

Albert H. Blumenthal Oral History Interview – RFK #2, 7/1/1974
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Biographical Note

Blumenthal, a State Assemblyman from New York and campaign worker for Robert F. Kennedy's (RFK) 1964 and 1968 campaigns, discusses RFK's involvement in New York State politics, including the 1965 fight for control of the New York State assembly, assignment of the New York State Democratic Whip in 1966, and the 1965 New York City mayoral race, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Albert H. Blumenthal

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Albert H. Blumenthal—RFK #2

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Second of Four Oral History Interviews

with

Albert H. Blumenthal

July 1, 1974
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: How much contact did you have with the Senator [Robert F. Kennedy] and Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] and Jack English [John F. English], perhaps, and some of the others, on the leadership fight in '65?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, English, a great deal because Jack was in Albany [New York] most of the time, so I saw him on at least a daily basis. I don't recall having discussed this more than once or twice with Steve. It seems like a generation ago.

GREENE: I'm sure it does.

BLUMENTHAL: Nor for that matter did I talk to the Senator more than three or four times about it.

GREENE: What was your overall impression of what his role was in the whole thing?

BLUMENTHAL: Supportive of Steingut [Stanley Steingut].

GREENE: But how active a supporter was he?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't think he thought his life depended on it.

GREENE: Because he had maintained throughout that he was staying behind and not interfering at all; that all he would do was....

BLUMENTHAL: I don't think he interfered in the sense that he was following it on a day-to-day basis, or that he construed it as a life or death decision for him politically. I think he thought, as between the two men, Steingut was the better one. I think he had worked with Stanley. Stanley had helped him in the Senate race, and he helped his brother [John F. Kennedy] in the presidential race. The forces aligned with Steingut were forces normally aligned with him. He didn't call members on the phone and say, "do this, do

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that, do the other thing."

GREENE: Well, that's always been what he maintained.

BLUMENTHAL: Absolutely true. Absolutely true.

GREENE: Okay. Some people had the feeling that he was doing that on the surface, but really acting behind the scenes.

BLUMENTHAL: No, as a matter of fact my recollection is that Jerry [Jerome Kretchmer] and I asked him, not he us. When the issue first presented itself and we began to talk about what to do, I think we discussed it with him, but it was on our initiative, not on his, as I recall.

GREENE: You were also backing Steingut, right?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: Did you have much contact, by the way, with Feldman [Justin Newton Feldman] who was up there working for Steingut?

BLUMENTHAL: Justin?

GREENE: Yes.

BLUMENTHAL: Some.

GREENE: Nothing very significant?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I've gotten to know Justin a lot better since then, than I knew him at that time, and while he was working with Stanley my recollection is that it was not on a daily basis.

GREENE: Was there a feeling that you were aware of in the Steingut camp, if you could call it that, that Kennedy could be doing more to help them to bring the whole thing to a conclusion?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't believe so, because the forces at work.... I don't know what anybody else really believed. Nobody said to me, "Why doesn't Bobby come up here and straighten it out?" And I think the reason was obvious, because the forces at work were not forces that were subject to Kennedy's control. Bob Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] was not going to do what Bob Kennedy told him to do, nor for that matter was Alex Rose who was involved, nor was Nelson Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller]. On the contrary, I have the feeling that one of the reasons for the battle was the feeling somehow that

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the Steingut people were too close to Kennedy, and it would bring him too much control over the state party. Part of this is action-reaction, and on the other side. So I don't recall anybody saying Bobby didn't do his share. My recollection is that everybody understood that there were limitations—real political limitations—as to his ability to do anything.

GREENE: Do you remember a trip that you and Jerry Kretchmer and, I think, maybe Ronnie [Ronnie M. Eldridge] took with him on the *Caroline* to Albany? Do you remember the discussion that day?

BLUMENTHAL: Some.

GREENE: Anything of importance?

BLUMENTHAL: In connection with the leadership fight.

GREENE: Yes.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, I remember a few. I don't think some of them are relevant to this though. So if you want to ask me anything specific you better ask

me something specific.

GREENE: They're not relevant, you say, to the leadership fight...

BLUMENTHAL: Well, let me put it this way, they may be relevant, but some of them I really don't care to talk about. Because some of his comments about some people were not....

GREENE: Really? I mean nobody's going to hear this or see it.

BLUMENTHAL: Right. Yes, I've heard that before, too.

GREENE: Okay. Anyway, as far as you know, where did the idea of voting in a party caucus come from? Do you remember that? The idea was that the Democrats would caucus and....

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think that came from a series of discussions. As I recall—well, not as I recall—it's a fact of history that it had been thirty years since the last time Democrats elected a speaker...

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: ...and so the question was, what were the mechanics. There is nothing in the Constitution

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or in state law, other than the requirement the speaker be elected by the house by assembly. So, the question is, how do you nominate the party's candidate, and that's done by a party conference or caucus. But that is by custom, not by legal mandate. And I recall a variety of meetings that I attended, I'm sure there were meetings that I didn't attend. Finally, I guess, it was Stanley who made the decision to call it. I'm trying to remember who the ranking member was. I think it was Max Turshen [Max M. Turshen].

GREENE: I'm not sure of that.

BLUMENTHAL: I'm fairly certain it was Max Turshen, and by custom it's the senior member who calls the meeting of the parties—simply sends out a letter is what it boils down to—and I believe it was Max who did it. He may have been the conference chairman, but again my memory is kind of stretched thin. I think he called the meeting and we met in Albany at the DeWitt Clinton [Hotel], as I remember.

You're not a caucus unless everybody agrees to be a caucus. You are a conference. You're not like Congress in that respect. As I recall, we agreed to be a caucus. And I recall, Stanley got the overwhelming vote of the caucus, almost two to one, as I recall. And that

night everybody agreed to go along with the caucus, including Travia [Anthony J. Travia]. He went up and congratulated, very reluctantly, but he congratulated Steingut. I remember Rossetti [Frank G. Rossetti] said he would abide by it, and some others, but by the next morning everything had changed.

GREENE: Wagner was among those who, at least *pro forma*, was calling for a caucus decision—Kennedy and Wagner and Harriman [William Averell Harriman], and there was a whole group of prestigious names that made this suggestion as a means of breaking the deadlock. Did you have the feeling that the whole thing was a set-up by Wagner, that he never really planned to go along with the caucus?

BLUMENTHAL: No. I think you've got it time-wise mixed up.

GREENE: Possibly.

BLUMENTHAL: There was no deadlock because there had never been a vote prior to the meeting of the Democrats in Albany. There were two candidates, and as I recall, Kennedy and Harriman and others called for a meeting of the Democrats so that it would be decided by a party meeting rather than by just everybody getting on the floor to vote. My recollection is that if Wagner went along with the meeting of the party in advance, it was most reluctantly and with a lot of hesitancy. And I'm not aware of the fact that

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he bound himself to the results.

GREENE: I don't know whether he did.

BLUMENTHAL: In fairness to him—and we were on opposite sides of this issue—is that he issued the most iffy statement I've heard in a long time. It was a typical Wagneresque statement. I don't believe he agreed to be bound. I think he may have said that he thought it was a good idea for the Democrats to get together.

GREENE: I wish I had looked at this more carefully—it's been such a long time—but my feeling was that the agreement was that the caucus would be the deciding factor, and then he sprang the whole thing using Jones [J. Raymond Jones] to frame McKeon [William H. McKeon]. Remember that? That came after that.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, but that was, I believe, afterwards. My information—this is not a question of recollections, it's a question of information—my information of the time was that Travia thought that he could have the votes, that he had a reasonable shot at the votes. There were some Kennedy chairmen who

had publicly committed themselves to Steingut, and there were, as frequently happens in these things, two separate votes. You know, Steingut had one slip of paper and Travia had another slip of paper. When Travia lost, Wagner, at that time and for many years, disliked Steingut. It emanates from some dispute in Kings County, I think about whether Steingut should become county leader or not, and he made the decision that Steingut was an enemy. I think that decision emanated for a lot of reasons: Rose didn't like Steingut; Steingut was too strong, too independent; Travia was much more amenable to control by Wagner. I think there was a religious issue involved.

GREENE: Really?

BLUMENTHAL: Not anti-Semitism, that's not what I'm saying. There was a dispute about where the Jewish county chairman should come from, Kings or Queens County.

GREENE: Usual ethnic politics.

BLUMENTHAL: Right. And Steingut's ascension to the county leadership apparently screwed up Wagner's plans for the way he wanted Queens County to go, and I think there was some empathy between Rose and Steingut, and Rose and Wagner were very close at that time, Rose having supported Wagner in '61 for the mayoralty. Steingut had not been anti-Wagner in '61 because it was Steingut who allowed Beame [Abraham D. Beame] to run for comptroller in '61, the

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first time Beame ever ran for public office. Beame was a member of the Madison Club which was Stanley's club; Stanley was his leader. So it was something that happened after '61. And I've questioned everyone involved to try to figure out what the root of the problem is, and I really don't remember, legitimately. Or, it was a series of things, not just one thing. And for whatever the reasons, the accumulated reasons were ultimately Wagner came to the conclusion that Steingut was not his person and Travia was. But my recollection is that they waged a pretty tough campaign against Steingut before the caucus may have met...

GREENE: Yes, this was really an effort after....

BLUMENTHAL: ...and that this was an effort to break it wide open after they lost the caucus vote. I remember that Jerry and I went down to the mansion on at least one and maybe two occasions. Also, Jones got us into a meeting, I remember, on a rainy Sunday, the most god-awful day that I'd had in a long time. We had to get up early in the morning and go down and meet with Jones and have his lecture on what was wrong with Stanley Steingut.

GREENE: And this would have been after the caucus?

BLUMENTHAL: This was before the caucus.

GREENE: Before the caucus.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. Then we had other meetings afterwards where they made a strong effort to try to strong-arm us into going back on our commitment. And Jones called a meeting of the county executive committee with the state legislators present, and that's when I got into my major fight with Rossetti because he broke his word. He came out of the caucus having given his word to support the caucus decision and support Steingut, and a couple of days after that we had the county executive committee meeting and he broke his word and said he was not going to support Steingut. So the pressures were intense at that time, I recall. Jerry and I just didn't care and I guess we were too stupid to know any better.

GREENE: I think after a while everybody was so exhausted about the whole thing that everybody probably didn't care a great deal.

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Jerry took a tough penalty. When it was all over he lost the Liberal Party designation the following year. They punished him. Why they didn't punish me I don't know. To this day I can't figure it out.

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GREENE: Your roles were pretty parallel, I gather, in this whole thing. You wouldn't have been....

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. For some reason he took much more of a beating than I did, and I don't really understand why.

GREENE: No, I don't think he does either.

BLUMENTHAL: No, I don't think he does, and I sympathize with him because I can't figure it out. A lot of things have occurred over the years. For some reason Jerry gets blamed for things that either he had no responsibility for—I mean literally no responsibility for—or at least he shared responsibility with me. And while people have frequently cursed me out for what I did, I've frequently told them to get lost.

GREENE: It hasn't been as costly.

BLUMENTHAL: ...It hasn't been as costly to me.

GREENE: Well, how would you describe your reaction when the whole thing broke open and Wagner went...

BLUMENTHAL: Sheer outrage. I've never been so disgusted in my entire life.

GREENE: You had no clue that it was coming?

BLUMENTHAL: No. I think the others did. I think probably people like English and the others maybe knew or suspected, but I had no inclination. It was my real baptism in lousy party politics.

GREENE: Do you have any explanation for what happened?

BLUMENTHAL: Do you mean why they react? People are very strange when they become politically involved, and their own self-interest becomes paramount. You know everybody uses the phrase "party unity" only when it serves his or her purpose. Wagner apparently felt that a Steingut-led assembly would be inimical to his best interests, and he was prepared to fight to the death to avoid it.

GREENE: But you don't agree. Some people have said that they always felt that was the way it was going to end. It was just a question of when.

BLUMENTHAL: You mean that it was always going to end in a public dispute?

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GREENE: No. That it would always end with a deal between Rockefeller and Wagner.

BLUMENTHAL: Oh. I had no sense of that.

GREENE: You never had that feeling.

BLUMENTHAL: No. The only time.... After we were into the votes, when this thing broke open on the floor, I guess in the six and a half weeks that we were going, about halfway through I began to smell a rat. You know, you would be with a Republican, or you'd go out to dinner with him, or you're just chatting in the hall, and you begin to get a sense that something wasn't quite kosher. So that would be accurate. At that point in time I began to suspect, and so did Stanley, but for all I know Stanley could have suspected it sooner.

GREENE: Do you remember talking to Kennedy about that at all, once it happened? What his reaction was?

BLUMENTHAL: After the Republicans voted for Travia?

GREENE: Right, right.

BLUMENTHAL: Oh, yes. We talked about those things.

GREENE: How did it affect his view of New York politics, for one thing, and also his feelings about Wagner?

BLUMENTHAL: That was when he gave his famous quote—at least for me famous quote. He said stealing in Boston and New York was about the same, but in New York they lied a lot more.

GREENE: I think Jack Newfield picked that up, didn't he?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah.

GREENE: Yes. But did it affect his relationship, so you think, with Wagner?

BLUMENTHAL: I think it affected his relationship, number one, with Wagner, and I think it affected his relationship with the so-called party structure. This is partly surmise on my part, but I think it was one of the elements which went into his thinking when he decided to make the fight on the surrogate's court. I think he may have felt that he made a mistake in not getting involved in the leadership fight in a more direct way. Not that everybody in the party was his enemy. He was not a schizophrenic. He

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didn't feel everybody hated him.

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: But he recognized the political fact of life in New York, that it was a bunch of feuding fiefdoms, and that if he was going to survive, if he was going to have a strong position politically and nationally—at least many people argued with him, and I think he finally accepted—that he had to play a major role and try to exercise the power that everybody thought he had. And I think that was one of the reasons that he decided ultimately to go into the surrogate's contest, to prove to the political people, the politicians, that if he put his mind to it, he could be it. And that they'd better shape up.

GREENE: Good. We can talk about this later, in a later time frame, but then there was no follow-through on that in terms of the governor's race?

BLUMENTHAL: No. Part of the problem for that was because he couldn't find a candidate.

GREENE: Perennial problem.

BLUMENTHAL: Perennial problem. He really couldn't find a candidate. His first meeting with Howard Samuels [Howard J. Samuels] was a disaster, and I've had several different versions of that meeting. I was not there.

GREENE: I never heard about that. That would be a good thing to talk about.

BLUMENTHAL: Ben Altman [Benjamin Altman] is the person you should talk to. Do you know Ben?

GREENE: No.

BLUMENTHAL: Ben was an assemblyman, then a criminal court judge. He's now a—I forget his exact title, but I think it's Chairman of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. It's a mayoral appointee. Ben and Howard were close, and Ben and I were close. I accept some responsibility for it, and he asked me what he should do about Samuels who wanted to run for governor. I said, “Well the best thing to do is to bring him down to Washington with....” You know, you ride up to New York City and have the two guys sit and talk to one another. It was a disaster. Why, I don't know, because I wasn't there, but Kennedy came away with a very negative conclusion on Howard, and Howard came away hating Kennedy. So for some reason the meeting didn't work

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out.

Kennedy recognized that Frank O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor] maybe is a nice guy but not the brightest guy in the world. There was nobody else. Gene Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson], who was an emotional favorite because he was English's candidate, couldn't mount the strength and had to pull out.

GREENE: Yes. Now this is something we should get into more later, in terms of the forums and what Kennedy might have done to try to strengthen Nickerson's hand. But maybe we ought to finish with this first and then get to that. What happened with the whole chairman business after the leadership fight? What do you know about that? After Jones' accusations it became obvious, I guess, that McEwen had to go. Did you have any part in this?

BLUMENTHAL: Only as an interested observer, because at that point I was a member, and a very junior member, of the defeated minority, within the minority. And so we had, I had nothing to say. I listened and watched and observed. I personally liked McEwen, but I think it's probably true that a state chairman gets involved in that kind of thing at his own risk. He's either going to be the neutral leader or he's going to be a partisan, and then he's going to suffer the loss just as he would have enjoyed the victory.

GREENE: What about the accusations that were made against him?

BLUMENTHAL: Such as?

GREENE: Well, wasn't that the double lulu, and all that?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, they made all kinds of accusations, and the answer is, yeah, he was on a variety of committees as they all have been. If that was the worst sin that he'd committed, he'd be the chairman.

GREENE: Other people have said, too, that they felt it was just a trumped up, exaggerated kind of thing that...

BLUMENTHAL: The whole thing was.... Well, let me separate it out. If, somebody wanted to make the accusation that the state chairman shouldn't be on the legislative payroll, it's a perfectly adequate accusation. But for Ray Jones to make that accusation becomes a little absurd, considering what Jones has tried to get at in the state legislature when he was chairman, candidate.

GREENE: Right.

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BLUMENTHAL: So, within the context of who was making these charges and pleading virtue. There's an expression in law that when you come to equity you must have clean hands, and Ray had anything but clean hands. For that matter, Wagner didn't either.

GREENE: No, and in fact some people have suggested that Jones was used by Wagner...

BLUMENTHAL: Sure.

GREENE: ...as a means of giving himself an excuse not to go along with the party caucus.

BLUMENTHAL: Oh, that it was trumped up, yeah.

GREENE: Right. That was his out from having to be....

BLUMENTHAL: That was his public relations. Absolutely.

GREENE: How did Kennedy feel about Zaretski [Joseph Zaretski] and Travia once they were in? Do you know?

BLUMENTHAL: Relatively neutral. They're two different people. Joe Zaretzki is the kind of person who, when he was majority leader was like Travia, but as soon as he lost his majority—he had a majority for one year—he became the relatively docile Joe Zaretzki who does as he's told by whomever is in power. So after '65 I think Zaretzki and Kennedy got along, you know, fairly well, just because Joe gets along with everybody. That's his style. He never fights with anybody, if he can avoid it.

Travia, on the other hand, my impression is that, if he was submissive at all, it was only to two people. One was to Rockefeller, and the other was to Wagner. And he did become tougher the longer he remained speaker, so that he had an arm's length working relationship with Kennedy. It was not good, but it was not bad. I remember in '68 when Jerry and I went out to the Midwest in Kennedy's presidential primary effort, we had to have Travia's help. We were playing hooky, in effect, and for a period of time he did sort of cover for us. Then he finally said that our period of grace was up and we'd better get back or else, so we got back.

GREENE: This was right after Indiana?

BLUMENTHAL: This was right after Indiana, and Kennedy had wanted me to go to Oregon, and Travia said, "No thanks." I went at my own peril. I had to run myself that year so I couldn't afford to get involved.

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publicly I couldn't afford it.

GREENE: Did he do that, by the way, do you think, just as a dig at Kennedy, or was...

BLUMENTHAL: I think it was a dig at both of us. Travia and I didn't get along too well. He never forgave me for the abortion thing.

GREENE: After the abortion thing.

BLUMENTHAL: We had a tremendous public struggle in '67 over the abortion thing. He fired me as chairman of the Democratic Policy Committee, and we exchanged a few words privately and a couple more publicly, and I don't think he ever forgave me for it. So I think he was motivated in part by figuring that I shouldn't...

GREENE: Be punished a little.

BLUMENTHAL: A little bit.

GREENE: This is jumping a little bit ahead to late '65 after the mayoral when the

leadership question arose, and you and Kretchmer were apparently both interested in the whip's job.

BLUMENTHAL: That wasn't '65.

GREENE: Wasn't that the special election after....

BLUMENTHAL: That was '66. '65 was when Travia won. Travia was speaker.... Wait a minute. Let me get myself straightened out.

GREENE: See, there are two in '65.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, you're actually right. It was in '65. Yes, I got mixed up.

GREENE: It is confusing, because that was a special election because of reapportionment, I think.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes.

GREENE: Anyway, that's kind of an interesting tale, and why don't you tell it from your own point of view.

BLUMENTHAL: In '65 Kennedy, during the course of the year, had made some very flattering comments to me personally, and then publicly at one point, to Moe Weinstein's [Moses M. Weinstein] absolute outrage. Kennedy

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had suggested from Brazil that I should become majority leader. I am certain, knowing him, that that was both to make me feel good and to give Travia and Weinstein a bit of a needle at the same time. It succeeded on both counts. It made me feel good, and it succeeded in giving both of them the needle. Unbeknownst to me, he apparently pressed the point with Travia, pushing fairly hard, I am told, that reformers were the coming group and that they were entitled to recognition and, in Kennedy's phrase, I was the best of the lot. We had elected some reformers in the Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] landslide in '64, and then elected some more in the mayoral election in '65, because of that peculiar three-way split—the Beame, Screvane [Paul R. Screvane], Ryan [William E. Ryan]—then that of O'Dwyer [Peter Paul O'Dwyer] race. The primaries which were still running on slates at that time, the primaries produced some rather strange results. So a number of regulars got beaten because reformers allied themselves in certain instances with Screvane, for example, in the Bronx where Bob Abrams [Robert Abrams] got elected for the first time, as a result of that alliance got nominated, and then election became automatic. Anyway, Kennedy, unbeknownst to me, apparently went to Travia and had recommended that I be given recognition, and I think part of that came from the fact that I was the first one to meet with Kennedy when he first came into the state. I preceded Jerry in that relationship. I think that's probably where it came from.

Then at some point Travia talked to me and asked me if I would be interested in being whip. I asked him what that was all about, and it was he who told me about it, not Kennedy.

GREENE: That was the first you heard?

BLUMENTHAL: The first inkling that I had that I was even being considered.

GREENE: Was this before the article from Brazil?

BLUMENTHAL: This was after the article from Brazil.

GREENE: So that would have been the first direct contact, you made. Yes.

BLUMENTHAL: The first direct contact. I had no idea, no inkling at all. Kennedy had not discussed it with me directly. As a matter of fact, he had not discussed the article from Brazil with me directly. I had read about it in the newspapers like everybody else did.

GREENE: You know, I sent for a copy of that—and it's probably sitting at the house now—but that's an interesting article because he talks in very specific terms about exchanging support for you as majority

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leader. Is that the whip, the majority leader?

BLUMENTHAL: Majority leader.

GREENE: In exchange for support for Travia as speaker. Travia, of course, would have been up again.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, you see that had some credence because, going back to the leadership fight, we had a couple of black legislators and a handful of reformers [INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: Well, we were on the whip decision.

BLUMENTHAL: Back in the leadership fight, McEwen came to me at one point, and I don't really remember exactly when.... It's funny, these things are seeds for everything. They were talking about a variety of ways to bring together a majority after Stanley....Not a majority but to break Travia's...

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: ...hold on some 35 or 33 or 37—I don't even remember the number

any more—people, some of whom were reformers, a couple of blacks like Percy [Percy E. Sutton]. And he asked me if I would consider being majority leader under Steingut. At that point I was a sophomore legislator. I had been there two years. This was my third year. Talk about being wet behind the ears, very wet, not at all a savvy politician. And we went back and forth on that for a while and....

GREENE: Where would that suggestion have come from, do you think?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I have to assume that it came from Kennedy, although I have no direct knowledge that that's true.

GREENE: But McKeon wouldn't put something out on his own?

BLUMENTHAL: Highly unlikely.

GREENE: Maybe English?

BLUMENTHAL: Possible, although I wasn't that close to Jack. Jerry was much more of a drinking buddy. I'm not a drinker. I get sick if I have too many drinks. I am more likely to go to bed early than most other people. My wife [Joel Marie Blumenthal] says I'm about the squarest human being she's ever come across with only a handful of exceptions.

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It led to something of a problem with Jerry, and a double problem with Freddy Ohrenstein [Manfred Ohrenstein], as I recall, because Freddy had been there two years longer than I had. He was in the Senate [New York State Senate] and he saw himself as a compromise candidate for majority leader in the Senate. And that's part of a long history of our personal problems. But going back to that, that was the first time that anybody had said to me, "You ought to be something other than a member of the legislature." I remember we had a meeting—I don't remember whether Jerry was there or not, I'm inclined to think he was not, but he might have been—with McEwen, English, Steingut....

GREENE: This is now in early '65?

BLUMENTHAL: This is early in '65. Where they asked me for a decision as to whether I would accept it. I said, "Are you offering?" And they said, "Yes," and I said yes, I would accept. And from that point on, that seemed to be a decision because I had to get from them an assurance that I wasn't going to be owned by anybody. That was one of the things that was bothering me. But we had something of a discussion, Stanley and I, and I kind of liked him because when we were working with him, and with Howard Samuels on reorganization of the legislature, I liked Stanley's impulses. He was not the caricature of the kind of leader that I had always grown up to believe that he was.

He had a mind that was quite open, as a matter of fact. But then, of course, we lost, and that ended any discussion of that.

GREENE: How far had they gone, let's say, in bartering with that, do you think?

BLUMENTHAL: I really am unclear, because I think—and again you're testing my memory which is not very clear on this point—I think that was at least more than halfway through the six weeks, and I have a feeling that things began to happen rather rapidly at that point. I think they tried it with the Bronx reform contingent and the mayor's hold, I think, proved to be too strong on that. It was Abrams [Melville E. Abrams] and Si Posner [Seymour Posner] and Tony Stella [Anthony J. Stella] and one or two others, so that that didn't really succeed, didn't accomplish what they thought it would accomplish.

GREENE: Okay then, jumping up to later in '65...

BLUMENTHAL: Then came the article, as I recall in the...

GREENE: November 20.

BLUMENTHAL: Is that the date of the article?

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GREENE: Right. Which would have been right after the election. Shortly, a couple of weeks.

BLUMENTHAL: Right. That makes sense, that makes sense.

GREENE: I wish I had the article.

BLUMENTHAL: That caused a lot of flak, that article.

GREENE: It was such an uncharacteristic thing for him to do.

BLUMENTHAL: And I couldn't explain it. I could not explain it. I didn't know what to say. When the reporters called me, I had no idea that Kennedy had made the statement, or what he meant by the statement...

GREENE: Or what he wanted you to do about it.

BLUMENTHAL: ...or what he wanted me to do about it. And what's worse is that the next day I remember trying to track him down.

GREENE: The Amazon [River].

BLUMENTHAL: I couldn't find him, nor could I find anybody who even understood what he was talking about. None of the people in his New York office knew what the hell he had on his mind.

GREENE: I've read one account—and I can't remember where—it may have been Ronnie who said that Kennedy was really angry about that story. Unless the quotes were misattributed, or he had given it off the record or something like that...

BLUMENTHAL: I have no idea.

GREENE: It's hard to understand what grounds he would have to be angry.

BLUMENTHAL: One person told me that he was not angry about the comment, but about some of the additional discussions in the story.

GREENE: Oh. See? And I haven't seen the article. It's on its way but I haven't read it yet.

BLUMENTHAL: But I don't remember any of it. It was a Marty Tolchin [Martin Tolchin] story as I recall.

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GREENE: Arnold.

BLUMENTHAL: Was it Marty Arnold [Martin Arnold] or Marty Tolchin?

GREENE: I think it was Marty Arnold.

BLUMENTHAL: Maybe it was Marty Arnold. Whichever one it was, it was, as I recall, a typical story for that reporter, and I don't remember which one it is.

GREENE: I'll send you a copy of it when I get it.

BLUMENTHAL: Okay. Would you?

GREENE: At what point did Jerry Kretchmer get actively interested in this job?

BLUMENTHAL: The first time I knew about the job was when Travia called me and asked me if I was interested. I asked him what it entailed. He told me. I said, "Yes, I'm interested." I called, I think I called Jerry and told him, and asked him what he thought. I think Jerry's response to me was, at the time that he thought he would be a better whip than I would, as I recall, that he was a better politician. I said,

“That may be, but that's not where we are. What do I do now?” My recollection is that the next time I got a call from Travia to meet him in his hotel room in Albany, and when I got there, Jerry was there.

GREENE: What do you know about how *that* happened?

BLUMENTHAL: Only from the benefit of hindsight. Apparently when Jerry found out—this is all secondhand, but I think probably accurate—that Kennedy was pushing me for whip, he went to Peter Straus [R. Peter Straus] with whom he was reasonably close. Peter Straus had been with WMCA and he had helped Peter when Peter was trying to run for Congress. Don't ask me which year, but I think it was '64.

GREENE: I'm not sure of it, either.

BLUMENTHAL: I think it was '64. Let's see, in '62. Yuh. Peter was trying to run in '64, and Jerry had been one of his sponsors, and I think Straus had some relationships with Travia. And so Jerry went to Straus; Straus went to Travia. Simultaneous with that, it was the beginning of black political consciousness, the black caucus, and all that. And I think Percy and some others came to the conclusion that this was the time for them to cash in some checks with Travia also. I think Travia, being a fairly astute politician, saw this as an unique opportunity to cancel

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me out with Jerry, and to cancel the blacks out by giving it to Bert Baker [Bertram L. Baker] who was his close personal friend, and no more real black than anybody else. Whatever consciousness Bert once had, he lost it a long time ago. But I think that's really the way it worked out.

GREENE: And Kennedy was not involved at this point at all, that you can remember?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, I think as I recall, it all happened very fast at that point. We had the meeting, and Jerry showed up. But I think within days Bert Baker had been named, and my recollection was that I spoke to Kennedy on the phone in the interim, like a day or two after I saw Travia, to say, “What the hell's going on?” and I think it was Kennedy who told me that the blacks were using the split.

GREENE: How would Kennedy feel about two people like you and Jerry, who were so closely aligned politically and also close to him, vying for one position? Does he see that as...

BLUMENTHAL: Disgusted.

GREENE: ...counterproductive?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. He had no patience for that kind of thing. None whatsoever.

GREENE: Supposedly Ronnie—I think it was she who told me herself—called Kennedy at some point in here and said to Kennedy that she thought he should go for you, and that he should get Kretchmer to stop making a play for the post. He, in turn, called Jerry and asked him to discontinue. That doesn't ring a bell at all?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't know about it. I just know that I talked to him at one point in the interim and we kidded a lot about reformers, except I don't think he was kidding. But I have a feeling that he had no influence at that point. I really believe that Travia saw this as a unique opportunity to screw Kennedy, screw me, screw Kretchmer, pay us all back for his heartache of earlier that year, and even to do the bidding of the blacks in a way that they couldn't complain about it afterwards, and solve his whole problem very quickly. And he did, and he did it very well.

GREENE: But it was right after that that he appointed you to the policy committee. Now was that a...

BLUMENTHAL: That was a salve. He called me in after it was all over...

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GREENE: That's what I thought.

BLUMENTHAL: ...all apologetic, and saying that he was sure that I would... No, Kennedy called him. Kennedy called me. He said that he was going to call Travia, because since I was not appointed whip he wanted me to have something, and what would I like to have, if I had my druthers. I said, "Well, I have an interest in health," because I had led the debate in '65 on Medicaid and I had worked with Kennedy's staff on health, and I liked the people he had and I had begun to take an interest in this area. So I said, "If there's a health committee vacancy I'd like the health committee." He said, "What do you think Jerry would like?" I said, "I think you'd better call Jerry and ask him," I said, but I thought he might like housing. And as it turned out Jerry wanted housing. That's how that went.

Then Travia called me in the day we convened, or the day after we convened, and told me that Kennedy had called him, and that he was sorry about how the thing worked out, and how would I feel about the health committee. And I said, "That would be fine." He said that he felt that I had gotten doubly screwed—I think I'm quoting him now—so that he'd like to do something to give me some leadership recognition, and he had thought for a long time about having some forum of Democratic policy committee. And the reason he had thought about it was because in the fall we had founded the Democratic study group, or re-founded it, and I think he was a little concerned about it. So he thought by setting up a Democratic

Policy Committee that would be a counterpoint to that, and with me as chairman, since I was active in the other group it would blunt it.

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: So he set up the Democratic Policy Committee with me as chairman. By the way, we hired Mary Anne Krupsak as counsel, who's now the woman who is state senator and seeking to run for lieutenant governor.

GREENE: Oh, yes.

BLUMENTHAL: So it really is only one small little family. But that's how that happened, and Jerry was appointed housing chairman. That's the result of that problem.

GREENE: Consolation prize.

BLUMENTHAL: Consolation prize. As it turned out, probably the best thing that never happened to me was to be appointed whip under Travia.

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GREENE: Yes. Why do you say that?

BLUMENTHAL: Because Travia was an autocrat of the first order, and to have to vote his way on many issues would have been impossible for me. In the end I would have ended up—as I did as chairman of the policy committee—I would have ended up in an even worse split with him.

GREENE: That's interesting.

BLUMENTHAL: I don't mind doing what you tell me to do, if you explain it to me in detail and consult with me. I mind if you attempt to order me to do things. Then I get angry.

GREENE: And that's the way he operated?

BLUMENTHAL: And that's the way he operated. The guy he appointed, that had been whip prior to Baker—Paul something-or-other—lost, because he forced him to make so many unpopular votes that he couldn't maintain his constituency.

GREENE: What about Baker?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, Baker came from a community in Brooklyn that really just

remembered Bert as just the other half of Metcalf [George R. Metcalf]-Baker who wrote the first civil rights law in the country.

GREENE: That's all he needed.

BLUMENTHAL: And he could have stayed in office the rest of his life. Whatever else he did, it didn't make any difference.

GREENE: Well, I think the next thing, and sort of in between the two things we've talked about, is the mayoral.

BLUMENTHAL: Which mayoral?

GREENE: In '65.

BLUMENTHAL: The mayoral in '65. Okay.

GREENE: Okay? What do you remember about your initial conversations with him in terms of the possible candidates? We have Screvane, Beame, Ryan, O'Dwyer.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, number one, he was looking for a candidate.

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I don't know that he spent an awful lot of time at it, but I think he was interested in trying to find a candidate, and I think he struck out. He couldn't find.... He had everybody in creation compiling lists of potential names.

GREENE: He kept trying to get someone from outside the normal political, didn't he?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, he kept thinking that if he could come along with somebody who was fresh and new.... He pulled the same routine with respect to the governor's race the following year, but I think he used to drive Ronnie up the wall to get a new list of names. And none of them washed. Either they didn't live here, and you have to be a resident, or...

GREENE: They were the wrong party.

BLUMENTHAL: ...they were the wrong party, you know. There were a whole variety of reasons why. And I remember holding off for a period of time, while he was going through this. I had an affinity for Ryan, I liked Bill. I thought he was a great guy. Ronnie couldn't stand him. She hated him.

GREENE: What about Kennedy?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, Kennedy had two feelings about Bill. One, he was moderately grateful to him because Bill, in fact, helped John Kennedy, and relatively early on. By the same token, Bill was that annoying kind of Irishman who could drive you up the wall. He was a bit pedantic, methodical, gutsy, but not imaginative. I think I'm using words that Kennedy used at one time. Unpredictable at times. And they got into a bit of a thing in '64, in which I was very much in the middle.

When I set up that first meeting with Kennedy in Washington which Bill attended, Bill felt that during the course of the campaign he never got the recognition from the Kennedy people that he was entitled to, having been instrumental in easing Kennedy's way into New York. And in the course of campaign relationship in '64, I think Bill had some odd feelings, Smith had some odd feelings, and of course Kennedy got mostly Smith's version, so I think some of the goodwill that Bill had earned by being instrumental in helping bring him in was dissipated as a result of the lack of relationship building in the course of the senatorial campaign.

GREENE: Was that over the chairmanship business that we talked about last time?

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BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, and over a couple of other things. I mean, silly things, and I kept trying to convince everybody that they were being silly about it but, I don't know, it just ended up that they didn't get on that well. Kennedy did not see Bill as a major candidate. I never could sell him. I think Ryan would have won had Kennedy supported him.

GREENE: Did he just outright say he wouldn't? Or just didn't do it?

BLUMENTHAL: Just didn't get into it. He had that habit of...

GREENE: Just letting things drop.

BLUMENTHAL: Just letting it slide.

GREENE: What about O'Dwyer? What was his feeling about him?

BLUMENTHAL: I don't think he had much of feeling, that I recall. At least none that I'm aware of.

GREENE: Anyway, then he went through a period where he was going to remain neutral. Remember that?

BLUMENTHAL: That's right.

GREENE: Was he really remaining neutral at that point?

BLUMENTHAL: Pretty much.

GREENE: Or disinterested, perhaps?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, he was disinterested, uninterested, disinterested, neutral.

[INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: Then there came a period, as I remember, where Screvane seemed to be just sort of running away with it. Do you remember Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan] came on as his running mate?

BLUMENTHAL: Moynihan was running with.... Right.

GREENE: Did that sort of make things more palatable for Kennedy, or not?

BLUMENTHAL: Not really. No. He didn't like Screvane. He really was a crook. He really was. "The crook,

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the bookkeeper, and the nut," was the way he expressed it.

GREENE: The crook...

BLUMENTHAL: The bookkeeper and the nut.

GREENE: All three?

BLUMENTHAL: And he never talked about O'Dwyer. He didn't consider O'Dwyer as being major. You know, importantly involved.

GREENE: Well, what's the impact on the reformers and the scene in general, of Kennedy's ambivalence in...

BLUMENTHAL: In the mayoral race?

GREENE: Yes. Does it create problems?

BLUMENTHAL: Most of the Manhattan reformers—not all, but most of the Manhattan reformers—backed Ryan. In the other boroughs they backed

whomever they thought would help them get elected. So in the Bronx, for example, you had Badillo [Herman Badillo] and Abrams supporting Screvane. That's how they got elected. In Queens you had somebody like Arthur Katzman [Arthur J. Katzman] running with Beame, and I think—I'm trying to remember it, he was chairman of the charter committee in the council and I've drawn a blank on his name—Ed Sadowsky [Edward Sadowsky] was elected. Katzman was either elected with Beame or Screvane, and Sadowsky was elected the other way. I mean, there were splits all over the place, with people running with the most unlikely people...

GREENE: Right.

BLUMENTHAL: ...depending upon the constituency, and they were trying to figure out who would do them the best, because we were running with slates at that time. So if the slate would carry the district, the likelihood is that you would win, because people were not splitting votes that much in those days.

But Kennedy, I think, just lost interest. Even when you had coffee with him, or a meeting with him on something else, as I recall, and you tried to talk about the mayoralty, he'd grumble and, you know, look out the window. Or as Ronnie would say, "He'd focus the steely blues on the ceiling."

GREENE: Okay. Once Beame does get the nomination....

BLUMENTHAL: My recollection is that he did not yet really

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thoroughly dislike John Lindsay [John V. Lindsay]. But he did ask Jerry and me to meet with Beame, and we had a meeting at the Summit Hotel.

GREENE: The Summit?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah, that's a motel on Lexington Avenue and 50-something Street. That was Beame's headquarters. And he talked about unity of the party, and how we, you know, had to get together. All of our clubs were going for Lindsay, just one right after the other. Kennedy, unity of the party, unity of the party. So we had this one hour meeting with Beame that was naturally horrendous, but we went along with it. We gave Beame an endorsement, and I did a little campaigning for him. I'm not sure when.

GREENE: But not too much?

BLUMENTHAL: It was very hard. My club was all out across the street in storefront headquarters for Lindsay, and it's very hard to stand on a sound truck

by yourself talking for Beame when all your friends are around you handing our Lindsay literature. It was a very.... I did the best I could under the circumstances, cursing Kennedy out repeatedly to myself, and several times to him, for having gotten me in this ignominious situation.

GREENE: I wondered about that, you know, how you feel when he puts you into that kind of a spot.

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I said some very unkind things to him on several occasions.

GREENE: But there's no lasting effect?

BLUMENTHAL: No. Absolutely none.

GREENE: 'Cause other people did refuse to do anything, didn't they? There weren't too many of his people working in that one.

BLUMENTHAL: I'm trying to remember. Well, he had some, a few.

GREENE: Anyway, do you remember anything else about the mayoral when he came in to campaign, and complaints that he wasn't doing enough, and that sort of thing?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, they always complained he didn't do enough. I mean, they wanted him there every minute because he was a crowd pleaser, and I think he did only the bare minimum he had to.

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GREENE: Did his feelings develop and change towards Lindsay, do you think, in the course of the campaign?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, I think he began to recognize Lindsay as political competition, more accurately. He didn't much like him as a person, and that he said to me on more than one occasion during '65. But I think after Lindsay won, he began to recognize him as a major political competitor for control of New York, and that just enhanced his feelings about him.

GREENE: What was his feeling about Lindsay, that he was a lightweight? That kind of thing?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes, that he was a lightweight.

GREENE: How did he feel about his own supporters who also liked Lindsay? Did he have much tolerance for that?

BLUMENTHAL: Well, he was a unique guy, Kennedy. My experience with him would make me believe that he had the capacity to hold a grudge, but only against very specific people, for very specific reasons, and on very few occasions. He could get angry, but the next week the anger's gone. Grudge was a very specific term with him. I don't recall too many people with whom he held grudges. What he remembered was a person who screwed up on a job. That he remembered, particularly in the middle of a campaign. That he remembered, and there you had to break your back—and I remember a lot of people whom he had bawled out—to make up for the fact that you fouled up.

GREENE: Can you be specific?

BLUMENTHAL: Not really. It never happened to me. I watched it happening to others. I remember in Indianapolis he once reamed somebody out, once in Gary, and during the surrogate's race in '66 he reamed more than one person out. I remember there was a conversation in the hallway in '66, where he was talking to somebody who was in charge of something, and it was in front of a whole group of people. He looked at him, and he said, "We don't like to lose and we don't like people who make us lose." And that little man—I don't remember his name—he just grew three feet shorter, standing right there. And he said it with no smile on his face.

GREENE: That's tough.

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BLUMENTHAL: Tough talk.

GREENE: Is there anything else in '65 that you do with him that you can remember? And then we can stop. Any legislative kinds of things or special projects?

BLUMENTHAL: Yes. I worked with a lot of people on Medicaid. I went to Washington a couple of times.

GREENE: With Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman]?

BLUMENTHAL: With Peter Edelman, Dave. What's David's name?

GREENE: Dave in his office?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Give me some other names. My head's not working. I'm sorry.

GREENE: Well, Peter was the main person usually on health things.

BLUMENTHAL: No, Dave was in Ted's [Edward Moore Kennedy] office.

GREENE: Yeah. Burke [David W. Burke].

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Dave Burke.

GREENE: That's who you're probably thinking of.

BLUMENTHAL: Right. Frank Van Dyke who worked with Kennedy on health matters, and then the physician from St. Vincent's [Hospital] whose name I don't remember at the moment.

GREENE: I know who you mean, though. Yes. The physician's name [Eugene G. McCarthy] is the same as somebody else's.

BLUMENTHAL: Yes it is. Yes it is. I'll think of it about four o'clock in the morning, but I won't call you. [Laughter] Yeah, I really got into the health thing, and he told his people to work with me and they did. They were all very good. I really enjoyed that episode. We did a couple of neighborhood things together.

GREENE: Do you remember Phil Ryan [Philip J. Ryan, Jr.] in that health thing?

BLUMENTHAL: Oh, sure

GREENE: He was involved in that, wasn't he?

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BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. We had a good time. That was a good year, '65. It was a fun year. It was very exciting. I think the single most exciting year I've ever had politically.

GREENE: Really?

BLUMENTHAL: Yeah. Everything kept happening, all the time. Exciting year.

[END OF TAPE; END OF INTERVIEW #2]

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