

**Michael H. Prendergast Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 6/20/1967**  
**Administrative Information**

**Creator:** Michael H. Prendergast  
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**Biographical Note**

Michael H. Prendergast (1913-1990) was the chairman of the New York State Democratic Committee from 1955 to 1962. This interview focuses on the 1956 and 1960 Democratic National Conventions, John F. Kennedy's campaign in New York, and conflict within the New York Democratic Party, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Michael H. Prendergast

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Oral History Interview

with

MICHAEL PRENDERGAST

New York, New York  
June 20, 1967

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Today is June 20, 1967. This is a recorded interview with Mr. Michael Prendergast. The interview is taking place in Mr. Prendergast's office in New York City. My name is John Stewart.

Let me start by asking you, Mr. Prendergast, if you recall when you first met John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy].

PRENDERGAST: My first recollection was at the 1956 National Convention in Chicago when he was looking for the nomination for vice president.

STEWART: Had you known Ambassador Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.] before that at all? His father?

PRENDERGAST: No. I had never.... I didn't even meet him at that time. I didn't meet the Ambassador until '60.

STEWART: What were your thoughts before that Convention on Kennedy as a vice presidential candidate, do you recall?

PRENDERGAST: Yes, but vaguely in the sense that my only knowledge of him was what I picked up in the press. He seemed like a fresh face on the horizon

and somebody that had the equipment that is given once in a great while.

STEWART: Do you recall your reactions when Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] opened it up that night after he was nominated?

PRENDERGAST: Yes. My reactions were that this was a phony setup, that when he speaks of when he was opening it up it was nothing more than window dressing. It was never really opened up. Nothing had been changed. The agreements had all been reached behind closed doors long before that. Most of us that considered ourselves professionals to some extent knew that.

I had been involved in the pre-Convention operation because of the interest that Governor Harriman [W. Averill Harriman] had shown as a possible candidate for the presidency. I was a member of Governor Harriman's cabinet at the time as Director of Safety in New York State, as well as the Democratic state chairman, and had discussed with Governor Harriman the possibility of him teaming up with somebody for his own protection. And one of the possibilities I had mentioned was Jack Kennedy. Another one that I had mentioned was then the new governor of California, Pat Brown [Edmund G. Brown]. The Governor had other advice from other sources. I still think it was bad, but he followed that advice which was not mine.

STEWART: What was his reaction to Jack Kennedy or the possibility of Kennedy?

PRENDERGAST: I really don't recall at this stage of the thing on the vice presidency, except that our friend, Mr. Wagner [Robert F. Wagner], was always hanging his hat wherever he thought he could find a peg. This proved somewhat embarrassing to the New York State delegation. Although we had about 95 percent of the delegates pledged to Harriman as a favorite son, at least, this guy down in City Hall was playing both sides against the middle as always and certainly had no love for Governor Harriman.

STEWART: Let me ask you a question somewhat unrelated. It's frequently been said that Kennedy's fight with McCormack [John W. McCormack] in 1956 for the control of the Massachusetts delegation was an attempt to impress people throughout the country of his power as a political leader. Do you recall your reaction to this? I assume you were aware of this fight?

PRENDERGAST: Yes. I was aware of it, and at the time I felt that this was something he had to do. This was something that was almost a definite requirement. My reaction to it was that this was a good move.

STEWART: Did it, in fact, impress you?

PRENDERGAST: It impressed me with his ability to put together something like this. It impressed me with his courage to go after the well and strong seated

regime that was in Massachusetts at the time.

STEWART: You went to the Kennedy suite, I believe, the night before the balloting with Mr. DeSapio [Carmine DeSapio] and others?

PRENDERGAST: You're talking about what year?

STEWART: In '56.

PRENDERGAST: In '56. I don't recall that I did, and if I did, I don't remember in '56. What we were going to do, once Averell Harriman had withdrawn his name and Stevenson had been nominated, again, our friend from City Hall was looking for some recognition, and he asked that we present him on the first ballot as a candidate for vice president. What I did--I don't recall any such meeting with the Kennedys the night before--but the day of the balloting on the floor I got out and talked with as many people as I could, such as Pat Brown and others, advising them that what we were going to do was to go with Wagner on the first ballot, that it was nothing more than a courtesy to him, meant nothing. We knew we weren't going anywhere. We were immediately going to switch to Jack Kennedy. And I did talk with him at the time, with Jack.

STEWART: Was there any problem within the New York Delegation to this whole plan?

PRENDERGAST: Yes. The problem within the New York delegation was with those that were allied with the reinstated Volunteers for Stevenson. This was a group that was formed in '52. And, of course, they were in the know and were told not to vote for anybody but Kefauver [Estes Kefauver], or--not Kefauver, the guy from Alabama who was in the Senate, Sparkman [John J. Sparkman].

STEWART: In '52

PRENDERGAST: '52 was Sparkman; '56 was Kefauver.

STEWART: Right.

PRENDERGAST: Yes. Right. It's hard to keep these things straight.

STEWART: If, as you say, the whole thing was arranged beforehand, how do you account for the fact that in the actual balloting Kennedy came so close?

PRENDERGAST: Very simple. Whenever you have something sewed up in politics, such as they had--they had made the arrangement, as you well know; Kefauver had pulled out as a presidential possibility and had thrown his weight with Stevenson. Whenever you play around with something like this, there's

always a possibility of rebellion in the areas where you think you're absolutely safe. And this, in my opinion, is one of the things--that there was some rebellion, that the delegates were not going to be led down the road like cattle. In fact, I helped foment some rebellion wherever I could in a few instances. This got out of hand

First of all, they underestimated Jack Kennedy's strength, and they underestimated his strength because they did not, I don't think, realize how strong a personality he was and how winsome he could be. And he was able to do a lot. As a result, if Sam Rayburn [Samuel T. Rayburn] hadn't ruled the way he did, they may have had trouble, because Sam Rayburn saved the day for them by turning a deaf ear to the nays and only listening to the yeas on the....

STEWART: Did you recall having any discussions with John Bailey before the balloting took place?

PRENDERGAST: No. I barely knew John Bailey at the time. I had talked with Abe Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff]. He came over to see us. I had met Bailey, but I don't recall my conversations with him.

STEWART: Why precisely did New York give its ninety-eight votes to Kennedy, as opposed to Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] or someone else?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I think it was primarily because, number one, we had a Democratic Governor, and number two, we had a strong party organization, of which I was the state chairman and Mr. DeSapio was the national committeeman and the unofficial city chairman. Between the three of us we were able to persuade our delegates that our strength showed up best if we were together and not diffused all over the lot.

STEWART: But why Kennedy? Did you feel he would help that much in New York?

PRENDERGAST: Oh, I felt that this was a fresh breeze coming over the horizon. We, not only I, we felt that Kefauver brought nothing to the ticket, absolutely nothing. We had trouble enough already with Stevenson at the top of the ticket. I, to be very frank with you, admired Adlai Stevenson, but I knew realistically you could never, never sell him, and unless we got an agent to couple with him, we would never carry New York.

These people that become involved in national programs and national campaigns are either ignorant or don't care what the problems of the state chairman is in such a thing. Now, for instance, in '56 we lost New York State by the greatest plurality that a Republican ever took it by. Well, that's one thing, but what they don't understand or don't care about is that, when you have a huge plurality or a sweep, it hurts you in every single little district across the state. We had made gains in '54 with Averell Harriman; we had gained a little more in '55 in upstate areas where they knew nothing but Republicans. In '56 we lost a great deal; we lost supervisors; we lost city councilmen; we lost village and town councilmen; we lost many



things across the state. The whole building collapsed really, and we had to start building over again. This is what we knew was going to come--we had experienced it in '52 to some extent; I was a county leader in '52--and we felt that Jack Kennedy would bring a balance to this ticket. We liked Humphrey, but Humphrey was the darling of the liberals, and we had to get a balance. This is the reason we went for Jack Kennedy.

STEWART: From your dealing with the Kennedy people at the Convention, was there any one person who impressed you as being in charge of things or who really knew what they were doing and where they were going?

PRENDERGAST: No. The only one that I had any relations with at the time was Jack Kennedy. And I certainly felt he knew where he was going or where he wanted to go, at least.

STEWART: Did you get the definite impression that he was, in fact, in charge of this whole operation?

PRENDERGAST: Yes, I did. Very much so.

STEWART: Do you recall any of the specific discussions you had with him at the convention? Any of the kinds of things you were talking to him about?

PRENDERGAST: No, except that Jack knew that he was in a precarious spot with the wrong man being the chairman of the convention so far as being friendly with him. I was aware of his knowledge of how these things were sometimes railroaded through. In other words, nothing happened that we didn't expect; it didn't come to a surprise either to him or to other people like him, or like myself.

STEWART: Why did Texas go for Kennedy?

PRENDERGAST: I don't know the answer to that. I think it might have been a--we could call it a typical American gesture. That would be the best description I could give.

STEWART: Did you have any contact at all with Kennedy during the '56 campaign? Did he campaign in New York at all?

PRENDERGAST: I think he came in once or twice, and I met him, which was normal for the state chairman to do. But I had very little contacts with him during the campaign.

STEWART: Moving on then; during the years '57 and '58, do you recall having any contact with either him or the people on his staff?

PRENDERGAST: My contacts remained completely with Jack, and they became closer.

As time went by, I was in touch with him quite a bit because this fellow had impressed me immensely. I liked him; I liked him as a person. Nobody knew then what '60 was going to be or anything else.

In '57 Jack Kennedy, myself, and a fellow by the name of Tom Murray [Thomas E. Murray, Jr.] (whose father had been on the Atomic Energy Commission) were awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws by my own college, Westchester [Westchester Community College], where I was a trustee. We had a little something to do with Jack being honored with his doctorate, and unfortunately that was the time that he wound up in the hospital with an operation on his back.

And at the same time, in conjunction with it--in other words, the degrees were awarded in the afternoon. The year before, I had instituted an upstate political dinner. In other words, the normal operation was for the state committee to hold a dinner in February in New York City at a hundred dollars a plate. I instituted a fifty-dollar-a-plate dinner in Albany this year, and I had arranged for Jack to be the speaker. He and I had worked this out. We thought it would be a good shot for him, be good exposure. Of course, the day came, and he was unable to accept the doctorate. His sister, Mrs. Stephen Smith, came, and Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen]--this was the first time I had met Ted Sorensen--Ted read Jack's speech of acceptance of the doctorate, and I wound up with Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] as the speaker in Albany that night.

STEWART: What were your earliest impressions of Ted Sorensen, do you recall?

PRENDERGAST: Ted Sorensen was one of the smartest men I've ever met and a very likable person. Starting with that day, each time I was around him my impressions of him were greater and better.

STEWART: Do you recall what your earliest plans were for the 1960 campaign in terms of who you were going to support and how you were going to go about it?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I never lost my feelings towards Jack Kennedy, although I wasn't sure that he would be able to put enough together to take the top spot. If not, I was certain in my own mind that he had to be on the ticket this time. I had seen quite a bit of him.

Let's talk about 1959. Whenever he came to New York, we met or we talked, one or the other. When I was in Washington, our relationship was very pleasant. I was flattered by many of his confidences. I was flattered, too, by his asking of advice and, more than that, seemed to follow after he received it. Fortunately, the few of the things that I said I thought he should do did work out all right.

We had a very turbulent year here in New York. We had, as I said earlier, we had lived with the so-called Volunteers for Stevenson, and, of course, their philosophy was all pitch should be towards him, never mind anybody else, whatever level. This hurt Stevenson a great deal in the rural areas, because I know, I was going around patching fences. A speaker would go up into the rural districts from the Stevenson headquarters and make no bones about it: "We don't care about your supervisors, your highway commissioners, your

councilmen. We don't care about anything; we couldn't care less. Just Adlai." And, of course, this caused a great deal of resentment. And you couldn't blame them. The only excuse I could offer, when I'd go around like that, was to say, "Well, the candidate doesn't feel this way, and he can't be responsible for a lot of these volunteers. They're unpaid, and we're more or less at their mercy."

The volunteers had carried over into 1958. They wanted Tom Finletter [Thomas K. Finletter] for their candidate for the United States Senate. Their philosophy was rule or ruin. Of course, I was in a very precarious position; I had the obligations as a state chairman to everybody. Maybe I took them too seriously. Mr. Farley [James A Farley] had indicated that he would possibly be a candidate. This was before the '58 gubernatorial convention. Finletter wanted to be a candidate. Mr. Thomas E. Murray had evidenced some interest, and Mayor Wagner.

At the time I was traveling around the state continuously, and wherever I could I'd talk to newspaper people, political people, business people, doctors, and so forth. And continuously, what was coming to the surface was a very strong feeling for Wagner. There wasn't any feeling for Finletter. There was some feeling for Mr. Farley, but this was mostly from men who had been postmasters and personal friends. And there was some feeling for Mr. Murray. But the overall picture was Wagner

I remember maybe this time 1958, this time of the year, I met with Governor Harriman and Mr. DeSapio over at Mr. Harriman's residence on 81<sup>st</sup> Street. The Governor was one day torn by the Finletter people and another day for something else. I finally put the cards on the table. I said, "Look, I'm traveling this state"--of course, Mr. Hogan's [Frank S. Hogan] name was coming up in the New York newspapers, too--"and the feeling I get is for Wagner." So we decided that day that Mr. DeSapio would talk with him and get some kind of a decision from him. And the Governor's office was taking a poll on how bad some of the scandals that were beginning to come out of the Wagner Administration were hurting them--housing relocation, and the rats running through the schools, and all that stuff. And we left off at that.

Mr. DeSapio came back after talking with Wagner, and said that Wagner was going to California and would be back the following week and then he'd give us his decision. The day before he was to come back, Farley had a big story in the New York newspapers about fake drafts, and he knew all about them, this, that and the other thing. Carmine went on a television program that afternoon, and, of course, he was confronted with Farley's statement. Trying to keep peace and everything, he sort of denied he was for Wagner, and they played that up in a bad way. Wagner got off the plane the next day, and he gets the newspapers, and he gets sore and blew his top.

Well, we got into the convention, and, in the meantime, Hogan's story was coming up and up. We got to the day on a Sunday morning when I had a meeting with Mr. DeSapio, and his feeling was that we had to go with Wagner. My feelings were, well, it was a hell of a time now to start, we should have started a long time ago. There could have been a genuine draft for Wagner at the time. There was no question because people I'd meet--Wagner, Wagner. Of course, we sat there in session up there for three days and three nights, and he wouldn't give us an answer. Then he ran off to Canada on us, typical of him.

If any one person is responsible for the catastrophe in Buffalo in '58 it was him, because if he had done what he should have done, accepted the nomination, we would have

come out of there in good shape. I doubt if Mr. Harriman would have been defeated if it weren't for that, because over his inability to make a decision, it went to Hogan. We got the famous telegram from Lehman [Herbert H. Lehman] from Europe using the word "bosses", this was the first time it was used.

Mrs. Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] took it up from there. She got on television the night before election, on *Meet the Press* and asked if she would support Hogan. She said she didn't know. Previous to that, I had met with Mrs. Roosevelt three or four times to try to keep peace. At one point she accused me of being for Farley or Hogan or Wagner because they were Catholics. Finally I said, "Mrs. Roosevelt, this is ridiculous. One thing I'm not is a bigot." And I said, "Who do you think would make the best candidate for nomination for Senate?" And she said, "I don't think any of them would, because I think Mr. Finletter has the best chance of learning." This was the thing that I had to contend with.

We went down to defeat in '58. Mr. Hogan lost because of what happened here in New York by the Stevenson people, and this gave Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] the impetus he needed. I don't think his campaign would have ever gotten off the ground otherwise.

So when we got to '59 we were still smarting with the wounds of bossism and all of this nonsense, and this was the time that I was talking with Jack Kennedy continuously. In the fall I had several meetings with him, and then in December of '59 Bobby came up to see me. We ate lunch downstairs in this hotel [Biltmore Hotel]. He said, "Will you come out for Jack?" And I said, "I can't come out for Jack. This is the worst thing that could happen to him." We hadn't even elected delegates, let alone held a meeting. "How can I come out for him?" I said. "You're just going to revive this whole bossism business." At this time the campaign tactics of the Stevenson people were beyond belief--bitter, bitter bitterness, much bitterness against Jack Kennedy because of his religion. And they made no bones about it. So I guess my relationship with Bobby began to deteriorate at that time and went on down.

STEWART: He asked for a definite open endorsement in December of '59?

PRENDERGAST: Right. Right downstairs in the Madison Room of the Biltmore.

STEWART: Had there in fact been an agreement among probably you and Mayor Wagner and DeSapio and Harriman not to endorse anyone, at least until....

PRENDERGAST: There wasn't any agreement, actually, because there wasn't any need for an agreement. Anybody with two ounces of common sense would know that, or anybody with a conscience.

There was activity by the Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] people at this time, Eddie Weisl [Edwin L. Weisl Jr.], who is now the national committeeman, Roy Cohn. Tom Connolly [Thomas T. Connolly] was around, Walter Jenkins and Marvin Watson were around quite a bit. They were, I think, devoting most of their persuasive activities towards Mr. DeSapio, assuming that perhaps I wasn't important enough, which was all right with me because I wasn't forced into the embarrassment of any commitments. At that time you certainly have to admit that Johnson was the most powerful man in the United States, even

more so than Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], because of his position and so forth, and Eisenhower was a sick man. As an American, I couldn't close my eyes to the fact of Johnson's abilities or anything else. I was an admirer of Johnson. I still am. I think he's a strong man. And I secretly hoped that, well, maybe we could come up with a Johnson-Kennedy operation, which would be good for everybody.

Then I began to get more involved with Jack, so much so that Ted Sorensen worked here for awhile without anybody knowing it, in our publicity department. I mean worked in the sense that he was looking over things and advising us. I shouldn't say worked, I should say he came here as a consultant. This was an agreement between Jack and myself.

STEWART:           When was this?

PRENDERGAST:    This would be in '59 or '60.

STEWART:           Theodore White in his book *The Making of a President* says that you and DeSapio were, as he puts it, "alerted too late to the Kennedy Activity in New York State." This is probably more specifically the activity of John Bailey and....[phone call] I was asking you about a statement that Teddy White makes in his book, *The Making of a President*, that you and DeSapio were, as he puts it, alerted too late to the Kennedy activity in New York State," that John Bailey had come in and won over Crotty [Peter J. Crotty] and that Ambassador Kennedy had gotten Buckley [Charles A. Buckley] and Keogh [Eugene J. Keogh] on their side, and so forth.

PRENDERGAST:    Well, the only part of Mr. White's book that I read was the version concerning New York State, and I read that in one of the magazines that serialized it before the book came out. And after reading that I was completely disgusted with the inaccuracies. I remember the passage that you mentioned. The fact that he talks about Bailey coming in like this is as far from the truth as anything can be.

Number one, we knew each time Bailey came in, and five minutes after he left we knew the exact conversations that took place--who he saw, what promises were made, et cetera. As I said, I was involved with Jack more than anybody else, in a quiet type of view--didn't bother me in the least. At that time we were aware of exactly what Jack's strength was, that Bailey and Mr. Kennedy, Sr., put together, amounted to thirty-six votes out of a hundred and five. And they were confined to the Bronx, to Erie County, and to three or four in Brooklyn. And a lot of people who were doing the yelling were not delegates, were not going to be delegates.

This is ridiculous, this whole setup of what.... Obviously this was fed to White when he wrote the book. There's no question about it. I only met the guy once; I could understand it.

STEWART:           What then precisely were your intentions, say, in January or February of 1960?

PRENDERGAST:    Well my intentions in February of '60 became rather apparent because I brought Jack Kennedy in as a speaker at the 1960 state Democratic

dinner, which was pretty much of a tip off. I remember in the fall of '59, in October, Cardinal Spellman [Richard A. Spellman] has the big Albert E. Smith Memorial Dinner, which is probably the greatest dinner around here each year. I knew that he had invited Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] the year before. And I felt very strongly that Jack Kennedy should also be invited to speak. This was a little bit out of the ordinary because those dinners are always the mayor of the city of New York, the governor of the state of New York, and a speaker. But I was able to persuade the people around the Cardinal to have Jack Kennedy invited. And I think Jack Kennedy buried Nixon that night with his cleverness, his warmth, his enthusiastic way of doing things. So when the dinner came around in February it made a little bit obvious to everybody what the feelings of the state chairman were. This, of course, caused a furor of the Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.], Lehman, Finletter, *New York Post* type of operation--feverish activity after that.

STEWART: Did Senator Kennedy understand why you couldn't come out and openly endorse him?

PRENDERGAST: Well, if he couldn't understand it, I honestly don't know why because it should have been very obvious. I think they were reaching. You see, to talk and explain things and go over things and rationalize them with Jack Kennedy was one thing; to do so with anybody else was entirely different. I guess Bobby Kennedy had a contract, and he was going to go through with it, come hell or high water. But it was the worst possible thing that could have happened to Jack at the time.

STEWART: For you to....

PRENDERGAST: And Jack knew it.

STEWART: And I assume DeSapio and, at least to a certain extent, Wagner and Harriman had the same feelings as far as open endorsements were concerned.

PRENDERGAST: Well, Harriman did. Now you've got to remember that Harriman was an ex-governor at this time, and I had created a Public Affairs Committee and made him the chairman of it. It was primarily to give him a forum and to give him the opportunity to stay in the limelight.

Wagner always played his own game, what was best for Wagner. In the summer of '59 he asked me if I would, as a favor to him, indicate that the New York State delegation would be interested in him as a vice presidential possibility. And I agreed to it. And I had a terrible time doing it. I mean, I had to fight the county leaders; I had a bad fight with Buckley over it. I never had a fight with Mr. DeSapio, but we had a long discussion over it, and many, many others. But I said to him at that time, "Look, I'll do this, but you have to understand we're for Kennedy. We're going to be for Kennedy. If he is not a candidate, then you come. But you're never number one because this would knock out Jack Kennedy." You couldn't have two Catholics; you couldn't have a man from New York and a man from Massachusetts on the top of the national ticket. He said he understood that.

But I did that to keep peace in our own family because Wagner was becoming more and more of a source of disrupting things. He was playing ball with Alex Rose against the organization. He was wined and dined considerably by the Texas people all that winter. We were aware of it. There's no secrets in politics. He was saying yes to the Stevenson people at the same time. We were also aware of that. And I did this to keep peace. Jack knew it, and Jack understood it.

STEWART: Did the Johnson people make any specific efforts to get you on their side?

PRENDERGAST: I was never approached by the Johnson people previous to the Convention, except the day before I left to go to California. I had a meeting with Mr. Johnson himself in which I'm sorry I didn't listen to him.

STEWART: Why? What was the....

PRENDERGAST: Well, it was such that all he wanted was thirty votes out of our delegation; thirty to thirty-five votes. And his reasoning was sound. If he got that, he could cause a stalemate on the first ballot; and if Jack didn't win on the first ballot, Jack couldn't win. And we knew this too. Had I gone along, I'm sure that the road that I've had to travel since '60 would have been a lot more pleasant and everything else. But I finally said to him, I said, "Lyndon, I've given this fellow my word." I don't know, maybe this is an indication that someone in politics should be flexible and never mind being honorable, but I chose the road that I've always traveled.

But all the efforts towards the Johnson Administration were directed towards Mr. DeSapio. I assume they felt that he was the most important, which was all right with me. I had no qualms about that, no resentment towards it. But one of the people that were very interested in Lyndon Johnson was Bill Shea [William A. Shea], the fellow who Shea stadium was named after, who was a very great friend of mine, a good friend. And Bill finally came to me and asked me, and I said, "Well, Bill, no one has talked to me." And he said, "Do you mean to tell me that Weisl, Connolly, Jenkins, Watson, none of those fellows...." I said, "No, none of them have. I know they've seen Carmine, but they haven't seen me." So as a result of that I met Lyndon Johnson across the street in Bill Shea's office.

I don't know in which book it's referred to, but there's a famous meeting recorded between myself and Mr. Kennedy, Sr., along the line there.

STEWART: I don't think I've ever run into that.

PRENDERGAST: Well, in the spring.... Well, I can pinpoint it because it was exactly, to the day, the week before the West Virginia primary.

STEWART: It was in, what, April?

PRENDERGAST: Whatever that was. And my friend, Mr. DeSapio said to me, he says,

“We have a lunch date.” And I said, “With whom?” “Oh,” he said, “a guy you’ll like.” I said, “Who?” He said, “Joe Kennedy.” I had never met Mr. Kennedy. Now it was the next day and we were going up--the meeting was up at the plaza. On the way up I said to Carmine, I said, “Look, do what you want, but I’m not going to be beleaguered.”

And we got up in the room, and Charley Buckley was there and a man by the name of Tom Shanahan [Thomas J. Shanahan] who was the president of the Federation Bank and Trust and who had financial dealings with.... [phone call] Well, it was a well known fact that Mr. Buckley was close to Joe Kennedy, Sr., and, as I said, Shanahan was also close to him too in a frivolous way.

When we walked in--this guy immediately jumped all over me. And he started to give me a song and dance, and he told me, told all of us, that they were only going to get about 33 percent of the vote in West Virginia and they would be defeated. He said, “I want you to come out for Jack tomorrow.” Now he said, “If you don’t come out for Jack tomorrow, your hundred and five votes aren’t worth a damn at the Convention.”

So I said, “Mr. Kennedy, I’m just as Irish as you are, and if that’s all you care about, our hundred and five votes, you can go to hell.” As I said that he put on his hat and slammed the door and went out. There was consternation in the room. Buckley and.... I said, “Look, nobody is going to tell me what I have to do.”

When I came back to the office I called Jack. I told him, I said, “This is exactly what happened.” Again, I said, “Good God, you know what’s going to happen here if I come out for you, or anybody comes out for you, either DeSapio or myself.” And he said, “Of course, you’re right. Don’t pay any attention to it.” That’s really what happened because we had to elect delegates that year and I had to be reelected as state chairman, and I was trying.... I had probably the worst state committee meeting I ever held here in the Biltmore, worst in the sense of the tactics of the Stevenson people, what was going on.

And there’s another bit of interesting history involved. Joe Starkey [Joseph T. Starkey], the leader in Kings County, came in, and a couple of the others, and told us that they would have a revolt on their hands if we made Senator Lehman a delegate-at-large. Well, both DeSapio and I didn’t agree with them.

STEWART: If you did or you didn’t?

PRENDERGAST: We did not agree with them....

STEWART: They would have a revolt if you did?

PRENDERGAST: Well, regardless, we felt that it would be a mistake not to have him. It would be a discourtesy. You know? So, on the other hand, we had had a big bitter thing with them about how the delegates-at-large were to be chosen. Historically, they were chosen by the state committee at large. He wanted them divided into congressional districts. Obviously this was a political maneuver, and we didn’t go for it. And we had all the moral things, the plusses, on our side on it.

But, because of this and some of the statements he had made--that if it wasn’t his way, he wouldn’t serve as a delegate--Mr. DeSapio and I got Mr. Goldwater, Monroe



Goldwater, who was the counsel for the state committee, and we said, "Look, contact Senator Lehman through Julius Edlestein, and find out if he will serve or he won't serve, because we don't want to name him and then have him decline either." The night before our state committee meeting when the elections were to be held, Edlestein came back to Mr. Goldwater and said the Senator had advised him that he was inclined not to accept. So we did not nominate him, and then all hell broke loose all over again. [BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

There were a lot of goings on. Wagner pulled his usual tricks: "What a terrible thing" it was, although he knew the full story of this. And a few other of these phonies were doing the same thing. And then Frank Roosevelt got into the act. Now we had made Frank Roosevelt a delegate-at-large at the request of his mother, and again we were bending over. They tried to prevent Mr. Farley from being a delegate, and we worked out a deal where we gave them Finletter. And, as you know, there was a fight on over Farley. And all these fellows were going to give up their seat; they were going to resign and let Mr. Lehman take it.

So I called a meeting, a caucus of the delegates, in Albany to get a feeling. The first order of business was seating Mr. Lehman because he had now reversed himself and said he wanted to be a delegate. I ran the meeting; so I opened it by telling them that I was aware of a lot of statements in the newspapers about people going to resign to give their seat to Mr. Lehman, but that I was not aware of any resignations, and if there were any I would know about it. And I said, "I want to know this, and I want the people who made the statements to know what I think of them. Now", I said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. We're not going to have any heroes here." I said, "I will give my seat up." So this is how Mr. Lehman came back into the picture, and this is why Jack Kennedy didn't have another half vote at the Convention.

STEWART: What changed after West Virginia? What impact did West Virginia, and the big victory Kennedy had there, what impact did that have on you and your plans?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I think the West Virginia thing really began to show that Jack Kennedy had the strength, and, instead of having a 60-40-chance with him having the short hand, it came around, and he was better than 50-50. And, if you recall, at that time Lyndon Johnson had not done anything, and I think he woke up to the fact. And the activity began around a little more in a greater way, in a stronger way, in his behalf because they began to realize--everybody thought Jack Kennedy was going to fall on his face in West Virginia, and that would be the end of him. It didn't alter my plans. It just made it a little easier.

STEWART: You say everyone thought he was going to fall. I read some place that both you and Mr. DeSapio hoped he would fall.

PRENDERGAST: Well, you see, this is how incorrect these things can be. Jack called me just a short time after they got the results. He was nice enough to call me because he knew I was interested. But these kinds of things didn't bother me because it kept the Stevenson people off my back.

STEWART: In putting together the delegation and the whole selection process, what considerations, as far as Kennedy was concerned, were you applying in putting the delegation together?

PRENDERGAST: I called the county leaders together in the fall of '59, and I made it very plain to them. I said, "Look, this is going to be a historical convention, and more than any other time the strength of New York State is going to be felt. Therefore, we have to conduct ourselves in the most dignified way. And in order to do that, I want you to understand that we must have solid people on the delegation, and we must have organizational people." I said, "I want every county chairman as a delegate if I can get him." And I said, "Where you give me somebody else, I want an affidavit from you that this is a decent person, that he can't be bought, he can't be persuaded otherwise." As a result of that, I had a good strong delegation that understood what unity meant, what organization meant. And it's a good thing I did because, when we got out there, the Stevenson people went to unbelievable ends, unbelievable.

STEWART: For example?

PRENDERGAST: Well, women were made available for delegates. There was all kinds of partying going on. I had to go to a couple of my county leaders and say, "Look, I don't want to hear about you going to know about it." This kind of stuff. I was getting telegrams from back here in the New York area saying, "The Little Sisters of the Poor want Jack Kennedy, but we want Adlai Stevenson," signed with a name that didn't mean anything. But it was a complete program because I would get a hundred telegrams in a batch. It was obviously a well arranged thing, but our delegation stood up well.

I went to more meetings with Lyndon Johnson out there. Again, he made the request because Johnson had some congressmen who were not delegates but who were going to him and saying, "Look, Mike is holding these, and Carmine is holding these, and if they'll let them go, we can do something for you." I finally, at one meeting, said to him, I said, "Lyndon," I said, "perhaps you won't like me, but I hope you will respect me because I'm telling you the truth. This guy has this delegation, and there aren't any loose votes laying around." The only loose votes there were for Stevenson. So I will say he thanked me for it. He said, "You never told me a lie." He said, "I do respect you."

STEWART: Do you recall the reception held at Gracie Mansion on June 16, again, that Teddy White describes in his book? He says that Kennedy was quite angry because of the whole Lehman thing, the exclusion of Lehman from the delegation? Do you recall this reception?

PRENDERGAST: I recall it very vividly. Jack Kennedy was in New York the day after the state committee meeting when Lehman was not given the seat, and thanked me for it," and I explained to him what Mr. Goldwater had gone through. I said, "We didn't want to be in the position of giving him the seat and then

taking it away from him because,” I said, “that half of a vote isn’t making any difference. But this is the embarrassing position we were put in.” So this so-called party at Gracie Mansion--nothing could be further from the truth than what White said in his book. Again this is another inaccuracy. And again to me it has to mean that the guy was fed the information to write.

STEWART:               What expectations did you personally have in all of your discussions with John Kennedy at this period as to what your role would be in both the national campaign and....

PRENDERGAST:       Truthfully, I never discussed this with him. And truthfully, I never looked beyond where I was as the state chairman. See, during 1960, in the spring, I was on the phone with Dave Lawrence [David L. Lawrence]; Bill Green [William J. Green, Jr.]; Matt McCloskey [Matthew H. McCloskey]; Dick Daley [Richard J. Daley]; Pat Brown; Jack Arvey [Jacob M. Arvey], Illinois national committeeman; also with Bob Meyner [Robert B. Meyner], Governor of New Jersey--he was allied with the Johnson operation. Johnny Kenny and them were lined up with the Kennedy operation.

But the arguments that we were getting, that I was getting from Dave Lawrence-- Dave was afraid of a Catholic on the top of the ticket, what it would do to his state. He could lose the legislature; he had a Bible belt to worry about. Daley’s argument was, “Mike, I don’t know whether I can carry Cook County big enough to offset Illinois.” He said, “Look, we’re all Catholics. It looks bad.” Pat Brown didn’t know what to do. He was this way and that way.

Anyway, we got out to Chicago. We got out, DeSapio and I, the Thursday before, and the next day we began to have meetings. We more or less had made Dave Lawrence the chairman of the meeting because he was a governor and senior member. So there used to be Bailey, Matt McCloskey, Billy Green, Dave Lawrence, DeSapio, myself, Johnny Kenny at one, Pat Brown, Daley, Arvey. This was the group, and this was where the votes were. And we kept pushing, pushing.

Dave Lawrence was the last guy to fold up. Finally, the Saturday before the Convention opened, Dave said to us, “All right,” he said, “if this young man will go along with Johnson for the vice president,” because we had canvassed and canvassed, and we were sure as sure can be in a situation like this that no one else could possibly carry the South other than Johnson, and in no way could we win unless we carried the South. So it had to be that. If he would go with Johnson for vice president, and go with Bailey for national chairman, if he would agree to work through the organizations, it was all go. And that’s what we needed.

That was around 11 o’clock when we broke up. That was in the Biltmore in LA, and this is where Jack Kennedy’s suite was. I stayed there to keep out of circulation. The only one who knew where I was was DeSapio. I stayed up in Jack’s suite till half past 4 that afternoon when he got in. I said, “Now look, this is the story. Will you go with this?” He said, “Yes, I’ll go with that.” I said, “You call Dave Lawrence and you tell Dave Lawrence and we’ll have no problems. We’ve got this thing wrapped up.” And I went back--we were at the Ambassador.

About an hour and a half later Lawrence called and told me. He said, "That young man is all right." He said, "He must be reading my mind. I didn't even have to ask him. He's going to go for Lyndon Johnson for vice president, and he's willing to go with Bailey for national chairman, and he's willing to work through the organization." And that's how it was all done ahead of time.

STEWART: Do you have any....

PRENDERGAST: Jack knew this.

STEWART: Did you have any definite indications at the Convention time, or before, as to how the campaign would be run in New York, the national campaign, as far as the citizens group was concerned?

PRENDERGAST: Before or after?

STEWART: Before the Convention, let's say.

PRENDERGAST: No we didn't get into any of that before. I had no discussions about that beforehand.

STEWART: Let me ask you: To what extent, if at all, were the Kennedy people involved in the problems surrounding the chairmanship of the New York delegation, or was that an entirely separate....

PRENDERGAST: They had nothing whatever to do with it. What was happening was the guy in City Hall was snarling because he wanted to be the chairman. Averell Harriman wanted to be the chairman. Arthur Levitt wanted to be the chairman. And I was holding these meetings with the county leaders, and every time they did they would come up and say, "We want you to be the chairman." So I finally got them to agree. In Albany I had a meeting, and I said, "I thank you for your confidence. Can I leave here knowing that you will back up any decision I make?" So I went to Harriman and I went to Levitt. I said, "Look, this character is out to do everybody harm unless he gets his way. Let's make him...." I said, "Look, I'm willing to give it up." And that's how he became the chairman, Wagner.

STEWART: Harriman was the honorary chairman, I think, and you....

PRENDERGAST: I ran it. But I ran it.

STEWART: You were the caucus.

PRENDERGAST: I ran them. I had a little bout with him out there. He wanted to do that too. I said, "You've got all your going to get, and that's all."

STEWART: Yes, that was over the announcement of the--well, at the actual caucus and then over the announcement.

PRENDERGAST: But you see, as I told you, he was playing all sides against the middle. And when he finally found out which way the thing was going to go, he flopped over to Kennedy. Jack Kennedy knew this. He was aware of all this.

STEWART: I think he was the first one to endorse him even, before the New York State caucus.

PRENDERGAST: Who?

STEWART: Wagner, to openly endorse him.

PRENDERGAST: He issued an endorsement out of City Hall after he knew what the delegates were going to do, yes. But it was all decided by that time, although we didn't have a formal meeting.

STEWART: Did you ever consider any alternative as far as the delegation was concerned?

PRENDERGAST: In what way?

STEWART: Either splitting it or--there was no problem deciding it should all go to one person?

PRENDERGAST: No, because, you see, once we split it we were diffusing our strength until it meant little or nothing, because you see, in order for us to influence Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, California, and these other places, we had to promise to produce better than a hundred votes. We produced a hundred four and a half out of a hundred and fifteen. This is the guarantee we had to give them. And if we didn't give them on the first ballot, they were going to split, because Dave Lawrence had a real problem in Pennsylvania, a very real one. There was a problem in New Jersey between Kennedy's forces and the Governor's. Pat Brown didn't know what to do. So finally I said to him, "Look, how many votes can you actually count?" He said, "Thirty." I said, "Well, go and tell the Kennedys that you'll give them thirty votes, but that you can't be responsible for the thirty-three others." I said, "At least you'll be able to back that up." Finally he did, and we wound up--I think we got thirty- three out of California. But we never.... At that point, we had made a decision, we had to stay with it. Our strength lies in the consolidation of better than a hundred votes.

STEWART: I heard there was a problem with arrangements at the Convention as far as seating and tickets were concerned. Do you recall anything about this?

PRENDERGAST: Yes. We had a lot of unpleasantness, and this again was the Stevenson operation. It's an old trick, you know, to have tickets printed. In 1956, when Harriman was a possible candidate, we were shut out. The Stevenson people had all the tickets because Paul Butler gave them to them. I had to get a ticket, fly a guy back to New York, and have some counterfeits made in order to get our people in. That's how bad it was. Of course, they pulled the same thing. We'd go there, and what they were doing was putting girls in the seats where the delegates were entitled to sit. And it's all right to--it's a lot easier to move a man than it is to move a girl, you know. And they were well trained; they were putting on a screaming act. This was the forerunner of what you see today where they lie down in the streets; they were lying down on the chairs. I finally had to get the captain of the ushers, "Get these people out. Here are my delegates. Here's the list of them. Here's their names. I don't care who has tickets. You can put them anyplace else in the gallery you want, but these are my people." And that was the unpleasantness.

STEWART: I think there was also a little fuss at the time of the Stevenson demonstration, wasn't there, over the....

PRENDERGAST: When somebody tried to make a New York banner. Yes, until Mr. Lehman came up and then they handed it to him. It was some little snot-nosed guy who came along and was going to take over and tried to rip it out. Somebody gave him a shove, and he landed over on the other side of the aisle.

STEWART: You saw Kennedy the morning after the nomination, I believe.

PRENDERGAST: I saw him the night of the nomination, too.

STEWART: Could you describe what they talked about, or generally what you were seeing him for?

PRENDERGAST: Well, he was exuberant, naturally. One of the things I remember we talked about was Adlai Stevenson. Everybody had gotten a belly full of this Stevenson operation at that point. It disgusted a great many people. The tactics and the gals and stuff. And this anti-Catholic stuff was getting pretty rough. I remember Jack saying to me, "My god, can you imagine a man like him ever becoming the President of the United States?" That was the night we went over to Chandler's; we had dinner that night. But he wanted, what he talked to me about the next day, he wanted Scoop Jackson [Henry M. Jackson] in the picture. You remember he was our national director, or whatever you call it, for awhile. We made no great plans at that point.

STEWART: That was the day, of course, that he indicted that Johnson was his choice, which you had been aware of.

PRENDERGAST: Well, we had been aware of it since Saturday.

STEWART: There was never any doubt in your mind from Saturday?

PRENDERGAST: Oh, no, no. I went down to see Mr. Sam Rayburn on Sunday. I liked Mr. Rayburn, and respected him. I knew he felt badly about Lyndon. So I went down just to say hello and be nice. And I walked in and he said to me, "Mike", he said, "do you know who was just here?" I said, "No sir, I don't." He said, "Bobby Kennedy." I said, "So?" He said, "Well, the goddamn man, he ordered Lyndon off the ticket."

STEWART: Ordered Lyndon what?

PRENDERGAST: Off the ticket. So I said. "What did you tell him?" He said, "I told him to go to hell." I said, "You did the right thing." But I had no doubts. I knew Jack would never.... You know, the whole thing was put together on him. And it wasn't any selfish reasons. I mean, you know, if I had to pick a guy that I liked personally, who I considered probably the most genteel person of everybody, it was Stu Symington [Stuart Symington]. They wouldn't buy him. Couldn't sell him, absolutely no. I talked to Congressmen. I talked to state chairmen. They wouldn't buy him. The only guy they'd buy was Johnson. You know, you had Soapy Williams [G. Mennen Williams] and some of that crew rebel because Johnson was going to be the candidate, that kind of nonsense.

STEWART: It never amounted to...

PRENDERGAST: No.

STEWART: ...much. Well, unless there's anything else about the Convention, why don't we move on to.... What were the earliest plans that you recall as far as the campaign in New York?

PRENDERGAST: Well, we met several times--Ted Sorensen, Jack, myself, I think Bailey was in on one, Abe Ribicoff. We had a very--we went to a very low ebb after the convention. We knew we had some problems. First of all, Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman] did not come to the Convention. That was the problem. We were getting stories that there were a great deal of apprehension among the very wealthy Jewish people against Jack Kennedy, and it was based on the old man--you know, the anti-semetic bit. So I got Abe Feinberg [Abraham Feinberg] from New York, south Long Island, and Abe is really a great man, and he was influential among wealthy Jewish people across the country because of his activities in raising money for causes. He went out and got a hold of Sid Salomon [Sidney Salomon Jr.] from St. Louis, and together they barnstormed the country and they straightened out a great many things.

In the meantime, as I said, we were at rather a low ebb, and--I'm trying to think of the man.... There was a man here--I can't think of his name at the moment--who had been with Mr. Truman when he was President. He was a writer, a very nice person. He happened to walk in one day, and I said to him, "What the hell are we going to do about the boss? We've

got to have him.” He says, “You can get him?” I says, “How?” He said, “He’ll come out if you call him.” So he gave me the private number, and I called him. He wasn’t at it. Then I called Jack at Hyannis Port and told him, “This is the story I get: Put a call in to Mr. Truman and I’m told that, if I ask him or if you ask him yourself, that he will come out for us.” And I gave him the number.

So meantime Mr. Truman called back. So I said, “Mr. President, you’ve got to go to work. We need you very badly.” And I said, “I want you to know what I did. We can’t win without you. I know in your heart you want to win, too. I took the Liberty of calling the candidate and telling him that if he calls you himself, you would come out.” And he said, “You did absolutely right, young man.” That was his blessing. The next day Truman came out for Kennedy, and the next day after that I read a great story in the press of how Abe Ribicoff engineered it. [Laughter] But that’s the truth of it.

STEWART:                There was a report that you had an agreement with the Kennedy people that there would be no separation in New York. Is this true?

PRENDERGAST:        No. No. There are always citizens for so-and-so committees, always, and that’s necessitated by these foolish laws on fundraising. And they have much, much more leeway in that field than the regular operation has and aren’t subjected to the laws as we were. No. What I had, the problems I had on that were individual problems. Now, for instance, Bobby Kennedy wanted Morgenthau [Robert M. Morgenthau] to be chairman for the Citizens for Kennedy and Johnson in the Bronx, and Buckley blew his top. He really wanted that job. Finally we reasoned--reasoned and reasoned with him, the more Carmine and myself, and got him calmed down. I said, “Look, Charlie, you’re the one that’s going to do the work, you’re the one that’s going to do this. Let’s keep everybody happy.” I had a couple of other instances like that around the state, but that was all. It was a personality thing.

STEWART:                But as far as the total campaign organization, there was no opposition to any of them; it was just assumed that there would be a separate....

PRENDERGAST:        It’s the normal operation in any campaign, absolutely.

STEWART:                How was it decided who would have what roles statewide in the campaign organization?

PRENDERGAST:        You’re talking about the state committee?

STEWART:                Yes.

PRENDERGAST:        Well, we picked Harry Brandt, who’s head of the Brandt theatres and really a top notch man. He moved the whole staff over and went to work, advertising, fund raising, coordinating, you know, which left me free to get away from all this detail stuff. I could go out and mediate if there was a problem, or meet someone there. Brandt did a tremendous job on that. Then we had individual



committees in each county. We'd usually get a men's and women's Citizens for Kennedy and Johnson. I would call the county leader and say, "Who can you come up with? Don't give me a stiff. I want somebody good." I worked that angle.

STEWART: Did Mr.--what was his name, Akers?

PRENDERGAST: Tony Akers [Anthony B. Akers].

STEWART: Headed the Citizens....

PRENDERGAST: He was in the city here, in the overall thing. No, Tony Akers was--we never had any problems.

STEWART: What kinds of problems did you have with Paul Corbin, and Ben Smith [Benjamin A. Smith II], and Norman Paul in upstate New York?

PRENDERGAST: I don't know the last name.

STEWART: Norman Paul?

PRENDERGAST: I don't know him.

STEWART: He later became Secretary of the Army over there.

PRENDERGAST: I never heard of him. He was never involved in the state campaign as to my knowledge.

STEWART: Corbin or Smith?

PRENDERGAST: Corbin and Smith. Well, the first time I met Corbin and Smith--the first time I met Corbin, Bob Kennedy brought him here. I should have been wise at the time, but I wasn't as to what his background was and so forth, Bob brought him in and he said he wanted him to work around the state because we were going to put out a publication, and he was going to circularize it and do all that. So I said, "Sure." So then I met Ben Smith. But the day he had Corbin in, you know, my girl happened to come in and said there were a lot of news cameramen waiting in the hall. Bobby said, "My god, I can't let them meet this guy." I didn't know why at the time, but anyway.

Anyhow I said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll get my staff in Albany, two men up there, to go out with Corbin and Ben Smith, so that when they walk in to a county chairman and the guy will accept them. If they were to go in on their own, they'll have nothing to do with them, because they're automatically suspicious of these things" So I had a fellow by the name of Pat Fischer in Albany and Jim Williams, but Fischer was the guy I depended on. About a week or so after that Fischer called me he said, "Gee, you better do something about this." I says, "What's the matter?" He says, "This guy Corbin is drunk. He's at the bar. He says that you and DeSapio are captive of the Italians and Jews, you and DeSapio have to go."

You know, all this kind of stuff. So I tried to get him moved out, but I couldn't. I had Dick Maguire up here. I got Dick get a hold of Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]. Bobby insisted on him staying.

But I also had Ben Smith pegged wrong. I got the same report on Ben Smith, but I found out it was not true. I apologized to Ben Smith, and as far as I was concerned, you know, he could stay as long as he liked.

But the next report I got, it was from one of my leaders upstate; one of the very, very powerful leaders called me up and told me, "If you don't have this guy out of here in five, twelve hours, (or something) I'm going to send somebody out to work him over." I said, "Don't do that. I'll make a protest again." This guy cost us a lot of votes in the state.

STEWART: Why? What specifically was he doing?

PRENDERGAST: Well, evidently one of the things that he did, by the end of every day he had a load on him. He had the ability to insult people. His language was anything but the best. He was the complete opposite of what you'd want if you were running for office. To have a guy out here--the complete opposite, and, you know, very anti-semitic, anti-Italian. He probably was anti-Irish too, but you just couldn't lose him. Bad alcoholic for you. And the county leaders were calling, one after the other, and screaming, "If you don't get this guy out of here, I'm not going to do anything, for no one." This is what I was up against. They wouldn't take him out. Bobby insisted they stay.

STEWART: What about your relationship with Walton, Bill Walton [William Walton]?

PRENDERGAST: This guy was a problem. He wandered around here--he was supposed to be a liaison between ourselves and Tony Akers office. Instead of being a liaison he was a--I don't know what to call him. Where we had no trouble, he'd make it. He used to tiptoe around here in a pair of sneakers, with his handkerchief up his sleeve, with a half a load on him. I threw him out once. I said, "Look, I don't want you coming around here until you're dressed properly." And we got down into the final stages of the campaign, and of course, as I see it later, this guy was bearing stories back that weren't true, and making monsters out of DeSapio and myself, and just probably caused more trouble than anyone else. I don't know how the hell he acquired the position he acquired in the confidence of the Kennedys. He certainly never merited it. I don't even want to say the things I know about Walton.

STEWART: Well, he had been with them since Wisconsin, I think.

PRENDERGAST: I don't know where they got him. Wherever they got him they should have left him.

STEWART: What kinds of problems did you encounter in raising funds in that campaign?

PRENDERGAST: None.

STEWART: None at all?

PRENDERGAST: Nope. We did very well. You see, in a campaign, if the people sense you got a winner, you have no problems. Its when they think your going to lose you can't get it. And as far as New York was concerned, our polls were showing up well, and everything was going well. We were having no problems whatsoever. With money, the old man was sending people to me with money which would normally go to the Kennedy operation. He would say, "Go over and give it to Mike and state your name." I got quite a bit of money that way.

STEWART: This has always been, of course, a source of some contention, as to what money stays in the state and what goes to Washington.

PRENDERGAST: Well, as you know, in a national campaign, whenever the candidate hits your state, you're responsible for the bills from there on in. This was a big nut to carry. You could get two plane loads between newspaper people and.... Back about the time we're talking about, things being low, I had a very instinctive--more instinct than anything else--feeling that we had to show something in New York to make the picture look good, which was going to have a big effect on the rest of the country. I had a scheme to have a ticker tape parade. I went to Wagner, had to go to him. "Oh, you.... Supposing the Republicans demand one?" "Let them. If Nixon wants one, let them have it." I said, "We'll stage ours." These ticker tape parades are all staged. If they're not they don't happen. So I called Jack and I said, "This is what I want to do. I think we'll get national television, we'll get everything, and if it's a big success, it's going to have an effect right across the country." I said, "It's a chance. That's the reason I'm calling you. It's risky. There's a risk to it. If it falls on its face, save me a seat on the plane and I'll leave with you.

Finally I got Wagner to support it. I had a hell of a time, but finally I got him. Paul Scravene, Commissioner of Sanitation, we got him, and he did a magnificent job. They carried barrels of tape and confetti on every roof all over every building. Got Steve Kennedy [Stephen B. Kennedy] in, who was the Police Commissioner. You know there's a way of milking a crowd. The cops make belief they break through, but they really don't. And of course, Wall Street was violently pro-Republican, as you well know, where it started. I road in the press bus. That's the day I met White. That's the only time I ever met him, and he was loaded. And Dorothy--what's her name, the columnist introduced me to him. Fleeson is it? Doris.

STEWART: Doris Fleeson.

PRENDERGAST: She introduced me to him. That's how I met him. But I said to Harry Brandt. I said, "Now, Harry, I want you to ride in the car with Jack and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline B. Kennedy]. What else can I do for a guy who has everything?" You know. It scared the life out of him. He came back and he said, "I'm never going to go again." They were played it too well and they let the crowd get a little

too loose. They had the car rocking. Harry got scared. But it worked. Thank God, it worked, because if--New York, as far as the press and television, went wild over Jack Kennedy. That, I think, was the beginning of the upsweep of the campaign. But we had minor rubs; where is he going to be? Everybody wants the candidate, and he can't be everywhere.

The bad one was the last night of the campaign, the Saturday night before. Actually, again, I think it's in somebody's book that Jack Kennedy was mad at us because we demanded that he come to New York that night, and he should have been in California, he might have called it. Did you get that?

STEWART: Well, its frequently been said, that he said that.

PRENDERGAST: This is again, as.... We didn't want him.

STEWART: Really?

PRENDERGAST: We didn't need him. We were in good shape, and we didn't want anything to rock the boat. Our polls were showing us in great shape. We didn't want him, we didn't need him--plus the expense. They were the ones that insisted.

STEWART: By they, who do you mean?

PRENDERGAST: Well, the operation that was running the show. Kenny O'Donnell, Dick Maguire, Jackson, they were the ones. And the National Committee was in on it because they had national television, nationwide television. We didn't want any part of this. We had to hire the coliseum; we had to provide busses; we had to.... We had a lot of expenses we could have necessarily used the money other places for. But they demanded it so--didn't have to demand it. I said they wanted it, and whatever they wanted we would go along. That was a bad day. Our polls were showing we were way down in the Catholic vote, we were way up in the Jewish vote. And there was a lot of agitation. The Jewish people--Stevenson for Secretary of State. Remember that?

STEWART: Yes.

PRENDERGAST: This was hurting us in other areas. So we got coming up to the Convention, and Walton tiptoed in one day, four or five days before and say, "Now, Mrs. Roosevelt ought to be the speaker at this thing." And I said, "You mind your own goddamn business." I said, "If I thought Mrs. Roosevelt should be a speaker," I said, "I would ask her." I said, "I'm inviting her to attend, but I have a mayor, I have the state controller, I have Harriman." And I said, "Every one of them are prima donnas. I can't have everybody speaking all night long." I said, "On top of that, Harry Brandt's going to run it." They didn't make any mention of Lehman.

So that Saturday we started off; we had breakfast over at the Commodore. We'd go from there to the Bronx. In the hotel you had somebody come back in, and--Wagner's having

a press conference; he's raising hell because he can't ride in the front car. You know, how silly all this is. Well, we get to the Bronx--oh, Abe Ribicoff had called me, asked me if he could come in and tour with Jack. I said, "Gee, Abe, I think that would be the greatest thing in the world for you to do this. Delighted to have you." So I had Abe Ribicoff. I wasn't in it, DeSapio wasn't in it, we didn't want to get in it. We had this character to contend with.

Anyway, we went to the Bronx, and we went from there to Nassau. It rained and it was a terrible day all in all. And while I was away Goldwater was here, and Brandt was here. So they put the heat on them; they wanted Lehman to speak. And the three of them made a decision, and rightfully. If I had been here, I would have agreed this wasn't like Lehman to make a speech at this thing. First of all, he's a thirty minute speaker. Secondly, I didn't know what he was going to say. This could do us a great deal of harm. So the decision....

STEWART:           What to do you mean? What could he have said? What were you afraid that he....

PRENDERGAST:    Well, one of the things, we didn't want him to get onto this business about what Stevenson's role was going to be in the new government if Jack Kennedy's elected. We didn't want him to come up with all this bitterness. They had promoted Finletter. This was the worst thing that could happen to us at the time. All of these things. So here was a group of people that did nothing but harm. DeSapio and I put our necks out on a limb to fight them in order to go for Jack Kennedy. We thought we gave them every courtesy. We invited them to be on the platform in the front row. But how do you--you can't displace the mayor of New York, Harriman's a former governor, a world figure. We had Arthur Levitt. You know. We were going to have the President and Vice President. This was the whole picture. You didn't have time to do it. And plus, Harry Brandt had gotten a million dollars worth of entertainment. He flew Rosemary Clooney in from the west coast, for this, and other people from other places. We were supposed to throw this all out. This was the beginning of the end, right that night. I was with Jack all day. I didn't even know Lehman came with a speech that night truthfully.

STEWART:           You didn't know what?

PRENDERGAST:    That Lehman came with a speech in his pocket. I didn't know it. But anyway at the conclusion of the thing Jack said, "What the hell happened with Lehman? He didn't make his speech." I said, "I don't know anything about it." The guy never spoke to me from that night on.

STEWART:           Who?

PRENDERGAST:    Jack Kennedy.

STEWART:           Really?

PRENDERGAST:    Never spoke to me, never heard from him. The only guy that ever talked to me after it all was the old man. He was nice enough to call

me up and thank me for the job that was done in New York.

STEWART: Really, that was the last night you ever did....

PRENDERGAST: That was the final.

BEGIN TAPE II, SIDE I

STEWART: Do you think in Kennedy's mind this was the culmination of a lot of things, or was it just this specific incident that caused him to sour on you, or what?

PRENDERGAST: Well, I don't know how to answer that. Every time he was here, in and out, I always made it my business to spend two or three minutes alone with Jack. "Is everything going the way you want it? Any ideas you've got you want me to try?" "No, Mike, everything is fine." In September '60, we toured across the state two days, and the second day my man set up a dinner in Syracuse. As I say, I never asked Jack Kennedy anything, for anything. And at the dais he put his arm around me, and said, "I'll never forget this guy for what he did for me." So I never knew what they had in mind.

STEWART: Could you describe your relationship with Robert Kennedy during the campaign?

PRENDERGAST: My relationship during the campaign with him--little or no relations. I only saw him once or twice; had him here for the registration drive downstairs in the hotel, had him speak to the county leaders, workers. The time he brought Corbin in we had another meeting, I remember, up here in one of the hotels on 59<sup>th</sup> Street. He had an apartment up there. The big problem I had before the Convention, the biggest problem I had before the Convention, trying to get people to come out for Jack, and the dislike of Bobby was such that they wouldn't do it. I finally had to say, "Jack, look you have to keep this guy quiet."

STEWART: What was his reaction?

PRENDERGAST: He said he would. I said, "Look, I'm only telling you what comes back to me." I had very little relationship with him. I told you of the meeting I had in December of '59.

STEWART: You went to Washington a couple of times, at least two or three times during the campaign, didn't you, to see Robert Kennedy?

PRENDERGAST: No. I never dealt with anybody but Jack. No, I never went to Washington, not during the campaign.

STEWART: Really?

PRENDERGAST: No.

STEWART: I'm sorry I can't reveal my source because we make it a point not to.

PRENDERGAST: Naturally. I wouldn't want to.

STEWART: You know, in other interviews, but I heard quite specifically that both you and DeSapio went to Washington on at least two or three occasions.

PRENDERGAST: Never. I wouldn't lie to you. There wouldn't be any point to it. No. Of course, you hear all these things. As I said, when I read about them I'm amazed. Truthfully, I never left New York State during the campaign, and I'm sure I know Carmine didn't. We had too much to do here. The meetings I had with Kennedy were up here; Scoop Jackson, up here. Everybody. I never went to Washington.

STEWART: You mentioned Dick Maguire a while ago. Did you have many dealings with him during the campaign?

PRENDERGAST: A great many dealings. All pleasant.

STEWART: Primarily on what kinds of things?

PRENDERGAST: Well, Dick was the guy in charge of all touring, you know, all that. He had advance men working under him. We'd work out programs. It was a pleasure to work with him. And he, he would talk to Kenny O'Donnell every night, and Kenny was with Jack all the time. So it was a perfect setup as far as I was concerned.

STEWART: What about Steve Smith? Did you have many....

PRENDERGAST: I had little, very little to do with Steve Smith at all.

STEWART: Did you see Ambassador Kennedy at all during the campaign?

PRENDERGAST: Only once.

STEWART: Just--that was the one and only meeting?

PRENDERGAST: That was the first time I ever met him.

STEWART: And the only time?

PRENDERGAST: The only time I ever met him. I had two conversations with him after Jack was elected. Once he called me and thanked me. No, during the campaign he called once and said he was sending, I think it was Billy Rose [William Rose], over. He came over with a lot of money. And I said, "That was very nice of you. We need money too." He said, "I figured you did, and you're doing a good job." And another day, after the campaign, Matt McCloskey came up to me. He was in my office and he had to call the ambassador. So he said, "He wants to say hello to you." That was it. He was the only one of the Kennedy's I ever had a talk with after the campaign.

STEWART: At one point during the campaign, I believe, Robert Kennedy came here and had a stormy meeting with some of the Citizens people, in effect telling them he cared not one bit about their feuds with everyone else, his only concern was to see that his brother was elected.

PRENDERGAST: I heard that. I wasn't there.

STEWART: Was there any specific attempt to get you people to stop the feuding, or to do whatever....

PRENDERGAST: Well, actually, we weren't doing any feuding. We were doing everything.... We felt we were acting--we couldn't have cared less about individual feelings. Maybe they didn't like us, but the paramount thing was the campaign and the candidate--elected. We followed everything they asked for except that last thing. We felt we just couldn't.

STEWART: Was there any discussion during the whole campaign of, for example, patronage after the administration....

PRENDERGAST: We never had a single one.

STEWART: This, of course, again was commonly given as the true account--was that you were to handle all the federal patronage, DeSapio was interested in, well, at one time was interested in the national chairmanship, and of course Wagner was interested in a cabinet post.

PRENDERGAST: Well, that's true. Wagner asked me during the campaign to speak to Jack Kennedy, and I did. Jack said to me, "For Christ's sake, he's got enough trouble here. What am I going to do with him in the Cabinet?" He said, "Don't say anything to him. Just tell him you talked to me." That was it. That was the only thing I ever talked to him about. It was a request from Wagner.

STEWART: There was never any discussion of patronage or any kind of arrangements after the election?



PRENDERGAST: No. I just assumed he would work through the state organization in accordance with what we agreed upon in LA.

STEWART: Are you saying you didn't foresee any of the problems of...

PRENDERGAST: I couldn't believe it, truthfully.

STEWART: Really?

PRENDERGAST: Couldn't believe it.

STEWART: What was your first indication then?

PRENDERGAST: I was in Florida. I was with DeSapio and another fellow. We brought the New York paper, quoting Walton that I had to go. I didn't believe it. I called back here and I had one of my people get ahold of Kenny O'Donnell. That was when Jack was in Palm Beach. Word came back that said, "Don't pay any attention to it."

STEWART: Then what happened?

PRENDERGAST: From there on it was downhill.

STEWART: To what do you attribute to all this?

PRENDERGAST: I never knew, to be honest with you. It'd be like you and I being associated over a period of two or three years and having dinner alone and with other people, and all of a sudden changing like this. I never could figure it out.

I don't recall whether it was before or after he was sworn in, he came to New York and he called on Lehman. It was on a Sunday. Kenny O'Donnell called me at home and said, "Jack told me to tell you that he was going to go to see Lehman. Don't get excited. Don't get worried about it." So I said, "Thanks for calling." I'd get a message from Dick Maguire or Kenny O'Donnell afterwards, after I was out, "Jack wants to know how you're making out." Well, I was dying on the vine, but I wasn't going to tell them that. I said, "I'm making out all right." I've never been treated this way.

STEWART: Who was responsible?

PRENDERGAST: I don't know, I don't know. I don't know and I've said this publicly too. No matter whatever happened--I don't know--but I still think this was one of the greatest guys I ever met. I think this was a guy touched by greatness. And there isn't anything I've done I wouldn't do over.

STEWART: Did you always feel that you had a certain amount of support among

some White House people--O'Donnell, Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan], these people?

PRENDERGAST: Yes, yes. At least they were trying to straighten it out. At least they were telling me that, although I never knew.

STEWART: What about John Bailey? What kind of dealings did you have with him after he became National Chairman?

PRENDERGAST: Well, John Bailey came up one time, and he brought Dave Lawrence with him. We met. He had a room over at the Waldorf and we met over there. This was after Jack was sworn in as president. And he gave me this sing-song, you know, "Why don't you make my job easy? Get out. They want you out. They'd like you to take an Ambassadorship." Dave Lawrence was there, DeSapio was there and Buckley was there. I said, "First of all, I've got four kids and a mortgage. That's all I've got." I had never made any money. I never took any. "What the hell kind of ambassadorship are you offering me? One of these places where I have to crawl in through windows because the bullets are coming through?" I said, "Who are you kidding?" I said, "You go back to Washington, and you tell anybody you like I can't be bought and I can't be scared." And I walked out of the room.

STEWART: Were you ever offered specifically any jobs? There was a report of this in January 1961.

PRENDERGAST: A collector at the port--I was never offered it, never offered. Finally, Charley Buckley called me up, and he said, "Mike, what about this collections job at the port?" I said, "Charley, nobody has ever said anything to me about it." And at this point I couldn't take anything because it would indicate that either they had something on me, I had to get out.... I knew I was losing. I had to lose. You can't fight the President of the United States. I knew I had to go down, but I knew I had to go down fighting. That's all I knew at that point. So I couldn't take anything. And I needed it badly, to be honest with you. And I said, "Charley, I have not been offered it. And if I were, I wouldn't take it, because I can't at this point." "Aw, you're crazy." Charley said. "Well," I said, "Charley, I have to live with myself." "Well," he said, "will you send Joe Kelly's name in?" I said, "Sure I will." And I sent it in. This was while when they were taking things from me. And Joe Kelly was appointed collector.

STEWART: They were taking things from you for a while?

PRENDERGAST: Yes.

STEWART: I didn't know. I thought they....

PRENDERGAST: Well, maybe it was because it came from Buckley. I don't know. At least, Buckley came to me with it and I sent it in with two or three

others like that.

STEWART: Arthur Krim got involved in the fund raising, I guess in '61 or maybe in '62 , starting with the big birthday bonanza for the President.

PRENDERGAST: Arthur Krim wasn't in the picture while I was state chairman.

STEWART: Oh, wasn't he?

PRENDERGAST: No.

STEWART: When did you leave?

PRENDERGAST: I got out in April of '62.

STEWART: All right. Yes, that would have been just after that. Were there any problems regarding fund raising or finances during 1961? Were there any big disputes?

PRENDERGAST: No disputes. There was no fund raising. Everybody ran away. I had a dinner, the last dinner I had was in February of '62, a state dinner, and I had maybe five hundred people. We used to get fifteen hundred to two thousand, but everybody was told to stay away.

STEWART: Really? Because it was yours?

PRENDERGAST: Yes.

STEWART: Again, were there charges during this period that there wasn't a proper division of the receipts of these dinners between the state committee and the national committee?

PRENDERGAST: No. I never had any problems with them. This has happened since. The only--I say I never had any problem, any real one. In October of '60--yes, during the campaign--the national committee had a dinner up here in the Waldorf. Matt McCloskey was a thousand percent. I was run together with the state. It was a 50-50 deal. No questions, no problems. Previous to '60, '59, early '59, I had some problems with Roger Stevenson and a couple of other guys, friends of Wagner's. And I remember I was in Florida, checking the office everyday, and a telegram came in inviting me to breakfast at Gracie Mansion. So I said to my girl, "Find out what it is." It was a fund raising deal. Paul Butler was the chairman. So I came back from Florida and went to breakfast. I said, "There'll be no fund raising in New York unless you do it through us. If you want to go to the mat with me, it's all right, but you're going to have to fight me." That was the only problem I ever had. The problems that you speak of happened after my time.

STEWART: Gee, I don't know if there's anything else. I'm very interested in hearing you say that you're not aware of who was the real instigator, the real cause....

PRENDERGAST: Truthfully, I don't know. The closest I ever came to anything--last fall I went to a dinner at Frank O'Connor's just before election. They had a VIP party. So a guy came over to me by the name of Tom O'Hara. Tom O'Hara was a political writer for the *Tribune* [*New York Herald Tribune*]. He said, "I have something on my mind." "So, so what?" "You know," he said, "I guess I did you some harm." "So what else is new? You guys are all alike," "Well," he said, "I'll tell you, Mike. Leo Egan used to scoop me." And I had always heard that O'Hara was crying to somebody that Egan had better stories than his. Egan wasn't getting anything that O'Hara didn't get around here. And he says, "I had a mania and every morning I'd have to wake up and 'What can I do to get ahead of Leo today?'" Actually, they were never in the same class, either the man or the writer. "Well," he said, "I dreamed up.... Well, I think I've got him. I called Walton, and I got Walton to say a lot of these things." He said, "Tom, my conscience is clear." I said, "I didn't give a damn." I walked away and left him.

I never knew a reason for it. If you have done something wrong, if you have failed to carry New York, if you have hurt somebody somewhere, it's a reason. But as I told you, I never once missed the opportunity of saying, "Look, Jack, if there's anything you want done another way, you just let me know about it." And of course, the last two or three weeks of the campaign Dick Maguire lived here in the hotel. So we had dinner every night. You know, Dick was talking to Kenny every night, and Kenny was with Jack all day, so there was never any problem.

I suppose it was--I don't like to judge them--Bobby, Corbin, Walton. Where else can it be? But, you know, it hurt, there's no question about it. I was badly hurt--personally, financially, politically, everything. I never understood it. It still didn't change my feelings toward Jack Kennedy. I still think he's a great guy that comes along every hundred years, and I felt awful that it happened.

STEWART: But you never got word one from him after....

PRENDERGAST: No, except I always had the feeling that it would come about. If I ever thought Jack was a phony, that's one thing. I never thought that; he didn't seem that way. So how can two people be the way we were, you know....

STEWART: Did this type of thing, to your knowledge, happen elsewhere?

PRENDERGAST: I don't know where it would have happened before. But I know they did a job on me. Oh, gee. They went over me with a fine tooth comb.

STEWART: In what way?

PRENDERGAST: Trying to get me out. They tried to find something: income tax....

They even had--I live up in a town thirty miles from here in a place on Long Island. They even had a guy up in the police station put a check on me.

STEWART: Really?

PRENDERGAST: Yep.

STEWART: Very interesting.

PRENDERGAST: It's a good thing I stayed clean, or they'd have sure had me. This thing, I suppose, got rolling and it got to a point of no return. I assume the Alex Rose's and these people--that was the price of peace that DeSapio and I had to go. We would call a spade a spade. Everything we predicted came true. They've ruined the party now.

STEWART: What about--just a couple more people--Larry O'Brien [Lawrence J. O'Brien]? Did you ever have much to do with him?

PRENDERGAST: Not too much, but whatever it was it was pleasant. In the campaign Larry was not as much involved in New York--in fact, very little, I would guess.

STEWART: Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] got heavily involved during the Buckley squabble in '62, I believe.

PRENDERGAST: Yes, I know he did.

STEWART: Did you have many dealings with him?

PRENDERGAST: Before that. See, by the time that came about in the fall I was out.

STEWART: Yes, that's right. I'm sorry.

PRENDERGAST: My dealings with Donahue were before that. But they were always all right.

STEWART: Well, unless there's anything else you want to say or comment on as far as Jack Kennedy as a political figure, that's about all the questions I have.

PRENDERGAST: I can't think of anything else. Maybe after I read this, I'll think of something. I'll add it.

STEWART: Okay.

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