

**William Barry, Oral History Interview – RFK#4, 12/11/1969**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** William Barry

**Interviewer:** Roberta W. Greene

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**Biographical Note**

Barry (1927-2018), Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, security expert, and personal bodyguard to Robert F. Kennedy [RFK] in the 1968 Presidential campaign. In this interview Barry discusses RFK's 1964 senate campaign, Ethel Kennedy's role during the campaigns, and RFK's demeanor after the assassination of John F. Kennedy among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

Of

**William Barry**

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William Barry – RFK #4

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Fourth Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM BARRY

December 11, 1969  
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Project  
of the John F. Kennedy Library

GREENE: Last time we left off we were just about to talk about the '64 campaign. Why don't you begin by talking about... [Interruption]

BARRY: ... Then at the end of the campaign Dean [Dean Markham] was very, very tired and decided he could not delay a business trip to Alaska anymore. He left for Alaska, and I took his place. I took annual leave from the bureau, [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and actually it was ex officio. The bureau didn't know that I had, on my vacation, gone with the senator, and I just provided protection for him on up to election night -- through election night, rather. We made tours upstate and through the city, and it was quite exciting.

GREENE: Are there any specific things that stand out in your mind?

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BARRY: It was actually my first experience in campaigning, and I had to learn how to do it. How to get him in and out of crowds, and the fact that you don't go through a crowd, at least if you're the person moving him along.... The first man has to turn around; you can't go through it facing the crowd, you've got to back through it. That was one significant thing. Then there were a lot of typical campaign incidents that happened.

Two things stand out on election night: In the excitement of the moment, after being elected senator, the senator was asked to make his victory acceptance speech -- I guess that's what they call it. We were all walking through this crowded hotel and got down to the floor where the speech was to be made. He turned to me and said, "Bill, don't get in any of these pictures. We don't want you to get into any trouble," which I thought was rather kind and indicates the completely unselfish guy he was in that moment to be worried about whether I'd get in any problems with the FBI, which was, I thought, a clue to his character. Then later that night there were just the three of us alone -- Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy], the senator, and myself -- and I made some congratulatory remark. He said, "I can't forget that the reason I am here tonight is because my brother was killed," so that kind of put it in the right perspective. That's really all about the '64 campaign.

GREENE: What about his attitude towards security in '64 as compared to '68? Was it as much of a problem?

BARRY: His attitude a problem or the security a problem?

GREENE: The fact that he really objected to having any kind of protection other than...

BARRY: Well, he really didn't have much protection. There wasn't any protection really, just the same as it was during the other campaign.

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GREENE: Was it as much of a problem to you? Were you as nervous about it as you were in '68?

BARRY: Yes, I think so. [Interruption] Yes, it was a problem. He was going to live his life. After the assassination of President Kennedy, when he came to New York, I mentioned to him how sorry I was. He said, "Well, I wish you would have been there in Dallas." So he was pretty broken up. But he just refused to live his life in any way different because of what had happened, and that was really the key to security for him.

GREENE: Were there as many threats as you had in '68? Was that a constant problem?

BARRY: No.

GREENE: There was one, I have, in Bayshore, New York, on October 25th.

BARRY: Gee, I really...

GREENE: You don't remember that?

BARRY: No. There were threats, but nothing of the intensity that later came. Of course, the one incident of the '64 campaign, which I guess was key to his elections, was the Ken Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] debate.

GREENE: The empathy chair.

BARRY: He showed up and demanded... Let's see now. There was a meeting to decide what the strategy should be. Bobby was due to address the Ladies Garment Workers [International Ladies Garment Workers Union], and he asked Ethel to take his place. Ethel had never done anything like that, so she was concerned and asked if I could go along with her. So I toddled off with Ethel to

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this Ladies Garment Workers Union meeting, and half of them, I'm sure, couldn't understand English. She told his marvelous story about a lady suffragette being loaded into a police van, and when she was going she said to her cohorts, "Don't worry, girls. God's on our side. She'll not let us down." Ethel told this story to these ladies; it was really great.

Then we went to dinner, and I kept checking the time to see what was going to happen, and finally we found that he had left for the studio to debate Keating. So we arrived late, Ethel and I, and ran through the CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc.] building, and ran smack into Ken Keating; and Ethel tried to buttonhole him. What we didn't realize was that Ken Keating was running away, trying to get away from all the press. Ethel chased him down the hall and got up into the stairwell, where he ran to hide, and almost caught him on the stairs. Meanwhile, the press came pounding on both of their heels. I sent them the wrong way down the stairs so that they wouldn't catch Ethel trying to catch Ken Keating. That was really a funny night. I think that was the key to the campaign; it changed everything. After that Bobby got momentum and Keating looked as though he was a loser.

GREENE: Did she catch Keating?

BARRY: Yes, she did, and he was very nice to her, very gentlemanly. Actually, what she was doing was chasing him to find out where the debate was going to be, not realizing that he was running away. She thought he was headed for the debate, which is rather funny.

GREENE: What about police in '64? He was very conscious of not having them become oppressive in '68, you have said. Was this also something he was thinking about in '64?

BARRY: Oh, yes. He didn't want a lot of uniforms around him; it would give the impression that he was afraid. Also, he didn't want anybody being pushed or

hurt or trampled if he could help it. He wasn't prepared, though, for the kind of crowds he got. I think it shocked him how much emotion he was stirring up. I wasn't prepared for it; I know that.

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GREENE: Could you get any feeling for his attitude towards the race, whether he was enjoying it, whether he was kind of sorry he was in it? There have been kind of conflicting reports on that.

BARRY: Before I joined him, I ran into the campaign car, quite by accident, in midtown, and he asked me to ride along with him. I was working as an FBI agent; it was just purely an accidental meeting. He asked me how things were going -- and at that time he was losing -- and I told him that I didn't think it was going too well, that people weren't getting his message. Keating was a rather nice man and kindly, et cetera, and after all Kennedy was from Massachusetts. He indicated at that time.... I think that was the low ebb of the campaign.

GREENE: Do you remember when it would have been?

BARRY: Probably right smack in the middle of it, a month before I went on the campaign trail. Then two weeks later they called me to help Ethel out; she was giving a tea for ladies from Brooklyn. The last tea she had they couldn't get the ladies to leave; they got upset -- the ladies did -- and Ethel was mobbed. I came out and kind of organized it. It was kind of fun.

GREENE: But did you find, by the time you got on, that his mood had picked up a bit?

BARRY: It was a catch up campaign when I joined it. I think it really just turned around in the Keating thing. I think he was, in fact, in the polls, behind -- I'm not sure of that. Yes, the mood was pressing to catch up, to see everybody.

GREENE: What kinds of things did you see on him between '65 and '66? We talked about the later period, but not those years.

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BARRY: Well, let's see. He was elected senator, and then he came back and gave a speech for Charlie Buckley [Charles A. Buckley]. I think I might have mentioned that, didn't I? Well, anyway...

GREENE: I really can't remember.

BARRY: Charlie Buckley was being threatened by the reform group, who subsequently

deposed him, and the senator was invited to a testimonial dinner on his behalf -- Charlie Buckley's behalf. He dutifully went and stayed the whole evening, gave a marvelous speech about Charlie Bukely's relationship with the Kennedy family and how he was one of the first to come out for Jack. When we got in the car later he said, "My father will be glad I went down the line for gold old Charlie."

I was in the FBI at that time, and he would call me on some things that he came in for. Maybe he wanted my company; he didn't need security, that wasn't the point. A couple of things like that, and then a couple of times with the children, when the children would come in, would I come down and help out? So I was always glad, and happy to see him.

Then, of course, as I described to you the last time, the problem with the bureau, that was the time I saw him, that there was '64, I guess. I didn't bother him at all, or see him when I was having problems because of my makeup. Then the next time was when I got back from Alabama.

GREENE: To your new job?

BARRY: My new job, well, in his office.

GREENE: Oh, right, in between that and.... In all this talking we've never really discussed your observations of Mrs. Kennedy in the campaign, and generally. Was she an asset to the campaign? Did she enjoy it? What kinds of things did she like to do?

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BARRY: She never speaks in public, although I think she did a terrific job the one time I heard her speak. What she did to the campaign was, obviously, lighten its mood and brighten the day, visibly. The candidate was just completely relaxed and enjoying himself when Ethel was around and really went out of his way to make sure she was taken care of, that she was enjoying it, that she saw everything that he felt was important. She definitely humanized Bobby and made him more understandable to the general public; he lost that prosecutor, tough guy image around Ethel. It was obvious that she was the sun in his sky. He brightened up visibly and was a lot more fun; so that really was her contribution.

GREENE: Would she also -- especially in the '68 campaign -- visit hospitals and things like that that campaign wives frequently do?

BARRY: No. She did it; I'm sure she did some of that, but whenever Ethel was on a campaign she was right next to Bobby, no matter where, and some of the things that happened were because of that. For instance, both of them would be up on the back of a convertible -- Ethel in high heels -- and trying to hold both of them on on different sides of the car was quite a problem. She went right into the thick of crowds. She

didn't like the crowds anymore than Bobby did, but she did whatever he did. Mostly she was with the candidate.

Before the end of the California campaign she took a couple of days out to go to South Dakota to campaign by herself there for three days with Andy Williams and somebody else, I guess.

GREENE: That was not her choice, I mean that was not first choice?

BARRY: No. Somebody had to go, and she went.

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GREENE: Let me ask you what changes you saw him go through in the period you knew him, particularly, of course, after the assassination. Was there a very evident change that he was undergoing?

BARRY: Oh, yes. From November until June he was just completely withdrawn and not interested in, really, too much; his spirit was really shot. Then, when he made his decision to go to the Senate, he picked up and he got interested in that; then the crowds interested him; then the fact that he could speak -- because really, that was one of his problems, that he really didn't feel he was a good speaker, when in fact he was. Then, when he became senator, I think, initially he enjoyed it, but then it got awful.... He told me that it was too slow a pace for him, that he liked to get into the thick of things a little more. Being in the Senate was nice, but that's not what he wanted to do. He became a much deeper man as the years went on. I think in 1963 he was, maybe, a one-dimension man, but in '68 he was every dimension. He became a man truly and honestly interested in the people who didn't have it. I don't know who else is really honestly interested in other people. That's how -- he really developed in depth. He became a much more intelligent man.

GREENE: Do you have anything to add to that?

BARRY: You mean how he developed?

GREENE: No, no, I'm sorry. I mean, in terms of the interview in general. I don't have any other questions. Do you have any other observations you'd like to put on tape?

BARRY: The thing that struck me in 1963, when the president was assassinated, was that it was tough for him and tough for his family, and it was just awful to be an American at that time. I think the real tragedy was what that act meant to the world as a whole, but in particular to the future generations. What he had started would, of necessity, grind to a halt,

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and what we lost was this new, fresh approach to the problems of the world, and it would take generations to get back to that kind of a youthful, "Let's get the thing done," and a "new image for America" approach. Then, when Bobby decided to do the job, you could see that the people behind John Kennedy, who had contributed most to his administration and to the idea that we are finally getting moving and getting the country doing what it should, were getting behind Bobby, and that obviously Bobby was the man to get America back to the place John Kenney had had us at.

I think Bobby brought another dimension to the presidency that Jack didn't have, and that was, really, the experience he had with Jack. So when we lost Bobby, we again lost that New Frontier, that dedication to human ideals, the betterment of America, but not at the expense of the minority groups or at the expense of our national honor. So that's why I supported Bobby so much. Besides the personal thing, I really believed in what he was trying to do; that's what I think the significance of his loss is: we all lost an American who was trying to better this country.

GREENE: Would you say that your association with him had a profound effect on your own personal life and thinking?

BARRY: Well, it did. I feel it made me a better man, certainly more understanding. I think it just completely wiped out the last two years. How long has it been? The last year...

GREENE: Year and a half.

BARRY: ...and a half. So I really can't tell what effect it will have long-range, but I just haven't been the same. I'm just going through the motions, more or less. Lately it's been a little bit better. The effect really has been pretty bad, not his association but what happened. I can't really answer the question. I think maybe in five or six years it will make a difference. I think I tried to do a little more than I

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think I'm capable of. I've gotten that from him, the association, but I don't think I've achieved, so personally it's been really bad. Professionally, he's shown me some ideals and a different philosophy. But I won't be able to tell the effect for a few years.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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