

**John Seigenthaler Oral History Interview – RFK #1, 6/5/1970**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** John Seigenthaler  
**Interviewer:** Larry J. Hackman  
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**Biographical Note**

Seigenthaler was aide to Robert F. Kennedy during the 1960 Presidential campaign and Administrative Assistant to the Attorney General, Department of Justice (1961). This interview focuses on the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination, Robert Kennedy's relationship with Lyndon Johnson, the transition from the Kennedy to Johnson Administration, and Robert Kennedy's political ambitions, among other issues.

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John Seigenthaler

August 29, 1986

Date

  
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John Seigenthaler  
RFK #1

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Oral History Interview

With

JOHN SEIGENTHALER

June 5, 1970  
Washington D.C.

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: Why don't we just take off then on what you can remember about just right after President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] assassination: your first conversation with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], what you talked about and what kind of shape he was in?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I was in the office when the assassination happened. Someone came in and gave me a slip of paper from the AP [Associated Press] wire which said it happened. I thought it was a gag. I was furious at the AP man; I said, "What is this, some sort of a joke? It's not very funny." And then you know they were very serious about it.

Well I really didn't. Like everybody I guess, nobody thought very, very much. Then Hooker [John Jay Hooker, Jr.] came by and we went for a long ride. My wife was at the office when I got back; she heard about it somehow. But anyway, I decided that I didn't want to get in the way, that there would be a hell of a lot of problems, so I didn't do anything. Well, I called a few people in Washington and said, you know, "If there's anything I can do, let me know."

I guess the night of the autopsy at the hospital here in Washington, I got a call from... I believe maybe John Nolan was at the hospital, but at any rate, wherever he was, he said Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] would like to talk with me, and he put her on the line – it could have been Joe Dolan [Joseph Francis Dolan] but I think it was John Nolan – and then Ethel said "Could you come up?" And I said, "Well sure." I planned to come, but I just didn't want

to get in the way. She said, "Come," and so I did. I went to the White House. I think Hooker and I came up together; no, I came up alone, and went to the White House. In those days, the newspaper had an apartment in the La Salle Hotel; I stayed there and walked over to the White House and got in line, went through the line.

It seems to me that there were all sort of strange people in line as I was going through: southern governors who really had been knocking Jack Kennedy's ass off for years; Herman

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Talmadge [Herman Eugene Taldmage]. It was almost as if the whole southern delegation had decided to come over at the same time. I got in line right behind Fritz Hollings [Ernest Frederick Hollings], who was an old friend of mine. He didn't like anything we did when I was in the Justice Department under the Attorney General, but he was still a friend. He was badly shaken.

So we went through. I remember Bob was not in the room where the casket was. I really felt sort of how weird it was, you know, that all of these people who had been attacking Jack Kennedy for so long had come to pay their respects. I had the feeling that most of them were probably embarrassed about being there. Well, you expect a silence, but I mean it was almost.... Later on I was there and people were coming through and they were talking, you know, and having quiet conversations. This group seemed to me almost to a man they were silent. And you didn't find people like Albert Gore or Bill Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] or Claude Pepper. It just seemed to me that all of a sudden the southern conservatives decided to come over in a group; now that could have been total coincidence.

HACKMAN:           Yeah.

SEIGENTHALER:    You know you couldn't see twenty ahead of you or twenty behind, but remember seeing Talmadge and I guess Ross Barnett and, of course, Fritz Hollings. It seemed to me that John Patterson was there; by this time, I guess he had been succeeded as Governor of Alabama, but it seems to me John Patterson was there.

Anyway I went through the line, and I was coming out at the back end of the foyer and I ran into Ethel. She told me where Bob was. He was in another part of the White House, upstairs. I went up there and saw him and I thought he was.... Well, there's been a great deal of talk about how he went into a deep blue flunk or a mood of depression for a period of a year until he decided to run for United States Senate in 1964.

I remember my first impression was.... My first impression now is that he looked to me like a man who is just in intense pain; he looked to me like a man who hurt, I mean, you know, just physically hurt. The strange thing about him.... rarely shook hands with him my whole life; I knew him from 1957 until 1963 and I don't guess I shook hands with him four or five times. I didn't shake hands with him, but then, I guess, with friends you don't really have to shake hands.

He said he was glad I was there. He wanted to know if there was anything he could do for me and I wanted to know if there was anything I could do for him. It was largely small

talk; there really wasn't anything to say. I didn't want to ask about anything, and he'd obviously been talking about the same thing

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over and over, so I just stayed around you know.

I guess everybody who was around him had a different relationship from everybody else. My own relationship was different, I guess, to me. If I had to describe that relationship, I think the one word that would probably describe it is easy; it was a very easy relationship. And that was not an easy time, but I guess for the next day and a half I was just around, maybe the next two days and a half I was around, through the funeral.

HACKMAN: Did any of those southerners who were in the line come up to talk to him at all or was that....?

SEIGENTHALER: No, he was not there at that time. Now, I guess he saw some of them at some point; maybe he had seen some of them earlier. I told him that I had sort of an eerie feeling going through the line with so many people that hadn't been friendly. He asked me if I'd been through the place where the casket was and I said I had. I said, "Yeah, I was part of the southern delegation." I mentioned some of those who were there. As a general rule, I found there were many times when he and I would get into conversations in which part of the conversation revolved around a sort of sardonic humor. Maybe some people wouldn't think it was sardonic humor; but I'd say, for example, in a situation like that, "I was part of the southern delegation" and you know, all I was there with John Patterson and John McClellan and Ross Barnett, Fritz Hollings." Under some circumstances we might have chuckled about that, but the only thing he said was "How is Fritz Hollings?"

I stayed around there for a couple of days. He was spending a good deal of time with Jackie [Jacqueline B. Kennedy] and the children and I didn't want to intrude on that. I stayed long enough to let him.... That first day I guess I was around about four or five hours. Then somehow we just sort of got separated and I went back, told Angie Novello [Angela M. Novello] where I was staying, what the phone number was, that I would just be around – and I was. The amazing thing.... While he was a man I thought in pain, he was still functional, and I don't think the great mood of depression hit me. He was very solicitous in his conversations to me about Jackie.

At some point in those two days, which were really sort of a blur you know, I remember being at Hickory Hill. At some point, he and Ethel went to Hickory Hill; there was a large number of people there, and they went back. I guess Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett] was at Hickory Hill. Then he [Robert Kennedy] went back to the White House before Ethel did; and Ethel and I and, I guess, Dave went back then. But as I say, those days are not very clear, just sort of a jumble.

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HACKMAN: No conversations about what might happen in the future from then on?

SEIGENTHALER: No, none whatever.

HACKMAN: Anything at all about his feelings about Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson being the President and those things?

SEIGENTHALER: None. He was just sort of a "Look Bob, I'm here."

HACKMAN: You talked about his being very concerned with Mrs. John Kennedy during that period. Was that what you'd describe as an easy relationship for him, or had it been?

SEIGENTHALER: No, my own relationship with him was easy, that's what I meant.

HACKMAN: Yeah, right. I'm just asking you if what you saw of his relationship with Mrs. Kennedy was an easy relationship? I don't know. Did you see them frequently together?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I thought it was not frequently this was really, I guess, the first time that I'd seen them together; but he was extremely solicitous of her and of the children, of John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] and Caroline [Caroline B. Kennedy]. I don't believe I saw Caroline, but I remember seeing John and the nurse at some point. At some point during that time I did have some conversation about the manner in which Jackie was handled really in Dallas.

HACKMAN: With Robert Kennedy?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. But it was not an in-depth discussion. I did not detect.... I mean it was sort of unbelievable to him. I don't remember his exact words but "Can you believe it?" I mean all of that, I think, went with the confusion over the planes and the problems that Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] had encountered in trying to help her. But again it was one of those things that he said to me in a passing moment. I did have the feeling that he felt very deeply that she had been ill-treated.

HACKMAN: Did he imply whose responsibility it was?

SEIGENTHALER: No.

HACKMAN: When then after that do you see him next? When do you start talking about what he might do?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I was going to say. I stayed; I was there



off and on. I was there at dinner the next evening; it was largely a family affair, but there were additional people there like Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and his wife, Douglas Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon] and his wife, Peter Lawford was there, a man named Milt Ebbins [Milton Ebbins] was there. Do you know about that dinner?

HACKMAN: No, no one has ever talked about it that I know of.

SEIGENTHALER: Most people would think that if there had been – Jackie was not there, as I said, I guess – some bitterness toward anybody, Lyndon Johnson or his aides, or toward the [U.S.] Secret Service, or toward anybody, that it would have come out at an occasion like that in which there were intimate family friends, but it didn't. The conversation was light, as light as it could be under those circumstances. It was factual on some accounts. Sarge [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.] talked briefly about, or just asked a few questions about procedural matters that were related to the funeral. As I say there was some light conversation.

I remember getting into a discussion with Douglas Dillon. I was sitting next to him at the outset and we got into this discussion about Albert Gore, who was really being tough on Douglas Dillon, and who had been against him from the outset. He said he really didn't understand what the genesis of it was, that in many ways he thought Gore was a fine Senator and he really couldn't understand these attacks. I explained to him that he was a protégé of Cordell Hull and that in the part of the country that he came from, there was no such thing as a Republican in whom you could place absolute trust.

At some point, Ethel said to me there – she was sitting, I guess, next to Bob – that two men should not sit side by side; she wanted to change places with me so that there would be a lady. We did change places which left me sitting next to Bob. I really think there was a good deal of side conversation as opposed to conversation across the table. As I say, some attempts at humor. I remember sitting next to him. I had not thought about it, but I had not seen during that time any weeping. He asked me about a fellow named Paul Corbin.

Do you know Paul Corbin?

HACKMAN: Yeah. I guess I've met him once.

SEIGENTHALER: Have you?

HACKMAN: I think we interviewed him a couple of times although I didn't do them, but I've heard a lot about Paul Corbin.

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SEIGENTHALER: Well the closest I... He and I were sitting there having a very quiet conversation and I said that I had talked with Paul. Paul was not one of President Kennedy's favorite people, but he was one of Bob Kennedy's favorite people. And I told him that Paul had called me on the telephone – I guess I volunteered this. I said Paul called me on the telephone – funny the conversations that stand

out in your mind. During that period we must have had twenty-five or thirty different conversations, but this one stands out in my mind. His face had drawn sort of an expression of disgust hearing the name of that friend who had not been one of the President's great friends and said, I don't know, something. So I said, "Yeah, he called me on the telephone." And I said, "He started to talk about how horrible this was, and then he broke down and he just cried, for about two or three minutes and then hung up right in the middle of the conversation." That was very moving to Bob. The next night I remember – well, I don't know that it was the next night, but it would have been the night after the funeral – John Hooker had come up then. I remember going to the funeral I sat next to Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno. (Maybe I said that in the previous interview.) He was – of course, he had advanced Dallas – badly shaken.

Oh, this I guess is relevant: on the afternoon of the – I guess Sunday afternoon would it have been...? I remember staying at Hickory Hill on Sunday afternoon when the family went to participate in the removal of the body from the White House to put it state at in the Capitol.

HACKMAN: I don't have that chronology in my head any more.

SEIGENTHALER: I don't either, but the reason I remember is that I was sitting in Bob's living room with a girl named Pat Nugent [Patricia Nugent] and Dave Hackett and maybe a half a dozen others, but those two stand out in my mind. We were watching on television – some of the kids were there – the procession. Suddenly they switched to Dallas and Oswald [Lee Harvey Oswald] was coming out and Ruby [Jack L. Ruby] got him right there.

I remember Bob calling maybe an hour after the ceremony was over, and saying that the Secret Service had told him about it. He said, "Do you think the fellow is crazy?" I said, "No, all the reports I get are that he just blew sky high." He said, "It's terrible."

HACKMAN: He said, "It's terrible?"

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. I remember that his impression of it was that Jack Ruby was some sort of psychotic nut. He didn't say "psychotic nut," but that Jack Ruby was

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crazy. He did not immediately or thereafter, to my knowledge, suspect any conspiracy.

HACKMAN: Had he talked at all about Oswald in the few days after the assassination?

SEIGENTHALER: No. After the funeral which would have been Monday.... Hooker and I went to the funeral. We had different seats, but we went to the funeral and then separated. After the funeral, we were getting ready to go back to Tennessee and I called the White House and I talked to him. He was there and I said that I

was going to go back. He said, “How are you going back?” And I said, “We have a private plane we’re going to fly back in.” And he said, “Well, how about you and Hooker coming out to the house?” Hooker and I were together; both of us didn’t want to intrude, you know, but he really was insistent. He said, “No, I want to see you and I’d like for you to come out. Could you come out at sometime – maybe 7 o’clock or 6:30” – but at any rate, I remember when we got there it was pitch dark.

He answered the door and I think that you could say that the mood of depression was beginning to set in by that time. Still obviously in pain, he opened the door and said something like this, “Come on in, somebody shot my brother and we’re watching his funeral on television.” Which was the sort of sardonic humor I was talking about earlier. I said, sort of with a half laugh, “Bob, that’s not funny.” And he looked me dead in the eye and said, “Don’t you think I know that?”

We walked into the little hall. Ethel and some of the children were in the room to the left. I remember they were watching. Ethel said she thought, it was important for them to remember all about it they could. Maybe it was the news, they were watching that point at which Jackie was given the flag. There was not much conversation. My own judgment about it is that it was the way he had of saying to us, “You’re friends.”

While we were there, he telephoned General Shoup [David M. Shoup]. He’d been trying to get General Shoup and the call came through. The White House operator said she had General Shoup. He talked with General Shoup and thanked him for his friendship to his brother. They had a brief conversation. Then he dialed back the White House operators and told them that the White House operators had always been good to his brother and he wanted them to know that he appreciated it.

HACKMAN: He’d been making a lot of these kinds of calls?

SEIGENTHALER: I guess he had, a few at least. I guess at some point during those three days Shoup had gone out of his way or maybe had come through the White

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House line and asked for Bob. But at any rate he made that call. And then he called the White House operator and said, “I just wanted you to know that my brother loved the White House operators. He said they were the greatest people in the world, they could put you in touch with anybody anywhere.”

He talked to Maxwell Taylor while we were there; again, the same sort of conversation, just “Max, thank you very much. We deeply appreciate it. I wanted you to know that I was thinking of you.” And we stayed a little while. He was going back again to the White House. I got a letter from him a few days later, several days later, a handwritten letter on White House stationery which said in effect....

Oh, the comment about the problems that had been created for Jackie in Dallas, I think that came up at that point when I mentioned to him that they weren’t waiting very long to get the President’s belongings out of the White House – that crazy scene in which the

rocking chair was turned upside down and carted out which added to the image that Austin was going to move in on Boston before the body was cold.

HACKMAN: Did he have a strong feeling that that was so at the time, that it was intentional?

SEIGENTHALER: No. You see I had a different feeling about his relationship with Lyndon Johnson than most people seem to have. During that period we were in the Justice Department, I know that he went out of his way to demonstrate to Lyndon Johnson that he was appreciative of Johnson's service, of his help to his brother, but beyond that, he went out of his way to defer to Lyndon Johnson. The one case that stands out so clearly in my mind is the equal employment opportunity effort that Johnson headed. Bob was a member of the Commission [President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity] and he just really went out of his way invariably to defer to Johnson.

HACKMAN: You don't remember there being a lot of hard feelings coming out of that? Maybe those came after you left, but they...

SEIGENTHALER: No, there were some. Well, what do you remember?

HACKMAN: Well, just that in a lot of meetings some of the participants in those meetings have said that Robert Kennedy frequently took Johnson or Johnson's supporters on the committee to task for playing with statistics or for not being serious about what they were doing and being tough....

SEIGENTHALER: I don't know who says that but that could have

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come later. But I know that...

HACKMAN: I think most of it does come probably after you leave.

SEIGENTHALER: I know that, in the early stages of that. My memory of it, and it's quite clear, was that he thought that Lyndon Johnson was making a mistake – he privately expressed the sentiment that Lyndon Johnson was making a mistake – in not taking advantage of some of the groundwork that had been already done, and he thought that the Johnson people unfairly treated Bobby Troutman [Robert B. Troutman]. But I can remember in those meetings and I think the transcript of the meetings would show, that there were a number of times during the courses of those meetings in which he would go out of his way to say that he thought the vice president was right on a given point.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Well, one of the things you said in your earlier interview was

you were talking about the Sarah Hughes appointment and President Kennedy saying, “Well, won’t you please do something for Lyndon? You’ve never done anything for him before.” You really wouldn’t share the President’s viewpoint then that anything that Lyndon Johnson wanted, Robert Kennedy was not likely to be sympathetic to?

SEIGENTHALER: Now what do you mean by that?

HACKMAN: Well I’m just saying that in your quoting the President’s remarks, I think that, you know, the President must feel that Robert Kennedy does not maybe appreciate or sympathize with some of Lyndon Johnson’s wants.

SEIGENTHALER: No, I think that’s not a true interpretation of it at all. Have you got it there?

HACKMAN: No, I don’t.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I’d have to read it and maybe you could ask me about that later on. But my memory of that is, and it’s hazy now, but it was really just sort of a thing where Lyndon was saying, “Look, I haven’t really asked the Department of Justice for anything. This is the first thing I’ve asked for and I’m entitled to it.” But he was with Sam Rayburn [Samuel T. Rayburn] and that was all sort of a facade on Lyndon’s part. If you remember that interview, it was really ironic later on when he said, “My God, I didn’t think that....” He indicated quite clearly that he didn’t really want Sarah Hughes.

But there had not been any.... Well, I wouldn’t say that he’d have been Bob’s first choice to go around the world with him

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on a bike – I think I’ve said that before – a tandem bike; but I would say that he went out of his way in every instance that I know about to publicly and personally try to make the relationship a little friendlier, went out of his way in those meetings to say things like, “I think the vice president’s right about that.”

I was his alternate to that body. He would much have preferred not to go to those meetings, and to let me go to those meetings but because George Reedy [George E. Reedy, Jr.] would call and say that the vice president would like to have as many members of that body, as opposed to their delegates, present – because Lyndon asked for that quite often – Bob would take the time to go and sit there when his time could, I think, have been put to better use. But he went out of his way. I think he did that not because he was worried about somebody taking advantage him. Now, he would say, when he thought that they were not making progress, that they were not making progress, but this was in the very early stages of development. He was making an effort, in so far as he could, to let Lyndon know that he was not suspicious of him or hostile to him and that he did appreciate the fact that Johnson was

serving his brother. I think he wanted to make Lyndon Johnson feel as easy about his own position as he possibly could. I never got the feeling that that was reciprocated; I always had the feeling that Lyndon Johnson's people, with maybe the exception of Walter Jenkins, were nervous and even suspicious of Robert Kennedy and those associated with Robert Kennedy.

HACKMAN: Now when you say Lyndon Johnson's people in that period, who other than Reedy and Jenkins are you talking about? Hobart Taylor?

SEIGENTHALER: That's about it. Well, Hobart was completely different. Hobart Taylor was loyal to Lyndon Johnson, but I am confident in my mind that Hobart Taylor liked Robert Kennedy and that Robert Kennedy liked Hobart Taylor. There may be something that somebody has said somewhere that would indicate something other than that, but I personally had a great relationship with Hobart Taylor, and I think Bob had a great relationship with Hobart Taylor. My own strong feeling was that that was a totally different relationship. Bob's criticism of that staff I don't think ever related to Hobart Taylor. My memory of it is it really related to the question of what Troutman did in those early days that led up to the formation of the group. Now, there was a fellow on that staff named....

HACKMAN: John Feild?

SEIGENTHALER: John Feild. I mean there was not on a feeling on Bob's part that John Feild was a very positive force – and this is just an impression – but I think

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he had the feeling that Hobart, left to his own devices, would have produced some more than John. I could be wrong about that. There were all sorts of....

Troutman was a strange human being and why he took on what he took on I don't know because it cost him a fantastic amount of money, much of which he was never reimbursed for. That was part of it. Feild felt it was important that he move in on the area where Troutman was operating. Would that be right? I don't know.

HACKMAN: There was sort of a philosophical difference – I think it was probably going on by the time you left there – between the Plans for Progress approach, which I basically heard described as the Troutman approach, and a tougher approach, more...

SEIGENTHALER: Well, yeah, but the tougher approach was largely....

HACKMAN: Or not suasion, but enforcement of statutes or something.

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. Well, my own impression is that it was much different from that. I mean looking at who Bobby Troutman is and where he came

from and the way he talks, I think that that in retrospect, was a part of it. But the idea that that agency was going to become a strong enforcement arm.... Bob Kennedy's fear was that there were an awful lot of people who were operating in the field of civil rights who were good conversationalists, but who were not achievers or activists, and that the result would be that you would have a lot of dialogue, a lot of conversation and no action. That was the psychological difference. I don't think he thought Bob Troutman was any great civil libertarian who was going around getting companies to agree to integrate or because Bob Troutman's accent drips with southern honey. It was really a concern that you were going to get an approach to the problem in which you had a good deal of concern and no action. I think that, in retrospect, looking back on what happened after John Feild became the controlling power of that group and Troutman hid himself back to Atlanta – I mean there was no strong enforcement of any statute or law – that thing fell to pieces.

HACKMAN: What you're basically saying is that Robert Kennedy thought Troutman could get something going.

SEIGENTHALER: He thought that he had something going. He thought that it was unique that a southerner who still couldn't say the word Negro as it should be pronounced was out busting his tail trying to get these people to cooperate. As aware as he was of the inadequacies of Troutman's

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approach, he felt, "At least we've got something going here." My memory of it is that the difficult relationship that developed, really came at that point when Troutman was moving out and the others were saying, you know, "Let him go and let's don't even thank him. Let us take this over and we'll just going to do great things with it."

I think by the time Hobart Taylor was through he was totally disillusioned with John Feild; he felt John Feild was not an achiever or an actor, and I felt that Hobart Taylor felt that he was not able to do what he really needed to do or wanted to do. I had a number of conversations with John Feild about where the thing was going. Of course, once that difference of opinion about which way the whole project was going became clear and Feild took over the operation, I do think that there was some.... I would say that Bob really made it aware that they didn't really have a strong approach to begin with, they didn't know how to proceed with a strong approach in the second place, and whatever their approach was, it didn't achieve a bloody thing.

HACKMAN: But your feeling is that he didn't think Lyndon Johnson was largely responsible for that? That it was Feild and whoever was at the operating levels?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, you know when he felt something, he wouldn't hide it, and he felt that was a mistake. But at the same time I say he felt it was a mistake, he felt there was some chance of making progress in that other direction rather than having John Feild take it over and flood you in a stream of words

about civil rights statutes which ultimately might lead nowhere. Once the decision to go with Feild was made and John Feild began to move, it did not surprise me to learn that the attorney general cross-examined him quite closely on whether he was making progress, somewhat critical of the lack of progress that was made. But I never had the feeling – and this I'm sure was after I was gone – but I do remember that he had the feeling it went nowhere. At the same time, I think that's a different situation. That ideological difference, if that's what it is, is quite separate from his own feeling that he wanted to try to make Lyndon Johnson feel that they were not bitter enemies. From Lyndon Johnson's point of view, maybe that whole thing was interpreted by him as a challenge of him.

In some ways I think Hobart Taylor felt trapped. He came down to Tennessee later on and came to my house for dinner. We talked at length about it. I think by the time he got through, I don't know what he'd say about it publicly, but I don't think he had the feeling that the support to do what he wanted to do was really there.

Again, as I say, in many little ways, Bob Kennedy went out of his way to make Lyndon feel somewhat relaxed. I remember

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after Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] and Jean [Jean Kennedy Smith] Kennedy took that trip with Lyndon to India, Steve came back and we were at Hickory Hill one night for dinner. There was a discussion which was very, very.... I mean here this was in family, you know, and there were some funny comments about things that happened on the trip, about Lyndon pressing Nehru's [Jawaharlal Nehru] flesh. But basically I think that they all agreed that Johnson had done a terrific job. Maybe nobody wanted to invite the camel driver for dinner, but basically I think they thought he had done a good job on that trip.

Well, we're way off.

HACKMAN: Yeah. But skipping back then to after the assassination, after you leave them then....

SEIGENTHALER: I got that letter which was very thoughtful of him. It just sort of said, "We're leaving tonight and I wanted you to know that I was thinking of you and all you meant to all the Kennedys." I remember going up to him sometime after that; I saw him in his office in the Justice Department. He really looked like hell.

HACKMAN: This is how much later? Any idea? Do you think January would be it?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. Yeah. I guess I got a letter from him and then I got.... I think Bill Walton [William Walton] had done a sketch of the Justice Department. I got a great Christmas gift of this sketch with an inscription, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" presented at....

Then maybe it was a month after Christmas, maybe late January or early February, the black plague was on him. While he had looked pained before, at least I had the feeling



that he was completely functional, and I didn't have the feeling now that he was really was part of the world in which he was working. I mean he was doing the job, answering the correspondence and dealing with his associates in the Department of Justice and answering the telephone.

[END SIDE I, TAPE I]

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I]

He got his hair cut while he was there; somebody came in and cut his hair, a barber. I told him he looked like hell; he said he felt fine. I said he can't feel fine and look terrible. He said he couldn't sleep. And it was really the only time I ever talked to him when I thought he was holding back. I had the feeling that after he said he couldn't sleep, he maybe regretted saying he couldn't sleep. That again is just an after impression. But again I didn't press. We spent maybe an hour and a half there, with calls that came in; went out in a car and

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drove somewhere, I don't remember where. Oh, he went home to Hickory Hill and I rode out with him and came back in.

Usually when we were together, there was a lot of conversation and there was a spontaneous exchange of views about things in which we were interested. That ran the total gamut from international politics to politics in various states in which he had an interest, in which I might have an interest or some contact, down to what was happening in Nashville, Tennessee, which was my home. But I think that this was really the first time that I realized that he was in such deep pain and it was really hurting him I mean hurting the way he was, was a slightly different personality.

HACKMAN: Did you talk to other people that you knew around the Justice Department at that period about how he was going or whether he was able to....

SEIGENTHALER: No, I mean I knew. I mean he was.... I don't really think he liked where he was; I don't think he liked being where he was. You know, fate in the form of Lee Harvey Oswald dealt this monstrous blow to him and to his family and to his brother. Their relationship had meant so much to him that, as I say, it was just painful. I just had the feeling that it was physically painful, almost as if he were on the rack or that he had a toothache or that he had a heart attack. I mean it was pain and it showed itself as being pain. I don't know that anybody else felt that about him, but it was very obvious to me, almost when he got up to walk that it hurt to get up to walk. When I say that he was not functional, I don't mean that he was not able to do what he had to do or that he didn't know what he was doing about what he had to do; it was more that he did what he did through that sort of haze or pain that he felt. That went on for a good period of time.

HACKMAN: Had you ever talked to him before, before the President's

assassination, about what he might want to do in a second Administration? Whether he might...?

SEIGENTHALER: The President's second administration? No.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

SEIGENTHALER: No, I think he was willing to be the President's lightning rod. But then there's so much that goes unsaid, you know, and that is assumed. To say that he had no political ambition of his own is not really an honest statement; but to say at the same time that he had formulated in his own mind by November '63, anything that he planned to do in 1968, that is not true.

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HACKMAN: I was thinking in terms of a move to the State Department or DOD [Department of Defense] or some of the things that have been thrown around.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I heard all those things before the first Administration. I talked to him in depth about that. I mentioned Corbin a while ago. I remember Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee] had found out through somebody in the White House that Paul Corbin, who was then working at the Democratic National Committee, was at the Marriott Motel having a swim.  
Do you know that story? Has that story been...?

HACKMAN: I don't know whether I know this one or not. The Marriott Hotel doesn't ring a bell.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, Bradlee called Corbin on the telephone at the Marriott Hotel – I guess he was having a swim in the middle of the day – said, "I understand you're on the payroll of the Democratic National Committee and I just wondered what you're doing out there." Well, Paul had seen some member of the White House Staff; he knew where the tip came from. He didn't really think it was anything. He said, "I'm out here with a drink in one hand and a blonde in the other. If you ask me what I'm doing I'm working to get the President reelected, but if he doesn't straighten up, we're going to run Bobby in four years."  
Do you know that story?

HACKMAN: Yeah, I've heard that much of it.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, of course, Bradlee wrote that. A lot of people have talked about Bob Kennedy having a temper; I think it's been largely exaggerated, I mean it's really been exaggerated; sometimes he had it, like the President, I guess in the steel thing. There were times, I mean.... I don't think he ever got mad, I never saw him get mad without a reason. But I thought that he had a....

He was very upset about it; he was angry at Corbin about that. He said, "Fire him. Get him out of there." I just said, "You think about it twenty-four hours and I'll do it." We were walking back through his office. He had talked to Bradlee about it. He knew Bradlee was going to write that in Newsweek and he was really angry at Corbin and said "Get him out of there. I don't want him working over there tonight. Fire him. Call up somebody over there. Tell John Bailey I said get him out of there; the President wants him out of there." And I said, "I'm not going to do that. You call John Bailey yourself and tell him." He said, "Listen, you're my administrative assistant. I'm

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telling you to call him and tell him."

We walked back and he was getting in the elevator, so I put my foot in the elevator and I said, "I'll wait twenty-four hours and see if you feel the same way about it." He said, "You do it now!" I said, "I'm not going to do it. I'll wait twenty-four hours. When you get home if you want to do it, you do it." I said, "You've got a phone in your car, you call." I said, "In the South we have a tendency to do things a little more slowly; just wait twenty-four hours and see how you feel." He said, "If you don't do it, I'm going to do it." I said, "Okay, let it be. I'll do it sometime tomorrow. We'll talk about it." As the elevator door shut, he laughed, in a disgusted way, mock disgust. There was some question in my mind as to whether he'd actually call John, but he didn't. We never talked about it again.

HACKMAN: You don't remember other problems with Corbin during the Kennedy Administration?

SEIGENTHALER: There were many.

HACKMAN: You could probably go into a long story on that?

SEIGENTHALER: What?

HACKMAN: You could probably go into a long story...

SEIGENTHALER: Well it's a totally different chapter. I mean, if there's something that comes to your mind, I'd be glad to....

HACKMAN: Well, why don't we go back to after the assassination again. Can you remember when this whole thing comes up which involves Corbin on New Hampshire and Wisconsin or whatever and the things that are being written in that period? Did you talk to him about that?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. He didn't want Corbin involved in that – that's difficult for some people maybe to believe – first of all because he knew there were liabilities involved in Paul Corbin doing that. It would be obvious. You see, Lyndon Johnson wanted Paul Corbin out of there. You know about that. I

think I've maybe had a conversation in a previous interview about that. But Lyndon Johnson told him to get Paul Corbin out of the Democratic National Committee. He told me that he said, "He was loyal to President Kennedy; he'll be loyal to you." And Lyndon said, "I know who he's loyal to. Get him out of there." So he did.

Knowing that and knowing how aggressive Corbin was, I'm sure in my own mind that Corbin did that on his own. Corbin not only didn't like Lyndon Johnson, President Johnson, he didn't like a

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lot of people on the Kennedy side of the fence. He had a strange way about him. When he made up his mind to do something, he'd do it.

I've talked to Corbin about it, about New Hampshire. And if the question is: Did Bob know in advance that he was getting in touch with – what's his name? Dunfey [William L. Dunfey], I guess – Bill Dunfey? There's no doubt in my mind that Paul indicated to Bill Dunfey that he did. I think that's an absolute lie which Corbin's totally capable of telling. I think he probably told Steve Smith but I don't think Steve had any idea that when Paul did something, the degree to which he would go. I would say, that I don't think Bob at that point especially cared whether it was upsetting to the President.

What would the date of that have been?

HACKMAN: Maybe I've got that in the chronology. What is it? Like February? February of '64?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah, that would be right.

HACKMAN: I think that's right.

SEIGENTHALER: That would be right. But I think if you take it in the context of Lyndon saying to Corbin, "Get out of there, or saying to Bob, "Get him out of there." Now, the question is what sort of conversation did he have with Corbin? And my guess is that his conversations with Corbin were at least something to this effect: Corbin might say to him what he was saying to me, "God, there's a tremendous grounds for Bob going up to New Hampshire." And I would say, "My God, I cannot go.... It was just unbelievable. I was talking to Bill Dunfey the other day and it's just fantastic what they've got going. So who the hell's pushing Dunfey's end?" And then during the course of the conversation, he'd let the hint drop that he was in constant contact with Dunfey and if you really pressed him on it, he would, in a very sly way, admit, yeah, he was behind the whole thing. Then he would go on to admit that Bob was not really involved in it and that if he got caught at it, then he was going to take the rap for it; that sort of silly stuff. So I think that Bob knowing Paul, knew probably what was going on, didn't think it was too serious, probably was amused by the fact that it created some discomfort for some of Lyndon Johnson's supporters.

HACKMAN: Did you ever have the feeling that any of the John Kennedy people

who stayed on Lyndon Johnson's staff at the White House blew this thing out of proportion because of their feeling about Corbin?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. They thought that Corbin was.... They

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face. didn't like him; and he didn't make any bones about telling them he didn't like them. I mean he has a penchant for insulting you to your

HACKMAN: Is it primarily O'Donnell or does it involve a number of other people too?

SEIGENTHALER: I guess Kenny was gone maybe shortly thereafter, about that time. Kenny didn't like him. Kenny despised him. I guess I am probably the one person in the administration who liked him; there may be others, I don't know. Pat Lucey [Patrick Joseph Lucey], I guess, liked him; Pat, of course, was out in Wisconsin. I think I was probably the only person in Washington who really liked him.

And honestly he was badly mistreated; of course, a good deal of it he asked for, but he's been badly mistreated. I mean the whole business about the House Un-American Activities [House Committee on Un-American Activities] investigation was a tragic thing for people in an Administration like the Kennedy Administration to instigate, to use a guy like Congressman Walter [Francis E. Walter] to get underway. I mean, you know, to do that to.... My God, he was not in the Administration. I think he would have been excellent. Well, I won't get into that. You know they kept him out of the Administration, out of a job in government. There were many areas of government he could have worked in effectively; I mean, believe it or not, he would have been a fantastic asset in the poverty program.

HACKMAN: Like in Bill Haddad's [William Frederick Haddad] job or something, Inspector General?

SEIGENTHALER: No, I wouldn't think that, although he might have done a better job than Bill Haddad; he was a great conversationalist and that was about it, but a good friend. I am not in a position of choosing up sides between Kenny and anybody. I had a great relationship with Kenny, thought he did a terrific job, but the idea of sitting back and.... You know, the Administration was just too big and the operation of government was so demanding that to spend all your time worrying whether Paul Corbin was at the Marriott Motel swimming at high noon, was so bloody unimportant. And then to spend all that time to get Congressman Walter exercised about whether Paul Corbin was a subversive and working in the Democratic National Committee. Again, that's, to me, stupid.

HACKMAN: Where did that come from?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I think some of those people in the Administration that didn't like him kept feeding it to Walter, you know; they fed it to him and fed it to him. And I think they made an effort to block his

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opportunity to get a lawyer.

HACKMAN: Are you talking about people in the White House staff?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. That's a suspicion of mine. Well, first of all, Paul knew upstate New York better than anybody. He thought that the Prendergast [Michael H. Prendergast]-DeSapio [Carmin G. DeSapio] control in New York was a pernicious influence on politics. Many people who know Paul Corbin and knew of his background and past would be surprised that late in life he would show that much idealism.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

SEIGENTHALER: But he gave a good, part of his heart to upstate New York. He was not just fighting to win for Kennedy there; he was trying with Ben Smith [Benjamin A. Smith, Jr.] – and I think Ben Smith would tell you this – to create a new political environment. And this feeling, and Ben's feeling, was that if there was going to be any opportunity for the Democratic Party ever to make any impact in upstate New York, it had to be fused with a sense of idealism, that the Republicans were in control in upstate New York because DeSapio and Prendergast ran the Democratic Party from New York City. I mean, there are dozens of stories about – DeSapio called me in the '60 campaign just terribly upset about them. Maybe that's all there already.

HACKMAN: You can put that in your transcript.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, after he went on the Democratic National Committee, he spent a good deal of his time working on upstate New York. Whenever he could, he would block the opportunity of DeSapio and Prendergast to get patronage for people in upstate, for their people. I think if you look at the record, he was tremendously successful in that; and then would come in with tips, and call me with tips about.... Well, I remember one Post Office garage lease that was going to a person that had been associated with the mafia. That's just one of dozens.

He had the feeling that there was substantial corruption. No, he had the feeling that the first vestiges of corruption were beginning to seep into the Kennedy Administration through various methods of contract letting, subscription of funds....

HACKMAN: Going how high in the Administration?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I don't know how high. I don't know. He was constantly on to

something. You never know

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how high. I mean he disliked people; people disliked him. He sometimes related to people he disliked, but I never had the feeling that.... But he did, just prior to the assassination, have some strong feeling and, he thought, some evidence that he was on to some major scandals in the Democratic Party and in the Administration. I never saw the evidence, don't know that it's relevant. I know a couple of people involved, liked them, had a good relationship with them, trusted them, found them always to be honorable men of integrity.

Paul strongly felt that he had some information. He was right so often about people and things and his information was discounted so often by people who disliked him, and that put him in a position of exaggerating facts so that they would include others – at time he was likely to do that – that I had some reservations about it. I had no conversations with Bob about it, about the substantive value of it – although I did have a conversation with him in which he asked me if Paul had told me what he was on to. So I do know that Paul had talked to him, but how seriously he took that I don't know. Bob Kennedy would in my judgment, have been slow to make up his mind on the basis of anything less than a full investigation, a full investigation.

HACKMAN:                Skipping back then to early '64, did you talk with Robert Kennedy about New Hampshire? We've talked a little about New Hampshire. I've never been clear as to what happened in Wisconsin if anything.

What took place?

SEIGENTHALER:        Well you see, the two things.... I mean first of all I don't think anybody is clear about what happened in Wisconsin. I think Paul Corbin would not have dared to do anything overt in Wisconsin. He might have asked Lucey to do something, and he might have inferred to Lucey that Bob wanted it done, I don't know why, or might have encouraged Pat to come in and talk to Bob about doing something for him out there. I think that's more likely the fact, that Pat probably took the lead out there. I mean, Paul Corbin is from Wisconsin, you know, and he couldn't get elected to any office there under any circumstances – although he would dispute that.

HACKMAN:                Go back to Janesville and run.

SEIGENTHALER:        Yeah. But in New Hampshire I think the point I talked to him about – and again it was not an in depth conversation – I had the feeling that he was rather amused by the whole thing. He did not really think it was a serious matter, and the fact that it might create some discomfort for some people who had gone out of their way to be mean and thoughtless to the Kennedys and even had sought to harass them, I think he was probably amused by that. And I say “amused” only.... In the conversations I had with him he was...

I guess, bemused is better to describe him. And the fact, as it finally came to light, that Paul Corbin was a part of creating some of that discomfort in the light of Lyndon's insistence that he get out of there, of the National Committee, I think it would have amused him too. I mean there would have been something of a sense of poetic justice in it insofar as he was concerned.

HACKMAN: Were there any conversations early in '64 or on through the summer, I guess, about how you might go about holding together some sort of Kennedy block in the party or what you might do with it?

SEIGENTHALER: No, in '64?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I would say that most of us felt, and again this just comes from talking to people around the country, that Lyndon Johnson had pretty much taken up where Jack Kennedy had left off in the field of human rights. None of us really liked what he – the crassness of anything any of them did.

I remember when Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] left, feeling a great sense of relief. I just felt good about Ted Sorensen's leaving; I felt good when I found out that Arthur [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.] had left. My own feeling and I think the feelings of an awful lot of people who considered themselves Kennedy people, was that there was something crass about the way that things had been done, from the mix-up about the airplanes – if that's what it was – to carting the rocking chair out upside down, to urging that Kennedy people stay in positions of trust while not really wanting them to and while seeking to undercut them and to get them out.

I remember hearing Lyndon Johnson say that he had the best speechwriter; he was better than Sorensen or any of the rest, in Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] which was.... You know, as if he had found Dick Goodwin somewhere, while all of us were.... I remember in 1964 busting my ass pulling Johnson in Tennessee and really working my head off for Lyndon Johnson in Tennessee. It was painful to get back into politics, but really making a major effort, and we carried the state for him by a hundred thousand votes.

HACKMAN: When you talk about him having the feeling that he really didn't want Kennedy people to stay, who, maybe other than Sorensen?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I think he wanted them to stay; he just didn't want them to stay and function. You know, he wanted them to stay, but either to be loyal to



him in the same way they were loyal to Jack, or he was going to have people around him who were loyal to him.

I mean, the whole business was sort of a show. You know, "I want Arthur to stay, I want Ted [Edward M. Kennedy] to stay. I want Dick to stay. I want Ralph [Ralph A. Dungan] to stay. I want Kenny to stay." But he didn't. He wanted them to stay because he didn't want that breach. That's a show and we all knew that that was a little game he was playing. We all expected him to move his people, so called, in. But I mean even if Pierre [Pierre E. Salinger] is press secretary, he's not *the* press secretary, and if he is *the* press secretary, then he's got to have the confidence of Lyndon Johnson in the same way that Jack did. Pierre might have some different feeling about it, but there's not much doubt that all the people were then shortly removed from the inner councils of government. It was a gradual thing; I think more and more they came to realize that they were being used. They didn't resent being used; I mean they were all in pain themselves and didn't resent being used. They really appreciated the sincere way in which he picked up the torch in some specific areas, but I don't think any of them were really sorry ultimately to get out of there.

HACKMAN: Did you ever talk to Robert Kennedy about his feelings about whether people should stay or not stay and what advice he gave individuals?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah, I think he was probably ambivalent about it. I talked to him about it several times. I think he was ambivalent about it. He encouraged some to stay and some not to stay.

HACKMAN: Did he talk about what he thought of Johnson's performance in the first several months, in terms of policy and politics not in terms of personalities, if you can separate them?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, there were little incidents. Again I think it was mixed. If you took a given situation on a given day, he might react adversely to that. But he also reacted very favorably to the line, "We Shall Overcome," for example; I mean, his reaction was he said, "He's got some guts." You remember that speech. He said, "He's got some guts."

I think there was a growing concern on his part that there were people in the Administration who had one type of relationship with Jack Kennedy who stayed on, for example in Cabinet posts, who had a different type of relationship with Lyndon Johnson, and that Johnson's reliance on them for capacities and abilities that they didn't really have or that he thought they didn't really have, was a mistake. I think he thought that went all the way through the Cabinet.

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HACKMAN: Hodges [Luther H. Hodges], Wirtz [Willard Wirtz]? Who? Udall [Stewart L. Udall]?

SEIGENTHALER: Basically, I think Rusk [Dean David Rusk].

HACKMAN: Rusk.

SEIGENTHALER: Basically, I think Rusk.

HACKMAN: Was that apparent very, very early to Robert Kennedy?

SEIGENTHALER: No, I think it was a growing.... I think he had a good feeling about Dean Rusk as a human being, Kennedy's relationship with Rusk was like Kennedy's relationship with Sorensen: he knew what part of the speeches to cut.

I think Bob Kennedy recognized that at some point during the President's Administration, President Kennedy's Administration that there were serious problems in the State Department. I think I've recited some of those in the early phases in the agreement of the President to send Bill Orrick [William H. Orrick, Jr.] over there to try to.... This is a reflection which perhaps I didn't sense at the time I was in the Justice Department. I think that Bob came to feel that Dean Rusk was a captive of his Department. The Wieland [William A. Wieland] case is the only thing I've really talked about in that regard in the other interview, but there were a number of other indications that the performance of the State Department could be substantially improved if it were not a mirror of the British Foreign Service. There were an awful lot of career diplomats who really thought it should do that.

I think that a number of the intellectuals in the Administration, more or less agree. Like Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith], John Bartlow Martin, as I've said in an earlier interview thought it was all a great mistake. The evidence on that remains to be seen, but out of that came the feeling that Rusk was more a captive and that the State Department was in dire need of an internal government check. And I think that Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] probably functioned in the White House as that sort of check. Maybe Johnson had the idea that Walt Rostow [Walt Whitman Rostow] would do the same thing for him Mac Bundy had done for Jack, but of course, Walt Rostow, it turns out, was sort of a mirror of Dean Rusk; so that rather than get a check by an intellectual who's going to challenge Rusk, you get a fellow who gets caught up in the same spirit of the thing and goes along. That's really what I'm talking about when I say that it was a matter of crowing concern to him, in my judgment, in that one key area.

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HACKMAN: Let me just say that after you talked about sending Orrick over in that Deputy Under Secretary slot, was there anyone over there during the Kennedy Administration that he really felt was doing anything about shaking up the Department or that he could really turn to and rely on? I think Harriman [William Averell Harriman] to some degree, I guess. Can you remember him having strong positive feelings about anybody in the leadership over there?

SEIGENTRALER: Well, he did have some deep feelings about Harriman. It was not that he thought that we were in danger of having the State Department

being taken over by magnificence. It was just the idea that of all the Departments of Government.... I mean McNamara went in and you know he was sort of a shaker and a mover in Defense; Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon] went in with the understanding he was going to run it, but still you had the feeling that while we was there, there were again checks and balances – William McChesney Martin didn't get high interest rates every time he wanted high interest rates – and there was a feeling of a balance.

I think Bob came to feel that as imperious as Mac Bundy was, that he was still an independent advisor on State Department policy and served to keep the State Department honest, and that was a healthy relationship. Not that Dean Rusk was dishonest nor that there was any sort of subversive conspiracy to have the British Foreign Service take over the State Department, but just that the State Department was lethargic – again I'm digressing in a way – but the “Jockey Club” type diplomat that you bump into traveling around the world was shocking. I mean just would scare the hell out of you – everything from the tweed coat with the split vent to the briar pipe and even the accent in some cases. There's nothing wrong.... This is no Boston-Irish IRA [Irish Republican Army] sense of despise for the British, it was just a fact of life that there was a good deal of lethargy in the State Department, that they were locked into one conduct and one way of thinking, and that they needed perhaps an organizational realignment, if not a new way of thinking about foreign affairs.

HACKMAN: That came out a lot, for instance, on the trip you took with him in '62 to the Far East?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, it came out, first of all, on the trip to the Ivory Coast in '61; it came on the trip around the world in '62; it came out very obvious in the trip we took to Latin America in '65. Again and again you would see it. You'd hit spots; I mean the difference between the career diplomats as an ambassador and those who were non-career diplomats was marked. I mean you could tell by the people you'd see in the embassy. For example, Ralph Dungan was a different personality and ran a different embassy from than say Marshall

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Green who turned out to be a courageous really heroic figure later.

HACKMAN: What was it about an embassy like that that would turn Robert Kennedy on? Informally or flexibility or what kind of things? About Dungan for example?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, little things like students coming up to the door and knocking, saying, “Can we see the Ambassador?” And Ralph coming to the door and going out on the back patio with them and sitting down and saying, you know, “What the hell are your problems?” I was critical of John Bartlow Martin, the Ambassador to the Dominican Republic. I don't know why; he's a great friend of mine, a great human being, a great writer. The fact that John Bartlow had to be called on by Lyndon

Johnson when there was trouble in the Dominican Republic so somebody could go down there and talk to the other side, somebody that had contacts with the other side....

It was that sort of thing – the feeling that there was a modified Peace Corps spirit, that’s what I think. And again, I mean you’d go to embassies where there was a career diplomat and ask about the Peace Corps, and, you know, they not only hadn’t seen them, they weren’t looking for them and didn’t want to see them. “We had the great misfortune of getting pretty bad ones, three kids down here who were revolutionaries, so we don’t really have much contact with them. They’re aligned with the other side.”

HACKMAN:           Yeah.

SEIGENTHALER:    In the other embassies, in some of the other cases, you would find that somebody on the staff is in touch with somebody with the Peace Corps. Ed Reischauer [Edwin Oldfather Reischauer] is the best example of that. I’m sure Ken Galbraith was the same sort, you know.

I know that if we had in a number of embassies, bumped into challengers such as the challenge in Japan in ‘62 or in Concepcion in Chile, in ‘65, first of all it would have literally scared the hell out of the embassy. They would have taken the information to the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and they would have never let him know about it. They would have diverted the schedule so he couldn’t have made the appearance or would have made a marked effort to block the appearance. In the case of Reischauer, he went with us to the conference at Waseda [Waseda University].

In the case of Dungan, he was still in Santiago, but his people were there and he was constantly in touch. He knew there was going to be trouble and he encouraged us to sit down and talk

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to the students who came in. I mean I was urging Bob not to make it, not to go there; I had suggested to him that he not go that night to Concepcion. I was influenced because I thought they might try to assassinate him. The newspapermen who were there.... I didn’t say that but I really argued strongly against going. Again I’m digressing, there’s no sense getting into that now. But that’s really the difference in the two sorts of embassy people. And I think that probably comes as close to defining his own feeling about what needed to be done in the Department of State. At the same time, I remember in 1968, he was asked the question, “Why don’t you come out against J. Edgar Hoover and Dean Rusk?” and he wouldn’t do it. He said, you know, “I’m not running this campaign as some sort of a personality campaign; everybody knows that I have not been in agreement with Dean Rusk, but I’m not going to stand out here and blast him to get the support of people that Senator McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] has appealed to as a result of that.” There’s no doubt that Dean Rusk would have gone.

HACKMAN:           Well, I asked you what Robert Kennedy might have done in a second Kennedy Administration. Did he ever tell you what kind of changes

they'd make in personnel in Administration? Did he talk about changing Rusk?

SEIGENTHALER: No, and I think Arthur caught the President in a moment when the President was speculating; I don't think there was any determination to change Rusk; I think that in terms of how Rusk performed, he was ideal: I mean, Jack Kennedy was his own Secretary of State; he had Mac Bundy. Rusk fit in well with the bureaucracy of the State Department and was an articulate spokesman for the State Department. There was the feeling from time to time that some things ought to be happening over there. I'm not sure but that after the Orrick experience, there just was the feeling that what the hell can you do about it? Maybe they would have put somebody else in at another point to try it again.

I don't think he had made up his mind that he wanted to make any changes from being Attorney General. As I say, I think he recognized the need to remain as a lightning rod for the Administration. That's what he had been for a good part of not just that Administration, but for a good part of his life.

HACKMAN: Any talk at all of moving Johnson off the ticket?

SEIGENTHALER: None whatever and I'm confident in my own mind that Johnson would not have been moved off the ticket. And I think Bob would have been an advocate to keep him on the ticket, and I'm sure that that would have come up, you see. In my own conversation with him, I think he would have.... You see, he knew that most of his efforts to make Johnson trust him had been rebuffed. I told you or told

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someone in one of the earlier interviews about the conversation he had with Lyndon Johnson about Johnson feeling that Bob's being hostile to him related to his father, the attack that he made on his father in San Francisco, in Los Angeles, which Bob hardly remembered. That was in Lyndon's mind. I think he would have not been at all reluctant to see the question raised about whether Lyndon was kept on the ticket because I think he would have been an advocate to keep him on the ticket and would have used that as another effort to let Lyndon know that he had no deep-seated hostility for him.

HACKMAN: When did you start talking to Robert Kennedy then about what he might do? When he might leave the Justice Department and what he might do?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I remember having several conversations with him, in person and by telephone, seems to me, maybe even as early as February of '64 in which he was saying, "I've got to think about getting out of here." He was not comfortable. I think he had the feeling that Lyndon wanted to name his own attorney general, and he just didn't feel comfortable there. But in terms of whether that

was formalized at all, I think it was not. You know from that point, then I began to have a few conversations with him as he began to think about New York. I don't remember the chronology. When was that? Do you remember?

HACKMAN: Well, he left the Justice Department, I guess, in September, but he was talking about New York as early as, I guess, June and July. July 27th I believe is the date when Johnson tells him he's definitely not going to be vice president.

SEIGENTHALER: I remember that. It was my birthday.

HACKMAN: Oh really? The 27th or 29th.

SEIGENTHALER: I remember that. I had a conversation with Bob I guess that day. Angie called and said "Happy Birthday and here's Bob." He had not yet made the statement about "Sorry to take so many good men down with me." I remember when I heard it on television a couple of days later, he had already said something like that, something like "Poor old Sarge." He was loose about it. I mean, he laughed about it. He said this, that day, he said, "I had the most unbelievable conversation with Lyndon Johnson today." Insofar as I could tell, as I say I remember the day quite well because it was my birthday, he was completely relaxed about it and I guess almost relieved that Lyndon had finally, publicly and openly and almost notoriously shown his hand, that he didn't want Kennedy.

HACKMAN: Had you talked to him before about the possibility

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of being Johnson's vice president?

SEIGENTHALER: I was urging him all the time to put himself in a position where he might be Johnson's vice presidential nominee.

HACKMAN: Oh, really?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah. First of all I thought it would be a good thing for the Administration. I thought it would be impossible to keep Johnson without him – I couldn't believe that Barry Goldwater was going to be the nominee – so I was talking to him about being Johnson's vice presidential candidate prior to the Republican Convention in San Francisco. I expected it was going to be an Eastern liberal: I thought it would be Scranton [William W. Scranton], or perhaps Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller], not Rockefeller; I really thought that Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] wanted Scranton. There was talk about that even before that came out, and my feeling about it was that it was just going to be so obvious that there was going to be an Eastern liberal on the ticket and that Lyndon was going to need Bob. I wanted Lyndon

Johnson because I thought it was the best way for him to win; I also wanted it for Bob Kennedy because I thought that it was a place he could have served with great distinction.

HACKMAN: Did you ever talk with him about what kind of role he might play as vice president? What kinds of problems there might be with Johnson?

SEIGENTHALER: It would have been a substantially different role than Hubert [Hubert H. Humphrey] played, but no, I didn't. I don't really think that anybody.... Well, he had a way of testing theories which he might have agreed with: he would say, "What the hell will I do in that position?" or he would say, "That won't be the most pleasant thing I've ever done in my whole life, if it ever came about," or, "That wouldn't be the most pleasant thing I ever did in my life," or, "Why do you think I ought to do that?" just to test you on it. He would not commit to me that he wanted to do it or was willing to do it and I don't think he ever really committed it to himself. I think that it was no real surprise to him when Johnson told him what he told him. He knew that the feeling insofar as Lyndon was concerned was deep-seated, so that was that.

As early as – I don't remember, I guess the Republican Convention would have been in July – June I was talking to him, urging him to put himself in a position to be vice president; maybe it was before that. I talked to some other people in the country about it who were friendly to him. I was delighted with what went on in New Hampshire; I didn't have any part in stirring it up, but I was delighted with what went on in New Hampshire

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because I thought it made clear that there was sex appeal insofar as Lyndon was concerned.

HACKMAN: Who were the people around the country that you feel closest to, that you sort of keep in contact with?

SEIGENTHALER: Well it is sort of a mixed bag: I guess Steve Smith in New York; some of it goes way back, people like Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman] and Joe Dolan and Walter Sheridan. But there are times when I would be in touch with people like Pat Lucey or some of Carl Sanders' people: Carl himself, Tom Radney down in Alabama, John Douglas, Mankiewicz [Frank F. Mankiewicz], that was late Mankiewicz; and some old friends of his who were just sort of floating around, people in the newspaper business Charlie Bartlett, [Charles H. Barlett], from time to time, occasionally, maybe Wally Turner [Wallace Turner] on the West Coast, of the *New York Times*; a number of others.

HACKMAN: Can you remember specific times, say through '64, when you would really make a whole round of phone calls?

SEIGENTHALER: No. I wouldn't get on the phone and say I'm going to call twenty people and talk to them about Bob being vice president, but during business.... Goodwin is another, Hodding Carter, Jr. [William Hodding

Carter, Jr.]. John Lewis, a Virginia minister – some of them not really Kennedy people in the traditional sense but still people who were friends. Many times I would have conversations with them because of some other business and it would come up, or I would bring it up because it was something I was interested in. I didn't start a sort of telephone campaign to get him elected vice president, but I would say to them that "I think it's a good idea for him to do this and if you're talking to him I think you might say that you think it's a good idea, too."

HACKMAN: Would you send him things on paper frequently, or not? I haven't seen the files, but...

SEIGENTHALER: Just.... I rarely put anything in writing usually the telephone, sometimes crazy stuff like clippings from the *Nashville Banner* which is our office rag. I think you may know about the Kennedy-Powell [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.] placard?

HACKMAN: No.

SEIGENTHALER: They ran a big picture on the front page about five columns on the top of the page, some black

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guy in Harlem nailing a poster to a telephone pole that said, "Kennedy-Powell." I tore it out and sent it to him, "You're in the news." He sent me back a copy of it and said, "I've sent the original on to Teddy." He's the one they're talking about or something like that. But there is a letter that I wrote to him that I didn't find in the files of the Justice Department when I left, and there were a couple of memos on political matters that I sent to him, my views on political matters that I didn't find in the files. And one on the Seigenthaler...

[END TAPE I, SIDE II.]

[BEGIN TAPE II, SIDE I.]

SEIGENTHALER: But there was the letter and then there was a memo, some memo on my own reactions to political things and what I thought a good posture for a political figure would be on those matters.

HACKMAN: This was mostly after '64 you mean, or after he gets in the Senate, or....

SEIGENTHALER: No, it might have been during the two. It wouldn't have been a half dozen altogether; I didn't write that much. If I had an idea, I'd call him up on the phone and say this is what I think. He had a very retentive mind and it would sort of mix. I remember sending one memo of a Seigenthaler plan for



disengagement in Vietnam – my view of a good political posture to take which is not unlike President Nixon’s [Richard M. Nixon] program to disengage – you have a 100,000 every ninety days a year, and then, see, by the end of the year you have a 125,000 left and that’s enough to do whatever you need to do. I was there in 1965 and there were only 40,000 there and we were doing enough. Then you can see what they do on the other side. He called me about that and said, you know, “I think it’s a sensible and logical course to follow, but my own position is that we have to get out.”

HACKMAN:           When is that?

SEIGENTHALER:   This would have been in ‘68, maybe after his announcement. His position was that we had to get out, and that to qualify that or to put limitations on what he would do if he were elected would be a mistake, and that he was not going to take the Aiken [George D. Aiken] plan for declaring a victory and come home, but that he was going to declare to come home. And even to that limited degree of qualification, he was not willing to go the rest. Some other people obviously had suggested the same sort of thing to him. I thought it made not only strategic sense militarily; but also political sense. As a psychological matter, I was delighted to hear him say that he was not going to put any qualifications

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on his position that they would have to come home.

HACKMAN:           Back in the spring of ‘64 again what other kinds of things was he talking about doing? Some people have said he was talking about quitting political life altogether, teaching or....

SEIGENTHALER:   Yeah, I think he was thinking about writing or teaching.

HACKMAN:           Did he ever talk to you about the possibility of going to Vietnam as Ambassador?

SEIGENTHALER:   Yeah, he said he did.... Yeah. And it seems to me that the time we talked about that would have been about the time he went back to Indonesia, maybe just after that. The only conversation I had with him about it – I guess maybe I brought it up, maybe I had heard about it from somebody – I guess I brought it up – he said he thought it would be terribly difficult for the children. But that did not mean that he was not interested in it. I’m sure, it was just that he made a comment. Of course, at that time his own thinking about Vietnam had not been formed.

                  Again you know the chronology on that? When he went to Indonesia?

HACKMAN:           He went to Indonesia very soon. I guess it was January of ‘64, I’m almost sure it was January of ‘64. Yeah. “January 27 returns from

thirteen day mission to the Far East.” He made the Philippines  
Malaysia.

SEIGENTHALER: Did he go back a second time?

HACKMAN: Not after the President was assassinated, he didn’t go back to the Far East again. It seemed to me he came home, and was here for a month and went back again to Vietnam. He went to Poland at some time.

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah, that’s right. I sort of laughed though about the whole thing to him. I told him I didn’t think Lyndon Johnson would name him ambassador to anywhere except Greenland or Iceland; he might make him Consul General to Iceland or Greenland or send him to Nome, Alaska. My conversation with him was rather light about it. I didn’t have the feeling that he was, at that point, deeply considering it, seriously considering it.

When were those discussions about being ambassador to Vietnam?

HACKMAN: I don’t know, I’ve never heard anybody put a date

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on it.

SEIGENTHALER: Well, as nearly as I can remember, there were many stories about the times he came back.

HACKMAN: Yeah, it was in the early spring of ‘64, but I don’t know exactly what days.

Just one other question on the vice presidential thing; do you remember getting involved in any discussions of whether or not you can enter a primary and run as a vice presidential candidate in the primary?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah, yeah.

HACKMAN: Who was involved in that?

SEIGENTHALER: I don’t know, there had been something in the press about it, and again in my judgment there was no serious, set strategy to pursue. There might have been in somebody’s mind, but in his mind it was all nothing more than sort of an irrelevant and irreverent political exercise on the part of people, which did not displease him at all and which I had the feeling he somewhat enjoyed. But in terms of sitting down with him and saying, you know, “Can you run for vice president in New Hampshire?” I kept saying to him that he was running for president of the world and not President of the United States and that I thought he’d be a cinch to be elected president of the world but he couldn’t get elected President of the United States.

I remember that he was elated over the poll. I remember that I used to, from time to time, get the Gallup poll maybe three or four days in advance and call Angie and give her the statistics on what Gallup [George H. Gallup] said about his standing in New England at a given time. Sometimes he would call back and say, "Do you have anything in-depth on that? Take a look at it." So I'd know that he was interested and seriously interested in public reaction to his chances. But in terms of having a set, political strategy and an answer, I don't think he did or ever considered it. If somebody went out and talked to him about running for vice president in New Hampshire, maybe he might have talked seriously about it if somebody asked a serious question, 1) out of politeness, and 2) simply, the political problems would have challenged him.

HACKMAN: But do you remember there being a particular memo from someone that was discussed?

SEIGENTHALER: No, I don't. Was there?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

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SEIGENTHALER: Who? Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton]?

HACKMAN: I'm not going to say.

SEIGENTHALER: Oh. I don't know about that. I did not see such a memo and he did not discuss it with me.

HACKMAN: You were talking a little bit about polls, maybe we can just finish up. What do you remember about the way he regarded polls, which ones he had more confidence in than others. Do any stand out, I guess, how much credence he gave them in general?

SEIGENTHALER: Yeah, well, I think it varied. In the early days of the Kennedy Administration in 1960, he had great confidence in Lou Harris [Louis Harris]; subsequently he came to have great confidence in Kraft [Joseph Kraft]. His association with Quayle [Oliver Quayle] was not as personal as the one with Kraft. There came a time when he didn't really care much for Lou Harris personally, but still respected some of his polls. He thought Gallup's polls were.... He showed some interest in them.

I did have some conversations with members of his staff about New Hampshire – with Dolan, and I think with John Nolan who has since left. I had the feeling that they were rather serious about it, but less serious than he was.

HACKMAN: I probably ought to get out of here.

SEIGENTHALER: Okay. What time is it?

HACKMAN: It's 12:30, 25 after.

SEIGENTHALER: Fine. Good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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