah, I think I'm going to — really, I'm getting into trouble on time.

GREENE: Okay.

