Frederick G. Dutton, Oral History Interview – 5/3/1965
Administrative Information

Creator: Frederick G. Dutton
Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey
Date of Interview: May 3, 1965
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 67 pages

Biographical Note
Frederick G. Dutton, Deputy national chairman, Citizens for Kennedy-Johnson, 1960; Special Assistant to President Kennedy, 1961; and Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations,1961-1964, discusses the Kennedy presidential campaign in California and the Kennedy Administration Cabinet, among other issues.

Access
Open.

Usage Restrictions
According to the deed of gift signed on November 14, 1973, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government.

Copyright

Transcript of Oral History Interview
These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Frederick G. Dutton, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey**,** May 3, 1965, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

NOV 9 1973

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

of FRED DUTTON

to the

John F. Kennedy Library

I, Fred Dutton of Washington, D.C. do hereby give to the John F. Kennedy Library, for use and administration therein, all my rights, title and interest, except as hereinafter provided, to the tape recording and transcript of the interviews conducted at Washington, D.C. on May 3, 1965 and November 18, 1969 for the John F. Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. The interviews are to be opened immediately to general research.

2. Researchers who have access to the transcripts of the interview may listen to the tapes; however, this is to be for background use only. Researchers may not cite, paraphrase or quote from the tapes.

3. I hereby assign literary property rights in these interviews to the United States Government.

4. Copies of the interview transcripts may be provided upon request to any researcher.

5. Copies of the interviews may, upon request, be deposited in other institutions.

6. This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Fred Dutton

Oct 29, 1973
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

11-14-73
Date

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By FREDERICK G. DUTTON

to the

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

I wish to restrict to research for the time being selected passages in my oral history interview of November 18, 1969 for the Robert F. Kennedy oral history project of the Kennedy Library. I have indicated such passages as follows:

Page 4, lines 10-13	Restrict X	Open ___
Page 22, lines 23-25	Restrict X	Open ___
Page 31, lines 24-26	Restrict X	Open ___
Page 32, lines 13-29	Restrict X	Open ___
Page 35, lines 20-22	Restrict X	Open ___
Page 48, lines 1-14	Restrict X	Open ___

These passages may be opened to research at the discretion of the Director of the John F. Kennedy Library.

Frederick G. Dutton

Frederick G. Dutton

Dec 26, 1973

Date

Frederick G. Dutton

Table of Contents

Oral History Interview

With

Frederick G. Dutton

May 3, 1965
National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let's start with 1956, and you go ahead and tell me about your first encounter with the Kennedys.

DUTTON: Well, my first acquaintance with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] was in the Democratic National Convention in Chicago at the Stockyards in 1956. I was Secretary of the California delegation which had been elected in the primary between Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] and Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]

and went to Chicago completely committed to Stevenson. After the presidential nomination was out of the way, that same night, Stevenson, you will recall, threw the nomination for Vice President open and Kennedy and Kefauver and Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] and a number of others came before the California delegation. That was the first time that I ever saw him in person, as far as I can recall, the first time that I have ever heard of him, as far as that's concerned. He came and he talked with "Pat" Brown [Edmund G. Brown], who was the Chairman of the delegation, Clair Engle, Cecil King [Cecil R. King], myself and some others privately. He was very interested in trying to tie down California. He

thought it was a natural alliance. Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] came through and provided us with a

[-2-]

paper he had done on the importance of winning back the Catholic vote that had been defecting in ’48 and ’52. We had a general talk. To the best of my recollection, I don’t believe Kennedy was at all involved in the presentation of the Sorensen memorandum, but it was very definitely discussed and shown to us. Kennedy made a very brief appearance – as far as I was concerned not memorable one way or the other. The next day I voted for Kefauver, largely because it made sense in terms of Kefauver’s standing in California and problems internal to the state’s delegation. [Laughter]

The California delegation was interesting, though. As a footnote, it broke down between I think about two-thirds for Kefauver and one-third for Kennedy. Southern Californians were

[-3-]

predominately for Kefauver – what I would call the more liberal element of the party. The more conservatives, the northern Californian group that I was really a part of, went for Kennedy. I think there were some religious alignments, undoubtedly unconscious; I think they were to some extent.

The next time I saw Kennedy was at a hundred-dollar-a-plate dinner in San Francisco at the Fairmont Hotel. I believe in ’57, maybe early ’58; I’m not sure. This was the main Democratic party fund raising project of the year. He gave a terrible speech. He was perfunctory; he was a terribly inadequate orator at that time. He raced through his script; no dramatic emphasis or anything else like that. While he apparently saw his speech text in advance

[-4-]

only very casually, he was tremendously well briefed on who was what and the political situation in the area. He was what I would call a good technical politician at that stage, but he disappointed just about everybody in terms of his speech.

The next time I saw him was in the spring of 1959, I believe it was May 1959. By then Brown had been elected governor of California. Kennedy was well along with his presidential efforts. He did not decide whether or not to come into California until a year later. But he came to Sacramento to woo Brown; and since I’d been the campaign manager statewide in ’58, he was obviously somewhat interested in me. He knew that I had been strongly for Stevenson before and had maintained contracts with him. Here

[-5-]

again my main impression was how well briefed he was on what everyone was doing politically. His intelligence sources couldn’t have been better.

MORRISSEY: Who was briefing him?

DUTTON: I don't know. I subsequently decided that he had some very informal contacts with various individuals but no key person. He was very careful not to get hard, fast alignments early. He wanted Brown, as Governor; and I, as sort of the chief political campaign manager of the state based on '56 and '58, was obviously of interest to him. But he was not committing himself to us or others, nor relying on us or others for final intelligence in any way. I would guess that he was relying to a great extent on very loose friendships as with Mrs. Edward Heller [Elinor Raas Heller], former Democratic

[-6-]

National Committeewoman, or a guy by the name of Joe Houghteling [Joseph C. Houghteling], who was a man then in his late thirties, a publisher of a chain of three or four small newspapers in the San Francisco Bay area, and others. Joe is a good example here. Joe's terribly bright, has some inherited money, is decent, interesting, not pushy – the kind of attractive person that Kennedy naturally liked. They had considerable in common; their backgrounds, etc.

MORRISSEY: How about Red Fay [Paul B. Fay, Jr. "Red"]?

DUTTON: Perhaps. But he was of little help politically in the state even through Kennedy apparently liked him a great deal personally. Red was known to us as a strong Kennedy supporter, but the truth of the matter is Red was a Republican. He was in his father's business.

[-7-]

It would have been to Kennedy's detriment to have Fay very far up front. It is true that whenever Kennedy came to California – to San Francisco, I should saw – we always knew that he went out evenings with Red Fay to Amelio's or some restaurant like that. But Red had no part in arranging his trips or anything public.

When Kennedy came to Sacramento in May of '59, he came to the Governor's office, had a press conference there with the Governor – and there was quite a bit of sparring. The truth of the matter is that Brown privately was very strong for Kennedy at that stage. I was arguing that it made sense in terms of California politics and everything else that the Governor stay uncommitted. This was something between just Brown

[-8-]

and me, but Kennedy was completely aware of it. He had it right down to the gnat's eyebrow.

I remember they had breakfast over at the Governor's Mansion. It was a Friday morning. The press came in and took pictures of them. The newspaper pictures showed

bacon on the tables – this caused quite a flurry. [Laughter] It was one of those minor faux pas that nobody thought about…. [Laughter]

After the press conference in the Governor's office, I took the Senator out to meet Eleanor McClatchy, who is the main owner of the McClatchy newspapers, and Walter Jones the executive editor, Kennedy and I went out in the car – small talk together. That was the day of the vote in the U.S. Senate on Admiral Strauss [Lewis L. Strauss] – whether or not he

[-9-]

was to be confirmed as Secretary of the Commerce Department. I asked Kennedy about his absence because it was noted in the papers. Without being explicit he made it clear that it was a good time to be away from the Senate for his purposes. He saw Walter Jones and Miss McClatchy. They were very strongly committed personally and editorially to Stevenson at that time. Kennedy was persuasive – he made what I thought was a very effective presentation in that he didn't ask for their vote. He was really merely trying to slow down their pro-Stevenson viewpoint and be able to come and get them at a later time.

He came back two or three times after that – nothing exceptional. His speaking was obviously improving. His complete familiarity with California politics was incredible. I would guess

[-10-]

he knew more about California politicians than any of the chief California Democratic politicians of the period.

The main thing that I think might be of interest in a political sense was the maneuvering that was going on, largely privately, over whether he would come into the state or not and run in the primary. Brown got into the Presidential primary race just in California very early. As Governor, he thought he had to control his delegation to the extent that he could. The Kennedys wanted to come in. O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] were out several times and made a strong private approach to various individuals – threatening is the only accurate word. They were the "heavies." Humphrey covered the state a number of times for himself.

[-11-]

Symington [(William) Stuart Symington] came in a few times in his own behalf. But those two were pretty much content to live with the Governor as a favorite son in control of the California delegation and take their chances. They only asked that the delegation be made up to include representatives of all the various genuine candidates.

We got right down to the filing deadline – the last day of the filing in order for the presidential delegation for the ballot. About 3:30 in the afternoon, much to our shock, after we thought we had an arrangement with the Kennedy group and the Humphrey group and everybody else that nobody from the outside would come in, that the Governor would be the only one on the ballot, the Kennedys at that late hour

[-12-]

filed a delegation. As a result, the Humphrey people, who only had an hour and a half left before the filing, quickly filed a group they had pulled together in the event of such a development.

I finally called and talked with Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] by phone, as the Governor's political representative, and then with Humphrey himself. We got them to withdraw their delegations. I thought it was a fairly good example, though, of the sort of hard-boiled game that the Kennedy group were playing. They were going to take no chances that the Humphrey people might file a last minute delegation themselves, and they weren't going to take the word either of the Humphrey people or us or anybody else. They were just protecting themselves, they said.

[-13-]

There were two or three days flap in the papers out there, and we finally got through that period. Brown won the primary over a minor candidate, George McLain [George H. McLain], who gave us some trouble. That largely was the result of problems irrelevant to the Presidential election. That was pretty much a question of anti-Brown sentiment in the election.

Then the most interesting time, I think, was from about June 5th, when the California presidential primary was held in 1960, to the Convention time. The Kennedys, as soon as the primary was over with, ran a very aggressive war of nerves to try to get Brown to come out for them and to pull over as many California delegates as they could. Bobby was in the state a half dozen times; Larry O'Brien came out and met

[-14-]

with me and Jesse Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh] and some others in the Biltmore Hotel in L.A. Hy Raskin [Hyman B. Raskin] was there. Raskin, in fact, came and stayed at a motel in Sacramento and came over to the Governor's office to see Pat or me at least twice a day for five or six days. Bobby would call up and want to know why the hell the Governor was vacillating. I had come to the position where I though that, for the Governor's self interest – and I was looking at it from the California and not national politics angle primarily because of the functional responsibility I had – that the Governor finally should commit himself to Kennedy and be done with it. He was getting whiplashed pretty bad between the liberal and the conservative Democrats and by the press for lacking decisiveness. The ironic thing is he started out strong

[-15-]

privately pro-Kennedy. Then, as public interest developed in the Convention as it approached, and there was a vocal Stevenson group in California, the Governor withdrew from his strong Kennedy position and took almost a neutral one privately as well as publicly.

He believes he remained pro-Kennedy, but the press did not so interpret his course, and the clippings should speak for themselves on that.

MORRISSEY: Can I ask you why?

DUTTON: My personal opinion is that it was primarily his sudden awareness, as an intuitive politician, of the extent of the Stevenson support. My own opinion, then and now, is that, had he come out strongly for Kennedy, there would have been some criticism by a small part of the Democratic Party, but that would

[-16-]

have been over with quickly. He would have terminated the tug-of-war that developed. All he did really was tear himself apart. Stevenson was working behind the sciences trying to stir up support for himself notwithstanding his public position of not wanting to get involved, of not being a candidate. I'd been an old friend. He called me several times from Mt. Kisco, New York – from Mrs. Eugene Meyers' place, where he was staying. He wasn't campaigning, but he was keeping in touch, a clear political symptom of candidates. The Kennedy people must have been aware of this; I'm sure they were. The consequence was that they immediately started turning on the screws also, and it badly hurt the Governor right down to the Convention, and it badly hurt the Democratic Party

[-17-]

in the state. I think it was entirely in Kennedy and Steveson's own self interest to act as they did, and I would have probably done the same thing if I'd been in their shoes.

I should back up just a second and talk about some of the byplay. One of our key supporters in the '58 election for Governor and the '59 legislative session was Jesse Unruh, who has since gone on to be a power in California politics. The Kennedys decided very early, I gather, that, because I was so close to Brown and had responsibility as his executive assistant, I was not going to be won over, and Jesse was the next one who might be won over. So they concentrated on him. As I learned afterwards, they invited him to Las Vegas in the fall – I think it was November –

[-18-]

of '59 and made what I can only call an arrangement. I learned about it some way or other a few days afterwards, and Jesse and I had a ten minute shouting session at each other over the telephone. (Jesse was in L.A. and I was in the Sacramento Capitol.) Jesse then arranged the hundred-dollar-a-plate dinner in L.A., I think late November of '59, in which Kennedy came out and spoke, and so did some of the others. No, it was just Kennedy – I'm not sure on that. Certainly I, and I think most of the regular Democrats – the Browns and Don Bradleys [Don L. Bradley], the Roger Kents, the state party officials – thought that we'd been double-crossed by Jesse. It was just an example of how Kennedy and O'Brien and O'Donnell always were looking for a key guy they could peel off. It had

[-19-]

a very divisive effect for the Democratic Party in California and a very good effect as far as their own purposes were concerned. Then Unruh picked up Bill Munnell [William A. Munnell], who was the majority leader of the Democrats in the lower house of the State Legislature, and began to build up a fairly sizeable group from there. An interesting thing about Munnell was he made a commitment to Kennedy, as far as Kennedy was concerned. And Unruh and many others, and I, think so. Munnell then subsequently made a commitment to Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], in March or April. Then, when we got to the Convention, he was suddenly for Stevenson as a sort of a sanctuary into which to retreat. When Kennedy appeared before the California Democratic delegation while we were in caucus at Los Angeles – he came in and made a little presentation

[-20-]

like all the candidates did, including Johnson and the others – Munnell, who was also state chairman of the party for the southern half of the state, came up to shake Kennedy's hand. But Kennedy refused to shake it. He said, "You're the only man in the country who double-crossed us after we had your word." It made a minor flurry at the time. Munnell never forgot it. This was not a private gesture at all; this was out in the open for everybody to see.

In terms of the way the Kennedys were operating just before Los Angeles, besides having Raskin come there and live quietly at a motel, Bobby was calling every day, sometimes twice a day, and being both nice and firm. I didn't know him at all. I'd met him once or twice at Senator Kennedy's

[-21-]

house in Georgetown in the spring of 1960, but I can't say that I really knew him. He was calling up and was impatient, a little petulant, and not at all understanding of why Brown couldn't make up his mind. Either he didn't understand the other guy's political problems or, if he did, he wasn't going to show he did.

Then as we got within a week and a half of the Convention – we'd previously been to the National Governor's Conference in Glacier where the Kennedys had a big operation going with all the governors – Hy Raskin one afternoon called the Governor, then me (in Sacramento), and said that Joseph P. Kennedy was up at Lake Tahoe, unknown to anybody, and would like to come down and have dinner that night with the Governor and me and

[-22-]

Hy, just the four of us. He came down. The dinner was not 'til eight o'clock; it would be getting dark then. He drove down from Lake Tahoe. We had dinner at the Governor's mansion. It was quite interesting. The father made a very vigorous presentation on behalf of his son. I must say, as far as I was concerned at the time, I think I had an attitude that was prejudiced against him from what I'd read and heard about the old man. But he was very

effective. He didn't overdo it; he wasn't a table-pounder or anything like that. I thought he moved in with great effectiveness. As Brown's assistant, I tried to explain our problems. Pat, who's not a hard-seller at all, left it to me to say, "If California goes for Kennedy, what are you going to do

[-23-]

for California? What about our water problem? What kind of appointments?" Things like that. The old man was absolutely firm, and he was very much to the point. He said, "We haven't promised anything to anybody anywhere, and we're not going to start now." They had under way as aggressive and comprehensive a campaign to win California delegates as they could, and California was important because it not only has the second largest delegation in the National Convention but we come very early in the roll call – we're the first big state. Any kind of a break in the California delegation, any kind of a commitment by Brown, could have great psychological effect. I think they had a lot going on trying to get us, and the guns they brought to bear on turning Brown around and picking

[-24-]

up California delegates showed the weight they put on it. And yet the Ambassador was absolutely adamant that he wasn't going to give us an inch. Unlike most politicians, the Ambassador wasn't going to imply things or double-talk about things; he was very much to the point. After that dinner, which broke up quite inconclusively – everybody was friendly, but there was no ground given either way – the Kennedys obviously decided with the week remaining that they probably no longer were going to budge the Governor. So they started trying to pick up individual delegates more intensively. In effect they went over, around, and under him, although with only moderate success, I think the truth of the matter is. The California delegation finally split I would guess

[-25-]

about three-fifths for Kennedy, not quite two-fifths for Stevenson, and a small smattering for Johnson, who came into the state with a huge entourage of Democratic businessmen, our principal Congressmen and some has-beens three days or so before the Convention.

After the nomination of the presidential candidate, the next morning the Governor got a call and was asked by Kennedy to come over and see him, which we thought was probably a courtesy to the Governor of one of the big states. Kennedy asked if I would come along. We went over, and we had a quite innocuous brief conversation in the hotel room. Who did Brown think would make a good vice presidential candidate and so forth like that. We did not think Lyndon Johnson would be Kennedy's choice.

[-26-]

Kennedy was obviously not leveling with Brown. This was in terms of California politics, civil rights, etc.

MORRISSEY: Offhand, did you have a name that you were suggesting?

DUTTON: No, we were not pushing anybody. Brown at one stage – in the summer and fall of ’59 – had weak presidential ambitions of his own, thinking Kennedy as a young man would falter and the lighting would strike him as a more mature Catholic and governor of a big, key state. But Pat was not a disciplined enough politician, and he irreparably damaged himself in some loose political statements between about September of ’59 and December. He realized that and took himself out of the race about the same time Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] did. I’m not sure who Brown proposed to Kennedy for the VP; I don’t

[-27-]

recall. I would guess it was Symington or Humphrey.

At the end of the brief meeting, which probably lasted ten minutes or so, Kennedy turned to me and asked if I would look at the acceptance speech Sorensen had worked on and if I would be interested in going to work for him on his staff. I had given it some thought, I wanted to get into the campaign, and I obviously leaped at that without any hesitancy. He said to get in touch with Ted Sorensen. As usual with Ted, he really didn’t appreciate anybody looking at his draft. It was presumptuous of me because I’d come in too much from out of the cold, so I sloughed that off. However, I talked with Bob who had invited me to dinner the first or second night of the convention and with whom I was

[-28-]

on easier terms. Bob had me fly back to Hyannis Port about ten days after the Convention, and then I was given the assignment to be Byron White’s [Byron R. White] assistant and deputy National Chairman of the “Citizens for Kennedy and Johnson” campaign.

During the campaign I saw Kennedy very little because he was on the road most of the time. I was in on a key meeting in late August or early September with him, Bob, Sorensen, Clark Clifford [Clark McAdams Clifford], O’Brien, O’Donnell, etc. I also flew out to the Midwest when he saw Truman [Harry S. Truman]. But most of the time I saw little of them. Besides the citizens campaign, I was made a member of an informal six or seven man committee that met three times a week in Washington to talk about strategy and so forth; it consisted

[-29-]

of Clark Clifford, Bill Fulbright [J. William Fulbright], Dick Bolling [Richard W. Bolling], Bob Kennedy, myself, and sometimes we’d have one or another persons. I also met with Bob at 8 or 9 at night three or four times each week to go over the campaign. O’Donnell, O’Brien, Sorensen, and the candidate were traveling around the country. The people in Washington were supposed to be looking at the campaign with some detachment. I’m not sure of its

effectiveness. We proposed some things, pushed hard for the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps idea was coming from many sources, and I can't say really from where it derives.

MORRISSEY: Any reason why the Peace Corps speech was given in San Francisco?

DUTTON: Yes, I believe that was almost entirely the result of the committee that I just

[-30-]

mentioned. Senator Kennedy had originally proposed the idea in substance at the University of Michigan much earlier in the campaign in a vague, generalized way. I'm told in retrospect that it got a great reception, but it's interesting that he really didn't follow up with it. He apparently didn't realize what he had. At this group meeting, however, we were always looking for new ideas. As the campaign wore on, the candidate and the speech writers get thinner and thinner. The Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman], Archie Cox [Archibald Cox] speech writing and research group in Washington had all kinds of problems. It was too big; the academicians were running it; it wasn't geared closely enough to the audience, political problems, and so forth like that. Everyone was looking for ideas which Sorensen would

[-31-]

then write up on the road. To the best of my knowledge, the genesis of the San Francisco speech was that Fulbright came and proposed the idea at one of the meetings of the committee I mentioned. I think he'd gotten the idea from the bills introduced by Humphrey, Gene McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy], and some others. Fulbright was completely unaware of the University of Michigan speech, which he learned about afterwards. I was given the responsibility to draft up the discussion at the committee meeting. I acted in it purely as a leg man, no substantive contribution whatsoever; the memo I then forwarded by airmail or messenger to Sorensen. He got the memo about four and a half days before the San Francisco Cow Palace speech. We weren't even sure they were going to use it. I'm curious

[-32-]

to see what Ted's recollection is and where he thinks the thing came from. I remember I came out of a movie here in Washington – I think it was a Saturday night – and the main headline was the San Francisco Cow Palace Peace Corps proposal. Of course, the papers obviously sensed the impact of the proposal, and he had really given it a first-class run at the Cow Palace. But to the extent that Fulbright had proposed it, and the routine way it was handled, I would guess nobody really recognized the potential until Ted got ahold of it. I'll be curious to know whether there were other channels feeding it into the works at the same time. I've never seen the credit given to Fulbright at all for being involved in this, and he was

[-33-]

getting it essentially out of old *Congressional Records*. My guess still is that Humphrey probably was as close to the original articulator of it.

After the campaign Kennedy called me up one day and asked me if I would put together a list of possible appointees from California and asked me whether I would be interested in coming to Washington. I said, obviously, I would. He said he wanted to know what the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration had done in terms of California. It was interesting; he was looking for appointment possibilities. His instructions to me were "people of substance." He wanted active Democrats, people who supported him to the extent possible; but the political support and loyalty and so forth was quite incidental. He wasn't thinking in those terms at all.

[-34-]

He wanted to know what Eisenhower had done in terms of various offices, total numbers and so forth, for the state. He obviously was trying to combine getting people of substance with having a foothold in California prospectively. The fact that you'd been a party official or an office holder or something like that was fairly irrelevant. It was substance and prospective public effectiveness. I provided a list of such persons, and by the time I got it done, he was down in Florida. I sent it there. We had a couple of meetings out at his house in Georgetown between the election and the inauguration.

As to my own appointment, Bob Kennedy finally asked me what I wanted to do, and I said I thought that I would

[-35-]

like to…. I'm not sure what I said. I know that I said that I wanted to go into one of the departments, preferably State, Defense, or Justice. Having been on Brown's staff, I thought it was desirable to get out of staff jobs if I could. Bob asked me if I was interested in any of the regulatory commissions, specifically FCC. I said, "No." I don't know why, I just did. I think what I frankly and specifically said I was interested in was either Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations or general counsel for the Defense Department. They were really just fliers. I don't know what qualifications I had for them, but I thought they were exciting and interesting and put them down. Bob called me back about two days later and said that I was going

[-36-]

to go on the White House Staff. I went over and saw him at his office on Connecticut Avenue and said that strange as it sounded I really preferred not to, and I went thought the rigmarole that I didn't want to be in a staff job. He said he'd talk to his brother, and the call came back and said, no, I was going to be on the White House Staff anyway. Bob made very clear that…. Without delving into personalities, it was made unmistakably clear that he and the Senator and Sorensen and his group on one hand – Mike Feldman and others, Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin], I guess – and then they had the so-called Irish Mafia on the other

hand. I was to go into the White House and was not to get involved in either one of those. It wasn't a terribly explicit instruction,

[-37-]

but it was pretty clear that there was a need for some padding, a third group, or something like that. After being in the White House in '61, in retrospect, I think I made a mistake in being too acquiescent about that. I thought my charge was to stay between them. I think that I was less effective in terms of the White House Staff and maybe less influential in my own self interest by trying to honestly observe this third group rule. I understand Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] had somewhat the same general assignment. It was interesting – their putting together of the White House Staff.

It should be clear that I came in very much as an outsider. I hadn't been for Kennedy until just before L.A., and during the campaign I worked in Washington, not on the road with him

[-38-]

and his key aides. I knew O'Brien, O'Donnell, Sorensen, and so forth, but I really was considered an outsider. I would guess they were probably fairly surprised that I was picked to go on the White House Staff – as surprised as I was. I was told by the end of November or very early December. No announcement was made until, I would guess, around the 20th of December, sometime in that period. It was known; I knew it; some of the press knew it; it was rumored, but not officially announced. One day I asked Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] why. He said that Larry's assignment had not been definitely fixed, and obviously I couldn't be appointed until some of the old-timers had had their job definitely lined up. I thought then, and still do, that Kennedy was

[-39-]

somewhat casual about his daytime aides and about putting together his own staff operation. During the interregnum I was working pretty much on personnel recruitment with Dungan, Sarge Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.], Adam Yarmolinsky, Dick Donahue [Richard King Donahue], and some of the others over at the Democratic National Committee during this period and so was still considered largely an outsider compared to others who went on the White House Staff.

When Bob told me I was going to the White House, I was asked what did I want to do there. I really had no idea, and I said, "Does anybody had the Secretary of the Cabinet?" He said, "I'll ask Jack." He came back and said, "Fine," and that's it. I was never officially given the title. I

[-40-]

was given the assignment, but what was going on during this period was the Dick Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] study and then Clark Clifford's. They were redesigning job

descriptions within the White House. There was a decision made that the Secretary of the Cabinet's title should be changed to a Special Assistant to the President to make it parallel to the others.

A decision was also made, which I knew nothing about, that the Cabinet was not to be the formal instrument that it had been under the Eisenhower Administration. I was told to familiarize myself with how it had operated and see about disassembling it to a considerable extent. I met Bob Merriam [Robert E. Merriam], who was one of Eisenhower's assistants, and Gray [Robert K. Gray], who was the Secretary of the Cabinet, and then

[-41-]

Brad Patterson [Bradley H. Patterson, Jr.], who was a career civil servant who actually was in charge of most of the paper flow for Cabinet meetings. They had something very similar to the National Security Council staff work in its early stages. But far too much paper shuffling. They'd even have rehearsals for Cabinet meetings, and Kennedy would never have tolerated that. It was the first thing that we stopped.

When we finally went into the White House on January 20, we'd had no meeting about who was going to do what, or who was going to be in what offices. We met in the Fish Room of the White House on the 19th. I had worked with Merriam on the 18th and 19th to familiarize myself with his projects, Cuban refugee work and others, so I

[-42-]

could take those over, and also Bob Gray's. We really didn't know who was going to go where. The informality was amazing. I had heard from somebody that rooms in the first floor of the West Wing were much more desirable, had access to the President, status, and all the other nonsense – much better than the rooms on the second floor. So I was naturally interested in that, but there was really no maneuvering you could do to get in. Kennedy was completely disinterested, and I didn't want to approach the others. That would have been to self-serving. So, I didn't. I finally ended up with the small room next to what's now called the Sherman Adams Room. I was in the room that Walter Jenkins [Walter W. Jenkins] had later; he was the next occupant, and I understand Horace Busby [Horace Busby, Jr.] has it now. It was then

[-43-]

two rooms from the President's office. Next to it was what was then the big room where four secretaries and Bill Hopkins [William J. Hopkins], the clerk of the White House, sat, and next to that was O'Donnell's room, then the President's. The West Wing is all broken up now so this floor plan would be hard to trace.

Once in the White House the first major problem that I had was the Cuban refugees in Florida, which really overlapped the foreign policy areas that McGeorge Bundy had. But Mac was always a great one to peel off the sort of housekeeping chores that he didn't want, that were not substantive enough. Of course, he properly did that. So, I had this and worked

with Abe Ribicoff [Abraham Alexander Ribicoff], who was Secretary of HEW [Health, Education, and Welfare]. As I recall, the appropriations

[-44-]

and directives under which the refugees were being handled in Miami were shortly to expire, and did expire about the end of January ’61. So, we had to get that all straightened out immediately after the Inauguration January 20.

Looking at that period, I though then and now Kennedy suddenly showed even more decisiveness, quickness in grasping a problem, and moving towards the decision, and lack of nonsense and so forth, in the White House than he did before. I think we all know he was always a person who didn’t like small talk and got to the heart of the matter very quickly. This was even more apparent once in the White House; it was as though it gave him considerable added zest. In terms of the Cuban refugees he came very quickly to the

[-45-]

point on that one. A program, assignment of responsibility, funds, public statements, etc. In retrospect I think he may had over-publicized it, over-public-relationed it. CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] obviously had an interest in the refugees, the screening and so forth. HEW had great interest in taking care of them; it was providing the housekeeping and food and things like that. The state of Florida had great interest. I think Governor Bryant [Cecil Farris Bryant]– I forget the name of the Governor of Florida at the time. He was very much involved. Bryant….

MORRISSEY: Farris?

DUTTON: Farris, yes. I was going to say Farrent, but it was Farris. Among the projects that I had at this early stage were these. One, getting settled what kind of paper work we were to get for the

[-46-]

President on a regular basis from individual Cabinet members – what reporting were we going to have in lieu of the detailed Eisenhower structure. We finally settled down, with President Kennedy’s approval, to a twice weekly report which would come in from each of the Cabinet members. There were written instructions about all that, and those are in the files, so there’s no need to go into them here. The instructions essentially were that the Cabinet members were to provide him with a brief synopsis of everything they were doing, and everything that was of sufficient importance for Presidential attention but not yet in the press, or he’d not yet been orally briefed on by them. We used to get about eight or nine pages from each Cabinet member twice a week – from some

[-47-]

like Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman] we'd get far more in great detail. Kennedy saw the first batch, and it must have been a pile of fifty or sixty or seventy pages. From then on he had me summarize them down to about five or six pages. They would come in on Tuesdays and Fridays. Overnight I would dictate and have typed the summary and would give them to him the next morning. He would usually have them read by the end of that working day; he would scan them in his office sometimes. Occasionally, they would go to his bedroom in the evening, through Mrs. Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln], or the ones he'd get Saturday morning he might take with him over the weekend, and I'd get back Monday morning. He would have written on the margin: "I want more information from

[-48-]

Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] on this." Or, "Tel l him I don't want that." It was very crisp, to the point, no nonsense stuff. To keep this in perspective, it should be emphasized that anything that was really of great, urgent importance, he'd obviously get over the phone or in a face to face meeting. The reports I mentioned were really a tickler file for him to keep abreast of what was going on that was important but not urgent nor already public information. In the early days of the Administration he was doing so many ceremonial things and the symbolic public relations aspect of the Presidency that, even though he was accessible, I think he was less accessible just because of the press of his schedule, than he was later on. These reports were consequently one of the chief ways he

[-49-]

had of familiarizing himself with that was in the assembly line of the major departments.

We started having Cabinet meetings immediately. The first procedural aspect of the Cabinet was, as soon as he was sworn in after his Inaugural Address, he came back to have a luncheon in the old Supreme Court chamber of the Capitol, and I had him sign the Cabinet papers which had to go to the Senate for confirmation. I believe, in fact I'm quite certain, that was the first official thing he did as President, purely a routine one. That afternoon or the next day the Senate acted on the nominations. By Saturday afternoon we had the swearing in of the Cabinet in the Gold Room of the White House with Chief Justice Warren [Earl Warren]; and the President Kennedy had his first Cabinet meeting, I believe, the following Tuesday. I think that the

[-50-]

secondary consideration he gave to Cabinet meetings is best indicated by the fact that he would tell me one or two things that he wanted to have discussed. Then, whatever else was on the agenda was pretty much for me to put together, subject to his final approval. I would make the decision based entirely on conversations with Goldberg or Rusk [Dean Rusk] or McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] or the other ones. But Kennedy really didn't get himself involved in what might be called housekeeping functions; he didn't care about them. I think a good example is the fact that he never had a staff meeting all the time that I was in the White House. I'm told he never had one all the time he was President from the time he was

inaugurated until he was assassinated. He just didn't believe in them. I understand Mr. Truman

[-51-]

had them regularly. I personally believe in them; I think they're a constructive way of pooling knowledge. But there was something about *large* group meetings that bothered Kennedy. There was something about Cabinet meetings that he thought were pretense en masse. Usually I would go in and talk with him very briefly about what I thought should be on the agenda of the Cabinet meeting, he'd always tick off with no hesitancy what he wanted. We'd send out agendas to people who were going to give the presentations – those who had to do the briefings. That was about the extent of the preparation. I think some political scientists would criticize it in relation to the thoroughness of the Eisenhower Administration. But Kennedy's approach cut direct to the real problems, without lost time, vague

[-52-]

discussions, and self interested presentations; in lieu of Cabinet meetings, Kennedy held small daily meetings. Every day there were at least three or four small, ad hoc, one time sessions that would be held. In these he'd come right to the point; he'd quite informally (with a sentence or two at most) ask whoever was the principal participant to say what the problem was, what were they to do. The people who were in the Cabinet knew him well enough that they got right to the point; they didn't start with preliminaries. By the end of the presentation he had sized up pretty well what he wanted. He might ask shotgun questions; he might not. At the end he'd give instructions, or end the discussion, and that was about it. It was in and out very fast even

[-53-]

in terms of the Cabinet members themselves. I think that he had more discursive sessions on foreign policy than on domestic matters. But international issues obviously interested him more, and he usually gave them a higher priority in terms of his schedule.

At the Cabinet meetings – the first one, for example – he went around and asked for very brief, informal remarks. The first was ceremonial but somewhat of an awkward session. He was not good even with a group like the Cabinet as far as joking or laughing much. They'd all be in the room; they'd be standing by their assigned chairs. By the time he came, he'd come in and say, "Hello, gentlemen. Sit down." And Bang! You went to work. The first time, as I recall, he gave some brief remarks,

[-54-]

then had Rusk give a brief presentation. Stevenson – for some reason, I guess having been a Presidential candidate – responded for the Cabinet. The Vice President didn't, which is interesting.

After a presentation on a major subject at a Cabinet meeting, Kennedy would ask quick questions – but not too many. He would mainly rely on the briefings and be done with the subject for the moment. I think in fairness I have to say that he considered most of the Cabinet meetings quite perfunctory. The record will show how many we had; I think that we didn't have more than eleven to fourteen during the first ten months.

By coincidence we had a Cabinet meeting the morning of the Bay of Pigs. That was by far the most fascinating.

[-55-]

When Kennedy came in, he was obviously (I don't think I would use the word "shaken" so much as) deeply distraught – not distraught, that's too harsh a word, disturbed, introspective. He sat down that morning at the Cabinet. For some reason there was just the Cabinet people there; there was not a lot of others, as was often the case. He started giving a monologue. It was the first session at which he talked at great length. I don't know how long he talked; it might have been fifteen minutes, it might have been twenty-five. He went through the whole thing: the planning of it, his version of it, what he thought went wrong. In terms of the Cabinet he took full responsibility. What became his public posture was no different from his private discussion there.

[-56-]

But he was really talking more to himself that anybody else. Rusk was not there that morning as I recall. I'm not sure of that. Chester Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] was sitting at the table as I recall. Nobody really said anything. At the end he got up and went from his room into Mrs. Lincoln's, out onto the terrace, and then out on the grass. Within two or three or four minutes, while he was standing there Bobby came up and walked with him. Then he was again by himself. It was quite a moving thing. Even with the Cabinet there at a moment like, he didn't ask them to rally round; he didn't say that they were to avoid criticism; he didn't give them a public line they were to take. It was very much the inner dignity and strength of the man coming out. If you were really going to work

[-57-]

with him – rapport with him as a Cabinet member – you had to realize that this was as much as he really was going to give you – either in terms of explanation or public line.

I got to know two-thirds of the Cabinet members well enough that they informally would be candid with me, their gripes, their grievances, complaints, so forth like that. I think there's no question that there were at least two or three who were moderately unhappy with the President's disregard of the Cabinet, or his disuse of it. I don't think they meant any ill towards him or anything like that. It was that they felt they were having a hard time getting through to him. I believe they were for a more formalistic arrangement such as Eisenhower had and such as President

[-58-]

Johnson has now. I don't think it makes any difference who they were – Udall [Stewart L. Udall] and Orville Freeman, in particular. But some of them wanted more explicit guidance. Of course, since they had Interior and Agriculture – which were two areas that Kennedy was not much concerned with – when they were with him, they wanted more exposure to his thinking, and for their concerns, than they were otherwise getting.

One thing that Kennedy did a pretty good job at in terms of the Cabinet meetings, relative to other Presidents, is he did not let it be used as a lobbying session. If he caught somebody trying to present what he considered the department viewpoint, he would get fairly sharp with his questions and abrupt enough that the advocate knew that he

[-59-]

should cut it off. Also, unlike what I read of the Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] and Truman administrations, Cabinet members could not lobby the President before and after the meetings. They knew they were there for Cabinet meetings. If they wanted to see him, they might try to convince him at other times – on the phone and so forth. Nor were there any attempts that I knew of, with one exception involving Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], to get his ear beforehand to affect what he was going to say at a meeting. He used Cabinet meetings to hear things, not to make decisions. To the best of my knowledge, decisions weren't made at the Cabinet gatherings, ever.

Let's stop a minute.

MORRISSEY: Did you notice in President Kennedy's dealings with his Cabinet that he tended

[-60-]

to rely more on the advice of those who had prior political experience, namely Ribicoff, Udall, and Freeman, as opposed to those, let's say, like Rusk, who had come out of the academic environment and never really been on the firing line?

DUTTON: No, not at all. I'd make the breakdown somewhat different. I would say that of the three you mentioned, he didn't rely on them a great deal at all in my personal observation. As among Ribicoff, Udall, and Freeman, he relied on Ribicoff more, and that probably was because Ribicoff was one of his early supporters and they had had a close working relationship. The breakdown, I think, of who he relied on and who he didn't, in terms of what I saw, I think he relied, to begin with, on people whom he knew well. That would

[-61-]

mean, for example, that he would rely more on his old White House staff aides – not myself since I was largely a new face. He would rely more on a Sorensen, let's say, than a Rusk. Other people may disagree with that, but that was my personal observation. He would rely

more on an O'Donnell or O'Brien for political suggestions than he would on Freeman or Udall, who also had political backgrounds but had not worked closely with him. After a fairly short period, though, while his reliance on the people he knew earlier didn't abate in terms of the Sorensens and O'Donnells and O'Briens, it did somewhat in terms of Ribicoffs. I think he found Abe more cautious, more self protective of Ribicoff than Kennedy wanted. But he came to rely very greatly on McNamara – just no question of that.

[-62-]

He came to rely very greatly on Doug Dillon, with whom he'd had little or no prior experience, and he genuinely relied upon him. In brief, he developed new relationships and reliances very quickly among those around him as President.

You mentioned Rusk. My personal opinion is that Rusk was never communicative enough with Kennedy except when asked questions. I would guess that Kennedy respected Rusk, but Rusk was too cautious, too professional, too quiet a man really. Not vis-à-vis a politician but, let's say, vis-à-vis McNamara. McNamara was very quick to become a direct advocate, an incisive talker, a statistical reciter at Cabinet meetings. McNamara asserted himself from the very start, never pulled any punches.

[-63-]

It's interesting to see these various men in Cabinet meetings. You would think that Rusk, with prior experience in Washington – even quasi-political experience – might have moved in fairly quickly; to the best of my knowledge, he never moved in on Kennedy. I think the papers are quite correct, at least from my first hand observation, that Kennedy never called Mr. Rusk anything except Mr. Secretary. But Kennedy was quickly on personal terms with Bob, for McNamara, and Doug, for Dillon. This had all kinds of consequences – not just in terms of Cabinet meetings, but relationships with the President and with the White House staff. Rusk, as I think we all know, always had to go through McGeorge Bundy. I don't criticize that; I think Bundy had all kinds of valuable uses for Kennedy.

[-64-]

I think a President, particularly in the present day and age, needs somebody who is looking at foreign policy problems from the President's own personal viewpoint and not just the institutional perspectives and angles of the State Department. So, I think Bundy's insertion between Kennedy and Rusk is defensible. My point here is simply that Rusk was quite content to work through that kind of a set up. McNamara, who had also to go through Bundy for much of his work (and though me in a secondary way for some of his work) was very quick to establish his own direct relationships with Kennedy and not be delayed by the White House staff. Doug Dillon was also very quick to do this. In fact Dillon was a great departmental in-fighter. I always got along well with Dillon, but there were

[-65-]

a couple of things were I would send back papers that had come over from Treasury asking for more information so that they would be more complete before they went to the President. One time, for example, I had a serious question that needed clarification. The President said, "You and Dillon and I will meet and discuss it briefly at the end of one day." Dillon, I thought, showed his White House expertise. He made sure that he got Kennedy on the phone and got the meeting predetermined before the three of us ever met. In fact, he often did that. Which I think it perfectly within bounds, it's normal procedure. McNamara would also often do that, although a bit less. Rusk wouldn't do that at all. An objective political scientist, sitting outside government,

might say Rusk's way was deliberate and proper. My personal opinion is that I would rather have the McNamaras and the Dillons working for me than the man who's going to wait for deliberate procedures and fail to push his point. Presidents need direct and energetic people – not pushiness but promptness and positive action. McNamara and Dillon, as advisors, demonstrated those qualities. Rusk did not, in my opinion.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Frederick G. Dutton Oral History Transcript
Name List