

William O. Douglas Oral History Interview – RFK #1 11/13/1969
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Douglas, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice from 1939 to 1975 and Kennedy family friend, discusses his personal and professional relationship with Robert F. Kennedy, their 1955 trip to Russia, and his impressions of Robert F. Kennedy as Attorney General, among other issues.

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William O. Douglas
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First of Two Oral History Interviews

with

William O. Douglas

November 13, 1969
Washington, D.C.

By Roberta Greene

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

GREENE: Well, let me ask you first what you remember about Robert Kennedy as a young boy? You were friends most of his life.

DOUGLAS: I just remember Bobby very slightly when he was young. I think I first met him when he was about eight years old -- I was a friend of his father's [Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr.]; I was at their home a lot -- but I didn't really get to know Bobby until after he had gone through prep school and college and had entered law school. That's when I began to really know him.

GREENE: I see. Did he discuss the idea of going to law school at all with you?

DOUGLAS: No, I don't believe so. I think that had been formed in his mind to go. I think he asked me about Virginia [University of Virginia Law School], and I recommended Virginia as a very good school.

GREENE: Did you get the feeling that he was particularly interested in law as a career, or just public service in general? How did he see law school fitting into his future?

DOUGLAS: I think it was probably an entree to public service. That was my general impression; we didn't talk about it much at the time he was in law school.

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GREENE: In the interview that you did for us on the President you compared Robert Kennedy and John Kennedy, and you said that you felt that Robert was like his father -- outgoing and extroverted -- while the President was more like his mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy], "shy and introspective" I think were your words. This conflicts somewhat with the general impression of Robert Kennedy as shy and withdrawn, and the President as outgoing and affable. Could you explain a bit why you saw them this way, what made you think in that manner?

DOUGLAS: Well, of course, Bobby in the family group was very much subdued; he was a junior. But Bobby was growing, and his campaigns were quite different from Jack's campaigns. I mean he was on his way to becoming a very demonstrative person.

GREENE: Let's see, you also said in this JFK interview -- which was one of my major sources I'm afraid because there wasn't that much written on your association with the Senator -- that when you tried to discuss the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] period with the President he seemed to dismiss the whole issue, saying that McCarthy was an old and probably sick friend. Was it the same way with Robert? Was he more embarrassed?

DOUGLAS: Pretty much so. McCarthy was a friend of the Kennedy family, not particularly of the sons, but of the father, and the family had supported McCarthy in some of his campaigns. They were close to him in that sense, but not really intellectually I don't believe.

GREENE: Did you ever discuss this in later life with the Senator? There was so much harm done in his own career because of his association with McCarthy. Do you think he ever regretted this?

DOUGLAS: I don't know. I never talked to him at all about these matters.

GREENE: You also said in that interview that you felt reluctant to ever discuss the McClellan [John L. McClellan] hearings with either Senator Robert or John Kennedy because of your own position on the Court. Did you ever do that later, after he was out of the committee?

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DOUGLAS: No, because some of those cases were coming up here or might come up here. Some of them did come up here; I think the Beck [David S. Beck] case was

one, and so on. No, I never talked about any cases with him.

GREENE: Okay. Now, I know quite a bit has been written about your trip with Robert Kennedy to Russia in 1955, so I won't ask you to cover the same ground again, but a couple of things did occur to me. In reading in his accounts of this trip -- in *U.S. News* [*U.S. News & World Report*]; he gave an interview in *Life* -- he seemed to be extremely well-versed in the politics and the social climate and everything else of that area. I wondered what kind of preparation the two of you had for this trip, where he got all this knowledge, or did it come after the fact?

DOUGLAS: Well, I think he had some. He had traveled to the Middle East; he'd talked to our State Department people, our Russian experts, and he had absorbed a lot that way; he'd been to Persia -- a matter of fact we entered Russia through Persia, the Caspian Sea -- and then he picked up an enormous amount while he was there in Russia. We could almost see him growing in his perspective on the problems of the country.

GREENE: The other thing that was very evident in these articles was his strong anti-Communist feelings at that time. Were you kind of in agreement on this? Did you see the situation differently, and try to influence him in any way?

DOUGLAS: No. I told Bobby -- his tendency was to get into arguments with Communists trying to convince them that they were wrong -- and I said, "Bobby, that's whistling in the wind. You never can argue with these fellows, so why don't we just forget about it, and spend an evening doing something else rather than wasting it trying to convert some guy who will never be converted." No, no, we never had any problems then.

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GREENE: Did it influence him at all in terms of his world view? Did he see these people as more human when he came back, rather than just a system?

DOUGLAS: I don't know. I think Bobby and I both came out of Russia with the feeling that Communism, while it was in control of Russia, was not embraced by more than probably seven percent of the people, and ninety percent of the people couldn't care less. Bobby's impression was that the cadres were in control, but that the Russian people were primarily nationalists and not ideological strays. They were just farmers and musicians, and they were interested in all the things of life like people in this country are, apart from your ideological differences -- not the [Communist] Party, but the people.

GREENE: Did he ever discuss this in terms of how it would relate to our own foreign policy towards Russia?

DOUGLAS: He often expressed concern about it and wondered what to do about it and so on, but never in specific terms as, "This is what I'm going to do." Nothing like

that.

GREENE: You also went mountain climbing on that trip, didn't you?

DOUGLAS: We were in Tien Shan Mountains down in southeast Russia, and we'd get up to ten, eleven thousand feet I think. I wouldn't call it real mountain climbing.

GREENE: You did climb with him at other times, too?

DOUGLAS: Yes. Bobby and I were on trips in this country out West.

GREENE: What are your recollections of him as a climber?

DOUGLAS: Well, Bobby was an all-out; whatever he was doing he was doing it in an all-out way. If he was climbing a peak or hiking a trail there was nothing else in the world to do but do that. I mean he was quite a person, all-out commitment to the thing that he decided to do.

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GREENE: Did you think he was a particularly capable outdoorsman?

DOUGLAS: I never thought that he would be a man who would form an expedition to climb some remote peak or anything like that. I thought he would keep it pretty much as a hobby in his life.

GREENE: Did you ever notice him taking risks in this climbing or other activities outdoors...

DOUGLAS: No.

GREENE: ...because there's been quite a bit said that half the fun for him was doing things like that.

DOUGLAS: It may have been. That was probably true in some of his winter exploits, but I never was with him on them.

GREENE: How did this enjoyment of the outdoors relate to his concern for environmental problems? Did you ever discuss it in those terms, what would happen with the wilderness you were enjoying?

DOUGLAS: Yes. He was concerned about the life of it, the durability of it, the people who were destroying it. He was concerned lest his sons and daughters didn't have any such thing when they grew up with their children. This was a passing thing, the disappearance of something grand and noble.

GREENE: Did you talk in this way when he was in the Senate too, and ever in terms of specific programs and things that might be done?

DOUGLAS: Once in a while, yes.

GREENE: Did you ever offer him suggestions of your own?

DOUGLAS: Yes. I offered him suggestions. The trouble with Bobby is that he was so terribly busy and animated and in so many things that there was never a long time to discuss any one thing, you see.

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GREENE: How much did you see of him, let's say, around the time of the '60 campaign and the election? Did you get much of a chance to talk to him in that period?

DOUGLAS: Yes, quite a bit. I was on the sidelines, of course; I wasn't active. He was doing an all-out terrific job. Then he had the decision to make as to whether he would go along with Jack after the election and into the cabinet. We talked about that.

GREENE: Yes, you said in your other interview again that you felt he found himself in this campaign.

DOUGLAS: I felt that he had somehow or other found himself, in the sense that he decided, I think, during the campaign that some form of public life was his calling. He didn't want to go into law practice; being attorney general was something else, that was an administrative post helping his brother.

GREENE: What were some of the problems that he was trying to reckon with in this decision about the attorney generalship?

DOUGLAS: Well, would it hurt Jack if I went in? Bobby and I had a two or three-hour lunch on this. We talked about it at great length, and I told him that from Jack's point of view it was perfect because he would be the attorney for the President, his brother, and there was nothing to worry about. The only thing he should worry about is the best thing for Bobby Kennedy. In the end, I urged him to do it, but I was trying to get him to think through what he wanted to do with his life and that maybe this was a turning point. Did he want to take this great victory of his brother's as an occasion to become, say, a college president or the head of a foundation, like the Ford Foundation, or would he think of running, say, for governor of Massachusetts or for the Senate or for the House? We talked about all those things.

GREENE: Can you remember any of his reactions to your specific suggestions?

DOUGLAS: Well, the things that came out most clearly were that he didn't want to practice law; he probably never would practice law. The first choice would be public service, possibly a foundation thing, although that didn't appeal to him much. Public service would be the first

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choice. Second choice, as an interim thing, would be a college presidency maybe. That's the way his mind was going that day.

GREENE: Did he ever say anything about interest in any position in the administration? I had heard he was a little wary of becoming a chaser again, you know, he felt that he had the cop role long enough and he wanted to do something where he wouldn't have to be chasing people. Did he ever talk in those terms?

DOUGLAS: No, because I don't think that there was a range of things that were available to him at that time that he talked to me.

GREENE: But his...

DOUGLAS: His main interest was in the.... Once he put aside running – “No, I'm not going to run for the Senate; I'm not going to run for the House or the governorship at the present. I'm going to go into the cabinet, you see” -- that was fine, but the spot that he really wanted was the Secretary of State.

GREENE: Oh, really?

DOUGLAS: If Jack had lived I think Bobby would have been Secretary of State.

GREENE: Is this just your own feeling, or had...

DOUGLAS: I talked to Jack about it; I talked to Bobby about it. That would get him out into the area where his real interest lay.

GREENE: Yes, foreign affairs. Did he tell you at this time, or later, some of the other advice he was getting? I know he spoke to then Secretary Rogers [William P. Rogers] and Hoover [J. Edgar Hoover].

DOUGLAS: No.

GREENE: Well, was there any other contact, that we should get down, during that period of transition between the election and the inaugural ceremony?

DOUGLAS: I don't think so: I saw him off-and-on just making plans. That was the big, critical decision, whether he should go in the cabinet as Attorney General. He

crossed that bridge in my office; he decided to do it.

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GREENE: Oh, really, that decisive coin.

DOUGLAS: I think so, yes.

GREENE: That's interesting. We had heard that either the President or Robert Kennedy at one point asked you if you would like to step down from the Court, I think it was for an ambassadorship, to make room for James Landis [James M. Landis]. Was there ever any discussion of this?

DOUGLAS: No.

GREENE: Not that you know of?

DOUGLAS: No, I never talked to them about it; they never talked to me about it. I never got any message of that kind through an emissary. No, that was...

GREENE: Okay. You know these stories do come around; they don't necessarily have any validity.

DOUGLAS: Yes.

GREENE: Well, what are some of the things that are worth putting down in terms of the administrative period? Your contacts with him then would have significance.

DOUGLAS: You tend, being on the Court, to be not in close touch with the head of the Department of Justice because it is the biggest litigant here, you see, before the Court. So I saw Bobby just socially, and didn't talk much about business. He called me once in a while. He called me once that Dean Rusk had gotten a word from the Persian ambassador that the Shah [Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi] wanted some of the Iranian students sent home. Dean Rusk represented to Bobby as Attorney General that these were Communists and we better get rid of them. Bobby called me because we both had been to Persia, and he knew that I knew something about the Persian situation. I told him that that meant that the Shah was making up lists for the firing squad when they got back, and that that should not be done unless there was a real issue of the national security of this country because these students were lawfully here -- I mean they were students; they were studying. I said, "Before I'd do that, Bobby, I'd make a check on every one of them on the list." He said, "Good idea," and hung up. About

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thirty, forty days later I got another call from Bobby; he said, "The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] report is in, and not a bloody one of these kids is a Communist, so I just told Rusk to go chase himself."

GREENE: Yes.

DOUGLAS: Well, it's that kind of thing that made him such a symbol, you see, for the young people around because all these dictators like the Shah of Iran are very corrupt people. They're out of the country because they can't tolerate that kind of a regime; they want more freedom. Bobby represented the breath of freedom to these people, so that's why he was mobbed everywhere he went among these foreign students.

GREENE: Are there other things like this that you could think of during the administration, informal advice you gave him?

DOUGLAS: I never gave any advice unless he asked me for it. I think this was after he was Attorney General, I took various people over to see him -- foreigners, Persians, Middle Easterners -- who wanted to meet him because in the Middle East -- how this happened, I don't know -- the Kennedy legend became very strong and great out there. Bobby had a very attractive image to these people. All I ever did was to take people over that I knew when they came to town, call up and get an appointment and introduce them to Bobby.

GREENE: Did he seem to enjoy that?

DOUGLAS: Oh yes, he liked to meet them. I didn't talk about much else. Then Bobby ran for the Senate.

GREENE: Well, I did want to ask you one thing. I know you can't discuss specific cases, and I wouldn't ask you to, but just in terms of your own observations of the Justice Department under Robert Kennedy and let's say the Solicitor General Archibald Cox. Comparing them with other Attorneys General and other Solicitors General how do you think the Justice Department compared at that point?

DOUGLAS: I thought, as near as I could tell from the outside, that it was a very efficiently run operation. I mean Bobby was, I thought, an excellent administrator; I think he did a fine job. I told

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him when he became Attorney General he should break a precedent and come over and argue a case once in a while, and he did.

GREENE: That one time.

DOUGLAS: Yes.

GREENE: What did you think of his performance?

DOUGLAS: Fine, he's wonderful. He was brilliant, had lots of energy and ideas, and a fresh approach.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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