

Vincent J. Celeste Oral History Interview—10/3/1977
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Biographical Note

Celeste, the Republican candidate for the United States Senate from Massachusetts in 1958, discusses Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. and his orchestration of John F. Kennedy's (JFK) political career, Celeste's 1958 Senate campaign against JFK, and the impact of money on politics, among other issues.

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John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

Columbia Point Boston, Massachusetts 02125-3398

November 23, 1999

Mr. Vincent Celeste
11 Celestine Terrace
Stoneham, MA 02180-3320

Dear Mr. Celeste,

Thank you for your call to Megan Desnoyers regarding your oral history interview. This letter will confirm your wishes and serve in lieu of a deed.

You will retain ownership and copyright, but the transcript will be opened in full, unedited and uncensored, and made available for use by researchers. It may also be quoted from without special permission. The interview will be listed in the new Guide to Holdings, and as of the first of the year it will be listed on the internet.

Again, we appreciate your valuable contribution to the historical record of the Kennedy administration.

Sincerely,

Marion Diener
Coordinator, Oral History Program

Vincent J. Celeste

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Oral History Interview

with

Vincent J. Celeste

October 3, 1977

Boston, Massachusetts

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: This is an interview with Vincent J. Celeste at his office at 53 State Street, Boston; date is October 3, 1977. Mr. Celeste was a candidate for Congress and for the Senate in 1950 and 1958 against John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]. Let's begin with the '46 campaign. Even though you didn't run in '46 I was very impressed with your memories of '46, particularly this incident—I think you said it was Maverick Square [East Boston], was it?

CELESTE: Yuh, that you might say was the opening relationship between Jack Kennedy and myself. I guess

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we both had gotten out of the service from World War II at about that time or just prior thereto, and you will appreciate I was making political speeches when I was sixteen years old, which is, of course, probably four years ago. So that we find ourselves, at least in my case at an age of about twenty-one years old. It's '46 thereabouts, and I see a very lean, handsome—good looking I would say rather than handsome—gentleman (of course, in this case it was Jack Kennedy I learned later), and he was apparently making his entrance into the political arena, in this instance standing on one place called Maverick Square in East Boston, Massachusetts, incidentally, part of my own district. I've lived in this district most of my life. I've politicked with this district for other candidates, as I say, since I was sixteen years old. So I knew the situation pretty well.

But I saw this stranger. Coincidentally, at the time I was looking at him I heard somebody

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yell from across the street—a tavern, I mean, across the street from where we both were standing, “The drinks are on Kennedy.” And I saw this young man move directly toward the tavern, and I reasoned afterwards...

STERN: He had been waiting outside.

CELESTE: Right. He had been waiting, I suppose, for the signal which was the method of campaigning in those days, you know, in the district. Nothing shocking. It was routine. To me it was almost a matter of fact that it would happen. So that that was my first impression of Jack.

My second impression of Jack was during that same campaign. He had occasion to be speaking in a club in the same Maverick Square, incidentally, a club of which I was a member called the Mercury Club, a club that I might add in my discussion with you will come in again as a headquarters of his in a campaign subsequent thereto. As a matter of fact during this time

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it became a headquarters of his in that '46 campaign. During a speech at the club I had occasion to ask him, for example, a question as to the Merchant Marine and its significance and importance in the future as to our national defense. And looking at our Merchant Marine today in 1977 you can understand why I probably asked that question, knowing that our Merchant Marine has always been neglected after each war. And what bothered me about Jack was—I got the impression that rather than answering my question as to what the status of the Merchant Marine should be objectively, he was looking for my viewpoint, which I kind of thought was as though he was trying to accommodate me rather than giving it. I wasn't terribly impressed.

STERN: In other words, he was trying to find out what your position was?

CELESTE: Yes, and in fairness to Jack this was my opinion

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of what he was doing. He may not have been doing that, but I came to that pretty strong opinion; and I kind of felt insulted by it, but I didn't show any emotion. I just passed it off accordingly. I treated it as immaturity as far as politics are concerned, and I let it go at that.

The next impression I have of Jack Kennedy and his candidacy for Congress—as a matter of fact, his whole approach to politics even at an early stage—was that he had rented

the Mercury Club I mentioned just previously and after his successful campaign in which, I think, the record shows over a quarter of a million dollars was spent for his election, I had occasion to go back to the Mercury Club, and I found literally hundreds—hundreds—of signs, hand-painted signs—you know, eighteen inches, two feet wide by maybe ten-twelve feet long, of canvas which were terribly expensive signs. In

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those days they must have cost at least sixty dollars apiece. These were abandoned signs...

STERN: “Kennedy for Congress?”

CELESTE: Yuh, “Kennedy for Congress.” These were abandoned signs. And there were literally thousands of cardboard signs measuring, say, three and one-half feet long by maybe two feet, two and a quarter feet, wide. I’ll never forget the heading was “The New Generation Offers a Leader”...

STERN: That was the slogan.

CELESTE: ...and it had a whistle, as I recall, a steam whistle. A very beautiful piece of printing. Very expensive, I might add, and very impressive. And I found this tons—not literally tons, but thousands of other tidbits that remained after an election—this is after an election.... You would think, at least the way I’ve been accustomed to elections, that on election day all this stuff is out and used.

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Being trained in that fashion in Boston politics, to find this tremendous reserve was quite impressive. And I don’t mind telling you now that I gathered all this material up. Right there and then I decided to run for Congress against him two years later. And I gathered all this material, particularly the great expensive signs, and I had my sign painter paint over it, and two years later I had “Celeste for Congress” on the Kennedy signs.

STERN: That’s marvelous.

CELESTE: That’s a true story.

STERN: Do you have any of these left?

CELESTE: Oh, I have photos of them. I have pictures of them left....

STERN: My gosh.

CELESTE: ...but where are you going to store? You know you just can’t store...

STERN: One of those would be a marvelous item possibly for an exhibit.

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CELESTE: Yes. There's no way I can promise you that, 'cause I'm sure that none exist of this canvas type. And I wish I had.... Believe it or not, even the whistles, while it was rough cardboard, we actually painted on the backside of these cardboard signs and we put them on the back of cars with a tape, you know. And that was all right until the wind blew at them and then you'd find one side, of course, with "Celeste for Congress" and the reverse side, this beautiful printed material, "Kennedy for Congress." And so it was that kind of a campaign. I might say with all the signs that we gathered in that one club, believe it or not, we had a great part of the district covered. Now as far as my next impression...

STERN: Let me ask you one thing though, if I can interrupt—your impression of the '46 campaign then, as we were talking before, compared to the two points of view which have essentially dominated the literature about Kennedy up to now. One

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is that he came in as a young idealistic guy who wanted to change things, et cetera, and that the campaign was run by his old navy buddies, his old school buddies, who essentially displaced the old Boston politicians. The other point of view which is much more recent is that that was essentially the surface. That beneath the surface was a very carefully orchestrated, very well-financed campaign run by professionals, particularly Joe Kane [Joseph Kane] who was, I believe, his father's cousin, and most importantly by his father. Now, I think it's very important in terms of your perception of the way things were that you clearly feel it was the latter and not the former.

CELESTE: Oh, by all means. As a matter of fact, it would be almost insulting to me for anyone to suggest otherwise. As a matter of fact, I'd like to go on record now, having been a student of the Kennedy method of politicking, that any

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candidacy of the Kennedys, postwar that is—that Joe Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] saw to it that it was deadly serious and deadly professional, and he had the genius of giving the veneer of amateurish support. And sometimes these amateurs really believed that the titles they bore were legitimate and very often didn't even know the inner workings of the campaign itself.

STERN: That's absolutely fascinating.

CELESTE: And I credit Joe Kennedy with that genius, and he put together a

commensurate organization depending on what office you're running for with such efficiency and agility that, really, I credit no man with equal knowledge of Massachusetts politics; and then he worked out national politics.

STERN: There's no question in your mind that that's where the campaign...

CELESTE: No, no. Not at all. As a matter of fact, even

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the candidate himself was, I'm sure, completely at loss at what was going on. Where they were taking him here and there and everywhere and telling him, you know, what to do and what to say, I'm sure with Jack's intelligence he acclimated pretty good, but in the initial stages it was completely foreign to him. The pros were running the show.

STERN: Were you aware of the fact at that early point that they had hired an advertising agency? Very unusual, of course...

CELESTE: Oh, my goodness, sure. Not only advertising. What impressed me was the signs. I wasn't following Jack that closely. I mean, all I saw was a well-financed, a well-oiled and an extremely efficiently run campaign wherein these new Democrats from outside, so-called, were challenging the traditionalists. And I might add, some pretty able, dedicated, good, honest Democrats of modest were literally steamrolled financially out to the sidelines, and that was

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one of the things that kind of disturbed me, because I was in East Boston and I knew Democratic politics even though I was an avowed Republican. I kind of felt sorry that an outsider could come in and, bang, just take over a whole situation. I saw the pros in key positions who would call the shots for Jack Kennedy's campaign, and, of course, it was common knowledge in those days that an awful lot of money had been spent, way beyond what the district ever dreamed was accustomed to being spent. It was just an avalanche of money. It's as simple as that. And the Democrats that lost had no apologies to make. It was no match; it was literally no match.

STERN: Did you have any personal contact with him at all during those early years?

CELESTE: The personal contact that I had with him in those early years, as I've just mentioned, and that was it—the little discussion we had on

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the Merchant Marine question and the speech I had heard him make at the club and my observation of him in Maverick Square at that stage was it. But what had happened was, being perturbed at thought of a man being able to just say, “This is what I want. I’m going to be congressman of this district,” almost not even coming from him, but my impression was his dad decided the question—I was provoked by it. It bothered me. It bothered me, particularly after the details of the election were analyzed and how it was won; it provoked me into being a candidate against him, you know, two years later. Almost on a question—should be on a question of principle. I knew at that time we didn’t have more than 85,000 Republicans in the whole district, but I decided that an objection had to be made and I would be willing to do it if necessary. I might add that prior to my returning from the war I had been a

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Democrat in a sense that as of nonvoting age everybody in the district was Democrat, so I knew the Democratic situation better than I did the Republican. But when I came back from the wars, for other reasons I prefer not to go into (they’re not relevant, so....) I was a Republican. So it was a Republican with some knowledge of the Democratic organization that I became critical and, you know, I questioned some of the modes of electioneering. It bothered me.

STERN: It seems to me that you were particularly concerned, as I sense what you're saying, about essentially the role of money being able to buy office.

CELESTE: Right.

STERN: Is that what you’re saying? Am I reading...

CELESTE: I hate to make it a one-issue campaign, but to be honest with you that’s really what provoked me into this candidacy for Congress—the thought that somebody could literally (let’s

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face it) buy an election. I mean, I’m sorry. I wish I could use another adjective but... (Or is it an adjective? The truth is it’s a verb.) The thought of buying an election bothered me, and it bothered me to think that it would be unchallenged. And I thought a challenge had to be made, and I decided to do it.

STERN: The use of the media, of course, was also something that was relatively new.

CELESTE: Yes, in those days.... I want to go on record now as crediting the Kennedys, particularly the dad and the organization around him as having had the brilliance of using the news media, particularly the television, as nobody ever used it before. I think the Kennedys, and Joe particularly, had the foresight to know that this

vehicle, this TV operation would be the best method that politicians in the future can use to promote their ideas and themselves. And his

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organization used it with a genius, with a relative genius in those days. But as the years went by, as campaigns continued—I might add, of course, being expensive this was only available to a certain few and Jack was one of the fortunate ones—as years went by this progressed even for his late Senate fights against Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge]; and then, of course, it was highly sophisticated an operation in his presidential years. I'd like to inject here—I think Joe's background, the dad's background in theater and in movies paid tremendous dividends...

STERN: ...and his connections?

CELESTE: ...yeah, and his connections paid tremendous dividends in furthering his son's political career—as a matter of fact, all his sons. Whomever he chose to make was made. Even today you watch television, you see comics and people who would love to have been associated with

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the Kennedys still idolize him, and he's registering pluses. It was quite a use of the theater and the media, and I don't think of any candidate or persons in government that have ever had an equal as far as [unclear].

STERN: What was it like to run against him in '50? Did you find it a frustrating experience or....

CELESTE: Well, when I ran against him in '50 I thought I was warning my Republican cohorts that this is a man to watch, this is a system of electioneering that has no equal, and I'm trying to stop it now if you'll help me. I was trying to get the Republicans and the Democrats to at least listen to my advocacy of equality in government and in politicking in the hopes that they would be well advised in the use of money. And as far as the Republicans were concerned, I was trying to tell them that this was a man that I think will very definitely be a candidate

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for Senate and higher in the future. And with the kind of organization that he's been able to muster and will be able to muster unless we do something about it, we're going to be defeated by this so-called steamroller. And it worked out that way, apparently.

STERN: You foresaw then in 1950 that Kennedy would run against...

CELESTE: Oh, yes. I saw Jack Kennedy at that time as a future candidate for president.

STERN: That's remarkable.

CELESTE: And I did, not so much from observing Jack, in all honesty, but I think I understood the father and his thinking. I knew his dad was determined to make a president. And I think he had an innermost feeling himself to be president in his Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] years. And for reasons we ought not to go in as not relevant here, he, I think, after the war, convinced himself that where he didn't make it, by

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gosh, he's going to make a president. And I'm not knocking it. I think it's admirable in a father to feel that way. As a man on the other side of the fence, I was aware of it, and I was aware of his genius for politics, and he had all the money and the power to do it. I was wondering if I could break it. In my humble way I was trying to break it, and it just didn't work out.

The answer to your question is, yes. Not in '46—I didn't as positive question that as much, but certainly when I was thinking of running for senator I became convinced that he was on his way to the presidency of the United States.

STERN: I'm fascinated by some of these for about '52. Obviously you took his senate candidacy very seriously in '52. You don't think that Senator Lodge did, or not as seriously as he should have?

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CELESTE: Oh, no. No, no. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. No. Cabot Lodge certainly did take his candidacy dead serious.

STERN: I may have misinterpreted what you said.

CELESTE: Oh, yes. What happened to Cabot is he ran out of money. As a matter of fact, now that you mention it, in '52 I, as you know, had a choice of going to a wedding or a wake: Chris Herter's [Christian A. Herter] governorship which was successful or...

STERN: He beat Dever [Paul A. Dever] didn't he?

CELESTE: Yeah, he beat Paul Dever for governor.... Or the wake which was—we're talking now of three o'clock in the morning, that election morning, the morning after the election. I chose to go into Cabot Lodge's situation and try to comfort him a little bit. And I'll never forget—Cabot said to me, "If I couldn't do it..."

meaning a man of his financial substance couldn't do it, how in heaven's name could a guy like me ever expect to do it,

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knowing that I had just run against him in '50 for Congress. And Cabot lost, in my opinion, if that was your question, if I can clarify your point, for lack of money and for lack of funds to really compete with Jack the way he.... I'll never forget; there was an ad that had to be covered, a \$60,000 item, that had to be covered by Cabot Lodge's organization the last minute. They had a lot of trouble just covering, and so that they were operating very close.

STERN: Apparently they didn't take Kennedy as a serious threat early in the campaign, but gradually became...

CELESTE: That would probably be a fair statement. They certainly didn't take Kennedy seriously when I was running against him as a natural threat to Cabot in '52. That's certainly true. But they, I guess, had come around to thinking my way in the middle of their campaign, realizing that Joe was deadly serious. They should have

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known at the convention. As I recall, the Kennedy forces were very closely aligned with the Taft [Robert A. Taft] crowd at the Republican National Convention where I was a delegate.

STERN: That's very interesting.

CELESTE: ...and they should have come away from there with the full knowledge of the precarious position that Cabot Lodge would find himself in a close fight. And that was the situation in Massachusetts, because the conservative element of the Republican party would decide the question. And Joe had many conservative contacts. That was the genius of Joe. Joe had connections from the ultraleft to the ultraright. That was the political genius of Joe Kennedy, and the Lodge crowd, I'm afraid, from my point of view, didn't early enough take the warning.

STERN: Apparently it was the isolationist-oriented

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Republicans who considered Lodge an internationalist who may have decided...

CELESTE: I think it was pettier than that, really. Your point is too philosophical, if I may. I have to bring it right down to earthy terms. In truth, they were just mad that Lodge had championed an Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] over Taft; and, I hate to use it, but this was a form of retribution. It was a sad thing; I wish I could be

more philosophical about the rejection, but they were just mad at him for having so efficiently promoted the Eisenhower presidency.

STERN: You mentioned a name before—Brewer [Basil Brewer], was it?

CELESTE: Yes. Basil Brewer was the publisher of the *New Bedford Times* [*New Bedford Standard-Times*], and he, you might say, was, well, somewhat a spokesman for the ultraconservative wing of the Republican Party in those days. And so that what went into the newspaper would be a

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signal to all others. And he came away from Chicago with definite Kennedy leanings or anti-Lodge feelings, whichever you prefer. But I think that Joe Kennedy—and I have no evidence of this, in fairness to Mr. Kennedy—I felt that Joe Kennedy did a magnificent job in behalf of his son, right in Chicago at the convention.

STERN: That's a very, very interesting point. Do you recall at all this famous incident with the *Boston Post* which was supporting Lodge and then switched in the middle of the campaign?

CELESTE: Well, there again we're talking after my campaign for Congress, and, admittedly, as you say, my campaign for Congress was that question of financial steamrolling, and now I'm still formulating my opinion of Kennedy. So, in answer to your question, now we're talking '52 campaign where the *Post*,

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a Democratic paper traditionally, decides to say a kind word for Lodge—a deserving kind word for Mr. Lodge, I might add. From my vantage point, I watched what happened to that wonderful newspaper which every morning I would read as a Republican with some tongue in cheek, but a great newspaper nevertheless. To see it die so suddenly and so violently, so really without legitimate reason except just ruthlessness.... From the story I gathered the father just killed the paper financially. He just literally murdered the paper. And what bothered me was the men that lost their jobs, you know, the multitudes that were working for that wonderful paper for years. Almost on a whim. How could you destroy a thing like that? It bothered me. That you could do it bothered me. That you could and would do it bothered me.

STERN: That's a very interesting point of view. Now in the '56, I was fascinated by what you said

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about the vice-presidential fight at the Democratic convention.

CELESTE: Well, again, now, see I'm now a student of the Kennedy rise to the presidency, and nobody has listened to me so I'm really talking to myself. I'm in my living room and watching this Democratic convention with interest and not terribly concerned because I felt that whatever candidates they would put forth the Eisenhower team would win. But it was interesting to watch the Kennedy campaign for the nomination for vice president. And I can't help remembering—I'll remember this surely for the rest of my life—that the Kennedy campaign was efficiently run and he was, to me at least, unsurprisingly strong. He went to the brink of victory; and, I'll never forget, his father was on the Riviera during this convention, and being the student of Joe Kennedy that I developed to be,

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I couldn't help but feel that he was still pulling the strings as far as Jack is concerned right from the Riviera, the French Riviera. And Jack going to the brink of victory suddenly had the rug pulled out from under them, and, of course, he lost the nomination for vice president.

And now I bring you to the highpoint of my discussion where I see Jack and his wife Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] on television, and Jack literally in tears at having lost the vice presidential nomination; and I couldn't help but remark to my wife, "My goodness, he doesn't even realize this is his shining hour." Here he is. He's the logical candidate four years hence, and had he won this thing he may have been forgotten forever. And here he is torn with distraught over the loss of it. And I couldn't help feel that either he knew very little of politics as it was on a national scale or whether he was just overcome by

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the situation at the moment.

STERN: You seem to feel, if I'm reading this correctly, that in some ways Jack Kennedy was very naive politically, at least in the early years.

CELESTE: Yes. Oh, yes. By all means. He had all the attributes a politician needed. He was good looking; he made a helluva nice speech; he loved people; he shook hands with people. You couldn't help but like the man. He was a good man, just a helluva nice guy. I never knew him personally, but that's how I received him in my mind. So having said that, you know, that would be usually all you needed to be successful in politics. But it doesn't work that way. Jack had a father named Joe Kennedy, and he had the money and the know-it-all of how to put together a magnificent political organization. So that in spite of Jack's assets that I've

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just mentioned he did have a naiveness in politics which, incidentally, was sometimes a breath of fresh air in Boston politics. You know, it really went to help him, in all fairness.

He'd come out naive, and his old man—pardon me, his father would be promoting professionally. And I thought that this was part of the success story of Kennedy. He would come out very naively on things, and then, of course, if it was serious the father or the pros would correct things. And that's how it would go. He learned fast. He was a good learner. He learned as he went along, like all of us do. But to say he knew it from the beginning or all the [unclear], that wouldn't be fair; that wouldn't be right at all.

STERN: When did you decide to challenge him in '58? Did you decide it in '58 or...

CELESTE: I decided to challenge him, believe it or not,

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on the very night I spoke to Cabot Lodge .

STERN: ...in '52?

CELESTE: ...in '52. The morning that I spoke to Cabot Lodge wherein he put the question to me, "How in heaven's name could a fellow like me hope?"—and incidentally he had no notion that I was going to run for Senate. I didn't know myself.

STERN: Sure.

CELESTE: He was referring to the '50 election campaign. He said, "How could you ever hope to win against a guy like Kennedy when I couldn't even get off to...." You know the situation. And I decided then that I would be a candidate for United States senator if no more formidable candidate would be around. Realizing that this was a stepping-stone to the presidency as far as Jack was concerned, I felt that he would be looking for a Protestant of statewide stature who he could take care of.

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And yet I'm saying "he" when I don't mean "he" at all. I mean Joe Kennedy. Really, that in all fairness, I can't give Jack that credit, and I don't mean to be discrediting him. I don't think that was his facet of the political game that was being played for him. He was to smile and make speeches, et cetera, et cetera, but not to analyze the next political move. I always felt that while he had his dad, it was in the realm of his dad's sphere, control. And so that at that time I felt that Joe Kennedy, more or less, had decided that a nice Protestant of statewide stature to be defeated could catapult his son into the presidential sphere.

STERN: Now '58 when you did run, that got a lot of national attention. There's no question that Senator Kennedy wanted very much, and his organization wanted very much, a big victory, because that would promote him for

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1960. What was it like running in '58 against, him, the incident with the debate and all these other things that...

CELESTE: Well, when I ran against him for the Senate, you're talking about...

STERN: Yes. As a matter of fact, let me backtrack for a second and ask you about the nomination itself, because apparently there was a favorite at the Republican convention...

CELESTE: Right.

STERN: ...and you essentially won over the convention by delivering a very strong speech.

CELESTE: Don't let me forget to give you a short narrative...

STERN: We'll get to that.

CELESTE: When I decided, as I say, to run for the Senate in the absence of what I would consider a legitimate, bona fide statewide Republican candidate, I had asked Chris Herter who was governor (incidentally, I was a secretary to

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Governor Herter at the time)—I asked him if he had intended to run for Senate from the governorship, and he said that he was not interested at all. And I had learned, naturally, that Cabot Lodge was not going to be involved. In the absence of one of their stature, I decided to be a candidate. As it happened, one Charles Gibbons who was Speaker of the House decided to run for senator. So I was campaigning for the office with the only other candidate, namely Charlie Gibbons for senate. We were both campaigning for the nomination. And as it worked out in the closing days of the primary, Charles Gibbons withdraws as a candidate for senator, leaving me alone to be the candidate for Senate. This was a very hard-fought nomination. I campaigned everywhere throughout the state. Every Republican group that I could get together I would speak before, and that took in

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really from one end of the state to the other. It was a very, very long, arduous fight for the nomination. And I can assure you any suggestion that I was placed in there is a lot of hogwash. I was convinced that the Kennedys least welcome me, an unknown. I felt that if a well-known candidate was not available an unknown Catholic who would be willing to really do battle on the legitimate issues fully would be the best candidate against Kennedy not only for the candidacy itself for Senate, but knowing that he was using this as a means of

catapulting to national politics, I felt that the best way to stop it would be through my type of candidacy. And that's why I was so determined to run. Well, after Charles Gibbons withdraws and on almost the very night before the nomination which was at the convention that the Republicans held in Worcester that year,

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I suddenly find myself with another candidate against me, one John Ames [John S. Ames, Jr.] who, incidentally, is of the illustrious Ames family whose ancestors, I guess, had been involved in politics and had senators and whatnot elected through the years. And I understand that his financial status makes Kennedy's look rather small. So this was an interesting situation as far as I was concerned.

STERN: Well, he was a much more typical Republican than you....

CELESTE: Oh, yeah, traditional Republican, but an unknown. A relatively unknown. I mean, he just came out of the blue, but he had the right name. He had the right name, and he was, you know, Protestant background and financially in the right circles. He was of the upper class financially. So that I found myself with a real problem before me.

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But with all this...

STERN: He was going to challenge you at the convention?

CELESTE: Right. But with all his wealth.... There my theory of wealth against non-wealth at least sustained in that he could not extend himself beyond the four walls of that convention, with all the money. So it was really a debate between Celeste and Ames in the final analysis in the few hours that were there for him to wage a campaign. And thank goodness we won substantially and without question. But it left a question as to how this fellow became a candidate very much alive in my mind, and I felt Kennedy all over the Republican National Convention.

STERN: ...State Convention.

CELESTE: Yeah, pardon me, Republican State Convention in Worcester. I felt the Kennedys and their forces almost in every aisle; even when I talked to Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall],

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I don't mind telling you, I wondered often whether I was talking to Kennedy or not, you know. But I gave him the benefit of the doubt, and I still do. But the fact of the matter

remains that I did have a candidate placed against me of substantial stature, and that was not to be expected in the original setting, you know. But I was pleased that it happened, and I think it improved my situation. I might add all the newspapers wanted me out, and I couldn't understand why they wanted me out except to serve Kennedy. I remember the *Herald* [*Boston Herald*] had written a headline on that Saturday afternoon before the nomination that I had withdrawn from the candidacy.

STERN: It was a Republican paper.

CELESTE: It was a Republican paper...

STERN: Right.

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CELESTE: ...which I think I'd like to include in this interview this incident with Choate [Robert B. Choate, Jr.] in connection with a follow-up to that. After that story of my withdrawing, which, of course, was false—and notwithstanding the story I won the nomination—the paper graciously gave me the headline the next morning, you know, which was quite complimentary. I didn't expect it.

I've got to tell you a little history—I think it's worthy—about the *Herald* and myself. When I ran for Congress, I'll never forget, I walked into the *Herald*, and I announced myself as a candidate, and the editor had a newspaper face down. He said, "Your name is Celeste?" "Yes." "And you're a candidate for the Congress against Kennedy?" "Yes." "And you're seeking our support?" "Yes." Being a Republican paper, I thought I at least had the right—or at least the thought was there that I had every license to make the

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request. He turns the newspaper in front of him face down, face up. And the headline read—I'll never forget—"Kennedy Foundation Donates \$2,000,000 to..." some Chicago charity. And I realized that that would be the method of campaigning against me. He looked at me with a grin I'll never forget the rest of my life. And, really, that summarizes the issue between John Kennedy and Vincent Celeste, as simple as that. The follow-up of that story was that when I won the nomination and I had gotten that headline in the *Herald* I went back to the *Herald*, this time being, you know, a person of some substance in the Republican ranks and statewide having won a nomination and having been secretary to the governor, I now was speaking to the governor. So I got to invite myself or be invited in to Choate's office wherein I didn't know what exactly to say to him. I

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couldn't thank him for what support he gave me, 'cause certainly he did anything to kill me. On the other hand, I wanted to be polite and genial. So I remember rather precisely I said, "I want to thank you for whatever you would have done on my behalf or whatever you

might choose to do in the future on my behalf.” Whereupon he pressed the question, and he said, “Gee, I’m not sure we did anything on your behalf.” Well I said, “Well now that you mention it, I certainly agree with you.” And he said, rather shockingly blunt, “Why don’t you get out of the race? Why don’t you forget and abandon the Senate fight?” And I was shocked at the openness about this man and the ruthlessness on which he approached the question and, really, at the thought that he had any license to speak to me that intimately. I didn’t know the fellow and I certainly wouldn’t wanted him as a personal friend of mine, so he had no

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real reason to speak that intimately with me. So I thought it was just sheer gall, and I told him so. And I don’t have to tell you that what I told him was.... Well, I think I will tell you what I told him. I told him that if we were to measure the importance of this paper by the amount of Republicans this paper has been able to engender in the city of Boston through the years, I said, then you can understand if I’m not terribly concerned about what influence you just don’t have or have. And I guess that kind of settled the question for the time being, and that was the end of my relationship with Mr. Choate except I was pleased to hear that finally the paper was properly laid to rest.

STERN: Did he support anyone in the campaign? Did they endorse Kennedy?

CELESTE: Oh, yes. He supported Kennedy; he supported Kennedy all the way through. And I might

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add there were a gracious number of Republicans who financed a fairly good-size ad in protest of this endorsement, which I thought was most gracious on the part of the Republicans. I’d like to say I never solicited any money during the campaign. I made it a point, knowing that it was a very difficult situation, that only those who really wanted to donate to my campaign would be invited to do so, and I would not solicit a soul.

STERN: Did you see any pressure in terms of donations, any sense at all that the Kennedy organization was making it difficult for you to get money?

CELESTE: No. I never witnessed any of that pressure, because, you see, I never solicited money so I never ran against that closed door. I invited them to donate. I know it sounds naive, but in that situation I felt where it

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was a very impossible situation, money would have to be donated voluntarily rather than solicited. So I never experienced that aspect of it. I did know that they were concerned as to whether or not I would invite money, say from Jimmy Hoffa or someone of that type, which I

emphatically answered to the questioners—in this instance the *Christian Science Monitor*—the answer was no, I would not be inviting that kind of money in campaigning against Kennedy.

STERN: That's a very interesting point. Was there any—I think you mentioned briefly earlier—attempt to try and promote one of those—“smear you” and this sort of, I mean, labeling you as the McGrory [Mary McGrory] example? I mean that kind of thing. Was that in '58?

CELESTE: Yes. The thing that bothered me.... I'm so glad you asked that question. The thing that bothered me very much and still does—still does.... Being an American of

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Italian ancestry, I remember Jack's campaign against me was a pretty sad one because he was involved in the Senate labor rackets investigation [Select Committee on Improper Activities, in Labor and Management], and all he kept doing was parading men of my ancestry up before that committee on national television. You may recall Costello [Joseph Costello] with his hands.... But being Costello for what he is—I won't question that point—but there was a parade of Latin names, particularly of Sicilian background where the name “Sicilian” would be brought out repeatedly. So the campaign against me was a subtle one. But what's sad to me is not the campaign against me; the fact that he was setting the Americans of Italian ancestry back so many years, so many law abiding Americans of Italian ancestry, to put the national attention on a parade of Sicilians or Italians in an effort to handle a candidacy

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in '58 against an Italian bothered me. It bothered me. And his brother [Robert F. Kennedy], I guess, invented the term “cosa nostra.” Incidentally, he never did pronounce it precisely. But this saddened me. That was the type of campaign that I encountered. I also felt that Jack's campaign against me was a bit on the petty side in the sense that they would go in and make their donations to the Sons of Italy and this organization and that organization and this charity and that charity, and nationally they would, as I say, have this anti-Italian kind of drapery...

[BEGIN TAPE 2]

CELESTE: That was the only way I could handle the situation, of course, was to meet my campaign trying to be on the positive side in raising issues that became germane. And up to now, if you notice, we haven't talked issues in the campaign.

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STERN: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I was just about to raise that point. In some of the reading I've done for this I know you did raise some very substantial and very real issues: the St. Lawrence Seaway and, of course, the question of his vote on the jury trials amendment, on the civil rights question, on minimum wage, et cetera. And, of course, you raised his national ambition, which was a very legitimate thing to raise in terms of what it would mean in Massachusetts, and all the rest. Did they respond to those things?

CELESTE: Jack started to respond. They were responding for a while, and then I felt that Joe Kennedy made the political decision that he ought to completely ignore me or try to run a campaign without me. And for a long while he was answering. And in the beginning, actually, before George Fingold's death the campaign was really starting to get going. It was this David and Goliath kind of thing

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the national press was picking up and everybody was terribly interested in, and I really felt as though, my goodness, my feelings on this campaign would come true. That is to say, I could very well become a formidable candidate and possibly even beat him. In the beginning I actually had the opinion that there was a chance of beating John F. Kennedy with our ticket being George Fingold, Vincent Celeste, and Chris Herter for attorney general. With the real marriage of a candidate for governor and senate between Fingold and myself and adequate funds available to promote the ticket, I thought we had a wonderful chance. Of course, this was all before the death of George Fingold and the issue of Sherm Adams [Sherman Adams] which was, of course, the death knell for that Republican campaign nationally let alone statewide.

On the issues, Jack had always campaigned on a national level. Even elected

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for Congress, he was naturally under the sponsorship of his dad and the tutorship of his dad looking for, as I say, the candidacy for presidency which was in the future. So any votes or any political decisions made by him even as a congressman, certainly as a senator, were made not for what is good for Massachusetts—what is good for the national position he'd take, for a national candidacy. And these inconsistencies of position which show up, as you say, in that judicial committee vote down South would show that he was playing politics. And, of course, this doesn't surprise me or bother me because actually in Boston politics one is weaned on ethnic and, you know, one gang against the other kind of operation. And then to suddenly say, like Pilate, "I wash my hands of it," is a facade. He played the same game nationally. He used the Catholic issue in favor of his position. He outsmarted the crowd. I wish I could give

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Jack credit for it, but I have to give Joe credit for it. And it was well planned. It was planned many years before, and it was played out to be that era and played out really magnificently in his favor. And I have to give the Kennedys credit for it.

STERN: You say that as you began to prod him with these issues during the campaign you asked about a debate, and he accepted.

CELESTE: Oh, we reached a point where he accepted the... The women's voters league [League of Women Voters] had sponsored a debate in Winthrop in that year, '58, and they had my acceptance for a debate with Senator Kennedy, and they had Senator Kennedy's acceptance to debate with me in Winthrop. And I appeared for the debate, and I was anxious to appear because maybe I could get on page 2 instead of page 72: And he didn't appear. And of course...

STERN: He had accepted publicly?

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CELESTE: Oh, yeah, he had accepted publicly. Everybody was invited there for the purpose of hearing a Celeste-Kennedy debate. And even the sponsors were at a loss to understand why he didn't show, you know.

STERN: What reason was given, do you recall?

CELESTE: I don't remember the reason. I don't remember the reason, in fairness to Jack; but it was not a terribly impressive reason. It was, you know, not a terribly impressive reason. I thought that somebody had just told him, "Look, forget it. You made a mistake. You're not supposed to be there." And that was the end of it. He sent one of his aides to debate with me, Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen], which, of course, I declined and rather what might be considered abruptly with the thought that I didn't come to debate a hired hand, and I understand he might have taken offense to it but I didn't intend it personally.

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STERN: You mentioned that there were in the audience—you say there were a lot of young people...

CELESTE: Oh, yeah. Typically of the Kennedy campaign, there'd always be the inner circle working on Beacon Street [Boston] and other places, the pros of the Kennedy organization, and then there would be the amateurs. In this case, Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] was the manager, the outward manager, the open manager, and he had a lot of these college youngsters, you know, up and down miniskirts, very attractive, very handsome organization from an image point of view, more or less accentuating youth. But you know, now that I mention image, I think it's worth recording when I won the

nomination and George Fingold had died and Sherman Adams' scandal had broken and was taking national press by storm, I had occasion to be on Tremont Street in Boston where Kennedy's main headquarters was, and I, incidentally was operating out of a room in

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the state committee on Beacon Street. And Jack Kennedy's headquarters was, if you please, a department store, a full department store with a great number of windows, dressed windows, you know, with everything on his life from birth to the then present in neon fashion. And I couldn't help but wonder to myself; I said, "My goodness, I couldn't afford to pay for the electric bill for a week in this place, and I'm running against this man and all the money and the power that goes with it." And I've got this terrible situation where I had no candidate for governor and no money and Republicans are running into the woods, and it was a pretty desperate situation. And, frankly, I just made up my mind that I would just keep fighting until the last gong, and I think I did. At least history had recorded that there was a fight in '58, and there was somebody

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named Celeste making some objections. True, not many people heard; but we did score 500,000 votes, and the point had been made.

STERN: Do you feel that if Fingold had lived and the whole ticket had remained, you would have done a lot better?

CELESTE: Oh, if Fingold had lived.... But then the "ifs" are unfair. But if Fingold had lived, since we're discussing on this vein, and in the absence of the Sherman Adams scandal, we certainly would have at least held them to 200,000—maybe quarter of a million—votes, which, of course, would have catapulted my candidacy in different directions. And I think it would have ended his candidacy for president. But he had everything going for him, and that's the way it worked out. But up until the death of Fingold, really, we were really starting to pick up some steam nationally and statewide.

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STERN: You mentioned before that some people offered you contributions but asked to keep it secret?

CELESTE: Yeah, and that would bother me, 'cause, as I say, my policy was that only those contributions that were given without solicitation would be accepted. And every once in a while I'd have someone offer me money for my candidacy—and I remember this rather impressively in the congressional fight that money was offered not really for my candidacy but almost as an anti-Joe Kennedy act, for whatever reasons these individuals had. It was almost a vindictive act against Joe or retribution kind of atmosphere which would make me very uncomfortable. But I knew the tracks were there and,

of course, the scars must have been there for reasons I... But when, they wouldn't put their name to the donation, naturally I would refuse it. Often they would

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say, "Here's the money, but don't mention my name." I guess they were just in fear of Joe Kennedy.

STERN: The other incident I'd like to get on record is the one about Teddy Kennedy putting stickers on the cars.

CELESTE: Yeah. It was amusing to me. I knew I was running against Jack, and I knew I was running against Joe Kennedy and all the organization that goes with the kind of financial setup that Joe can put together. And, image-wise, Teddy was being told that he was the campaign manager, and I really believe he believed he was. I really believe that Teddy honestly believed he was. But I remember a report where Ted was putting stickers on cars in the tunnel with these college girls, you know, this young group I described; and they really thought they were

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running the campaign. And it was kind of amusing to me, you know, but I never worried about that part of the group at all. I was always concerned with the pros under Joe Kennedy's organization.

STERN: It must have been very hard, then, to try and get the public to accept your description of the difference between the surface of the campaign and the...

CELESTE: Well, I never really tried to bring it out, in fairness. It would take too long. As an experienced trial lawyer, I don't deal in the impossible. As a practical political thinker, I wouldn't even think of trying to. That item would cost maybe \$300,000 just to get it across in word form over a newspaper. So I couldn't even think in those terms. I never had that luxury. Even an issue against Jack—my problem was, how do I get it into the press? How do I get the people to even know of it?

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This is what bothered me about American politics. What bothers me and what motivated my candidacy is: A nominee for a major office without money has no way of putting forth his position. There's no mechanism wherein one can put forth his position unless the press graciously accepts it. And when the press has got to consider ads, big money ads, from one side they're not going to alienate that by taking on a position by an opponent. So that the system leaves much wanting, and this is the whole purpose of my campaign against Jack.

STERN: That point is very well taken, but apparently there was also a kind of—you

mentioned earlier—let’s say a more surreptitious sort of pressure against you in terms of your law clients.

CELESTE: Oh, yeah, my goodness. There was an incident where.... For instance, I was counsel to

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Rocky Marciano. Now at this time I might say.... George hadn’t died, I don’t believe at this time; and the campaign was starting to roll. Marciano, after George had died.... And really, my campaign and hopes of beating Jack were almost out with the loss of George and this Sherman Adams thing. We’re now talking late September, early October...

STERN: Didn’t Ames become Republican finance chairman?

CELESTE: Oh, yes. That’s another story. But let me just say this. As far as Marciano was concerned with this incident here, sometime early October of that year— ‘cause, as I say, I remember because it was the October 12 Columbus Day parade. The newspapers had been bandying about whether Marciano was going to march with Kennedy or going to march with his lawyer, Vincent Celeste. I guess the Kennedy

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thinkers thought it would be a great, victory if they could get Marciano to march with Kennedy, and so this story was bandied about back and forth. I didn’t pay much attention to it; I had so many other things to worry about. So then I got a call from Rocky Marciano from Miami, and he’s telling me that the Kennedy organization is on his back and they’re giving all kinds of pressure on him to march with Kennedy. He at that time had a TV show where he was a sheriff—and I’ve forgotten the details of the show—but he had been negotiating. He was about to make a deal, and this deal would be in jeopardy unless he agreed to march with Kennedy. I didn’t know any more about the transaction than that. I might inject here that I wrote Marciano’s swan song in the hope that he would have a livelihood for the rest of his life. That was in the Ed Sullivan show some time prior thereto.

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So I was concerned about Marciano’s financial future, both as his friend and as his attorney, and I sympathized with his problem, and I told him so. I said, “Look, if it means that you’re going to jeopardize your livelihood, for goodness sake, don’t do it. But I just simply want to know whether you are or are not going to march so at least I could handle the press with honor.” And he says, “Dead, yes; but march, no. I will never march. Forget what I have to say image-wise, you know public-wise,” he says, “but you will not see me march with Kennedy.” I says, “Then thank you very much.” And that was the end of our conversation; and, of course, he kept his word, and he didn’t march with Kennedy. And this is when

everybody really is now running for the woods, but Rocky Marciano, God bless him, he wouldn't budge. I didn't ask him to; I just appreciated that

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he did. I thought this overkill was kind of sad. Certainly I wasn't challenging. I thought, after all, this is my living. I'm a lawyer. I depend on my clients, you know, and I thought this was going a little bit too far.

Insofar as the prior incident where I mentioned before the Kennedy operation was at the Republican convention even when I got nominated. The immediate follow-up of that was that immediately following my new financial chairman, finance chairman of the Republican state committee, was one John Ames, the fellow I just defeated for senator. So that I would have to depend on Mr. Ames for whatever moneys would he raised on my behalf. And to say that he got appointed by accident would be rather naive. I'm inclined to think it was rather a very efficient piece of political doing which has all the earmarks of Joe Kennedy and some

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substantial Republicans which for the time being will remain nameless.

STERN: This incident you mentioned with Mary McGrory, was that in '58, too?

CELESTE: Yeah, Mary McGrory, she was syndicated and in this instance writing from Washington, one of the Washington papers. She asked me for an interview with her regarding Jack's candidacy and my running against him. I agreed to it, and we met for lunch in one of the restaurants near the State House. It was a Saturday morning, and I frankly thought when I granted the interview, "How many votes are there in Washington?" And then, well, I said, "The heck with it. I made a commitment. I'll go through." So I did. She conducted what I thought was her interview, and, frankly, part of the story has to be that this gal was drinking heavily. Whether she didn't remember what I said or

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what, the truth of the matter is the story that she had written was completely fabricated, had no relationship to our dinner. She probably didn't remember what our discussions were, or what. But the story was completely foreign to me, and I was very disturbed over the fact that she described me as maybe a little better than a street fighter, you know, out of the North End of Boston with all the.... Bear in mind you have this Senate investigating rackets thing and that atmosphere behind me. She gave the candidacy an assist by describing me in that fashion which I thought was rather unfair, you know. I don't mind telling you I never did object to a story about me in politics all my life. As I said, I've been in politics since I was sixteen years old, but this is one instance I did object to. I thought that I hadn't contributed anything for the story, so I sent, frankly, a check

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with the equivalency of the money for my lunch because I didn't contribute anything to her publishing. But that was the only time I ever really objected to it. And, no, that was symbolic. She was just one of many writers. You know, the money controls the press, and that's about the size of it in plain terms. And if you don't have an equal shot at the press and at television.... I would appear on television.... my goodness, I'll never forget, I used to appear on television five minutes—I'll never forget it—you'd have to catch me between 6:30 and 6:35. It was just before the news or at some point in time near the news. And you'd have to catch me within those five minutes on certain nights of the week. No advertisements, no acknowledgments, nothing, zero. Right there. Five minutes, my message, and that was it. And Jack would come on with three-quarters of an hour, all this New York

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and Madison Avenue kind of distribution. And to say, you know, you get an inferiority complex would be putting it mild, but it didn't bother me much. I mean, that was what I had taken on. There were no surprises, and probably that was what had to be experienced, and I went through it. But as far as doing it, believe me, it was done, and it was done in lavish fashion by the Kennedy operation. It impressed me. It impressed me that someone of modest means just can't possibly compete with.... And now, since the Kennedy years, American politics, today—look at it today. The problem has been magnified commensurately, and unless the law is really changed our system of democracy will undergo the European kind of aristocracy change. I think it'd change. But as a practical matter, unless you're in a position to raise millions of dollars for campaigning, you may

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as well forget it, because the Senate seats belong to only those who are willing to write out that kind of a check, and were able to write that kind of a check. So that for me, for instance, I had no interest in politics whatever except as a viewer because I don't see that you can change it at all. Sad thing to say, but....

STERN: Do you feel your experience running against John Kennedy helped shape that sort of fatalism?

CELESTE: Well, it's not fatalism. It's a statement of fact which, if stated as a fact, there's some hope for change. The fact that I state it as a fact, there's hope for change. But Jack was not the only campaigner who campaigned on that premise. We've had others. We've had Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller], the Harrimans [William Averell Harriman], on all sides. And I think that may have been all right in the early 1900s

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and the 1800s, but since the advent of television if you command that tube, the other fellow doesn't even get a shot. In the old days, with all your money, so you can buy so many papers. People still had to read them, and this sharp voice can travel as far as the next guy's. But in this mass media operation we have today, it's a question of how much money and what office do you want. It's just like the story.... It brings to mind the story I'll never forget telling my mother-in-law. I was in New York during the '58 campaign, and I was commenting on this tremendous budget for television, et cetera. that was going on in Massachusetts by the Kennedys for this office for Senate...

STERN: While you were running?

CELESTE: Yeah. And I had told my mother-in-law what the situation was, and she, incidentally, a substantial Democrat in New York—said

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to me—she put the question to me whether or not I was really analyzing it proportionately and fairly, and is it as bad as I say it is about the spending of money business by the Kennedys for political gain. And I put it to her that if Bobby Kennedy wanted to be senator of New York, believe it or not, he could be senator of New York. Frankly, I didn't fully believe that that was possible at the time. I really didn't believe fully that what I was saying was really possible, 'cause I had more confidence in the party organization in New York to be more selective of outsiders winning the nomination for U.S. senator, never realizing I overestimated the party. In truth, history proved that Bobby did want to be senator, and he did become senator. So that if anyone asks me, have I any doubts of the use of money in politics and its success that goes with it or failure

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without it.... I mean, to say it's fatalistic, no; it's factual. Not fatalistic; it's factual. And those are the facts. If I were to advise my children now—if I were to advise my children in politics, very truthfully, if I was not in a position to put up money for my children into American politics, I'd tell them to forget it. I would tell them absolutely to forget it. Oh, yes, you can win a rep seat locally, assembly or something, but if you have desires to go up the ladder and anybody of substance decides you ought not to have it, unfortunately those are the facts of life. And it's sad. It's absolutely sad, because America loses a lot of great leaders in denying the opportunity. We talk equal opportunity yet.... There's a lot of talk in that direction. "Oh, government, come on into politics. We need you." But

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talking and really creating an atmosphere conducive to equality in politics is another thing. And it's hard to create legislation that's necessary to bring about a fairness, because sometimes the legislation becomes worse than the malady itself. And notwithstanding, some solution has to be found if we're really going to preserves the dream of these youngsters that

in America you can be what you want. And that's the question I tried raise in my first stages in my campaign back in 1950, and now here in 1977 I find the issues just as strong as ever and never been solved. And I bear witness to the fact that, you know, that many men are denied an opportunity to serve government much more qualified than those who are fortunate enough to have money behind them. I mean those are the facts of life.

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STERN: Would you be willing to just, purely from your own perspective, give me your assessment of John Kennedy as a man, a politician, as president?

CELESTE: Well as far as John Kennedy is concerned as a man in politics, I found him a breath of fresh air from what I grew up in as the typical political figure in our situation in our area in Massachusetts, generally. He had a naiveness that was refreshing, and he had the luxury of not having to take on some cronies—you know, the usual politicians. So from an observation point of view you have to admire the luxuries—these were luxuries; these were not traits. It would be a trait if I would knock off a crony that I needed badly and I don't have the money to replace the fellow. Then that would be a credit to me. In fairness, it would be a luxury. He had the luxury of not having to commit himself

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to anybody. He had the luxury to be selective in whom he wanted around him. This is the unfairness of the system. So that in answer to your question, the man I saw was very impressive to me as a man. But being the man that I am, I go beyond it. I say sure he does it, but this is a luxury. Now am I being fair when I compare him with another political figure? An Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith], if you please. So I quickly say—you know, I sort of ameliorate Mr. Smith's position. So it doesn't take away the fact, in fairness to Kennedy, that he is a wonderful guy. He probably was a helluva nice guy. He certainly was honest, and he certainly was dedicated in what he was doing. I must say that as far as qualifications were concerned—and I'm talking about mental maturity into the offices that he won—he was behind, I thought. Or, if you please, he was ahead

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of his situation. He would be elected to an office when he was very ill prepared for it. Sure, he had the best brains around him so that would ameliorate his situation; but to appraise the man as a human being, he was, I thought, excellent, handsome, nice individual, honest, et cetera. But to praise him from a man who becomes a candidate and titular head of a machine that gets elected by doing a, b, c, d, e, and f—I don't think I would get the kicks out of winning that he used to get out of it. Do you know what I mean?

STERN: Yes.

CELESTE: That's about as close a situation I can make.

STERN: I think it's remarkable, the degree to which you came out of this whole experience objectively and without any vindictiveness at all.

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CELESTE: No, my goodness, it's very simple, Sheldon, if I may. The reason is that I took what I said and what I believed in dead serious, but never myself. I mean, I had something to say, and what I believed in and I still believe in, I'm stronger today than I was then. But the "I" of it all, the first person, didn't matter. That's why I walk the street today, and people say, "Gee, Vin, time doesn't hurt you at all." I try not to take myself that seriously, you know. I'm busy with my law practice; I'm raising a family—I'm raising two families. I have a farm; I'm raising cattle. I have a lot of fun. I live my life. I'm a pretty good lawyer. You know, as Sinatra [Frank Sinatra] says, I do it my way. I take the cases I want and the cases I don't want. And I've got a lovely—then I'll accentuate the lovely—family. I mean I really have a

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lovely family—not just conversation. My wife and kids—they made it easy for me, my wife, in particular. This is not just conversation that political people say. I've had a pal, you know, and we've had a good life. And when I compare what I have with the others, even Jack and the others, I tell you the truth I've always felt far luckier. I really did. This is it.

I'd feel sorry for Jack very often. I felt very sorry. This is a silly thing to say, probably, but I'd see him in these situations where I kind of felt as though he wasn't ready for. You know, I could just see everybody pulling him in different directions, advisors and whatnot, and I'd sympathize with the situation. Frankly, look, let's face it: If my dad.... If I (let's put it in the first person) am

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determined to make my son a president of the United States, if I am determined to do that, and I have a son receptive to my ambitions for him, and we've been involved in the way, at least to my eyes, I have seen it—right?—isn't it reasonable to assume that possibly my son might be put in positions of responsibility before he's ready for them? I mean not only that—if you go up the ladder of politics as the American system has traditionally, you get to learn friend from foe by experience. You know when a guy is, so-called giving you a con job or whether he's giving you some pretty good advice, and you develop that very important ability to decipher good from bad by associations. And there's no substitute for your own ability to do and make those decisions on the subject. I think the kids were shortchanged on that.

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My kid would be shortchanged on that. It's part of the luxury of being able to give him what I set out to do. It's part of the price he'll have to pay. So that means I've got to build an organization to protect him. Organizations being what they are, human beings being what we are, individuals in these pull people in the direction, for selfish reasons, that they ought not to be pushed. And if the guy isn't strong enough or able enough to decipher on his own without any other support, like he said—what was it, Truman [Harry S. Truman]?—"This is a lonely spot to be in." You know, it's a frustrating thing to be looking for friends when you don't know who in the hell your friend is. So I think that Jack was shortchanged on that; and Teddy was shortchanged. Teddy is maturing now. Bobby, forget it! Bobby, to me, was completely immature. To me, Bobby was as

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naive as can be and positive in his thinking as though he knew a lot which was very dangerous, I might add. And it proved sad in the end.

But as to Jack, Jack had the qualities of a very fine guy. You liked him. I thought the world of him, you know, as an individual.

STERN: Just curious...

CELESTE: No offense—I don't think I'd want to be his pal. You know what I mean. Don't misunderstand me. He's not the kind of guy I would probably have chosen to be my friend or buddy—certainly a friend, but not buddy. You know?

STERN: I appreciate the distinction, yes.

CELESTE: Certainly friend, but not buddy. He was not—he couldn't.... His whole bringing up was a complete opposite to mine. If two fellows were ever different, it was Vinny

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Celeste and Jack Kennedy. His code, his standards, his rights, and his wrongs with mine are completely.... And it's not fair for me to judge him on my standards or he to judge me on his, if he were to judge me. It's unfair; you come from two different civilizations. And if I'm asked to comment, it's hard to say this is right or wrong, because then I'd be doing the thing that I'd object in others to do. And I don't think it's fair. But I do say, in closing, in answer to your question that politically Jack, unfortunately, died so soon after his election he didn't have too much of a chance to get a record on paper, you know, what his presidency would have been like to really give a fair judgment of his ability as president. He was very dedicated and well meaning from what I was able to

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observe of his presidency, and with that was a lot of naiveness as I see the presidency. I see the presidency quite differently than I think he saw the presidency. I think he really became president thinking he could do bigger, start and finish certain things, and that was his upbringing. You know, he was in the habit of that.

STERN: You think then he ran into the complications of things.

CELESTE: Right. And sometimes the frustration of the office.... You know, just 'cause you had your brother an A.G. doesn't solve the problem. It's better to have someone bother the hell out of you and give you some objective opinions on subjects. Do you know what I'm saying?

STERN: Yes, I understand...

CELESTE: The immediacy of the decision.... Sure, he's not on your back; you've got him on

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your side. But that's not the best solution. So as an administrator, I'm talking, to me, he left much to be wanted; and I think it was done with the best of intentions, but I can't give him an "A" for that at all. I really can't.

And the Bay of Pigs and his handling of Castro [Fidel Castro] personally, you know, and Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeyeovich Khrushchev], you know, the missile exchange, if it was a missile exchange. As far as I was concerned, it's hard for me even to give an opinion on matters that I don't have the intimate knowledge of. After all, what really is known about the intimacy of the relationship between the Khrushchev situation on giving up missiles on our part in Asia, the lower belly of Asia there, and Cuba. To me, I could bloodily say there wasn't a communist country there before, but gosh dammit we've got it now, and I've

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got to judge it accordingly. Now that may be over harsh, but I'm sorry. That bugs me. And that should never have happened. So how can I say that he was very able in the handling of the Cuban situation? I just can't. But all the best of intentions, historically it didn't work out right.

STERN: Do you have anything to add?

CELESTE: Yes. What I'd like to do is, I'd like to get a copy of what we've got down so far, and then I'd like to go into what I would like to include, you know, for the moment. Can you cut it for a few minutes, just a second? Maybe I can...

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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