

Jesse M. Unruh Oral History Interview –RFK #1, 6/18/1969
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Oral History Interview

Of

Jesse M. Unruh

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Jesse M. Unruh- RFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JESSE M. UNRUH

June 18, 1969
Sacramento, California

By Dennis O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I guess the logical place to begin--and we're really going back into California politics rather than starting with the more contemporary thing, but really feel free to make any comparisons and references you wish. I guess the logical place to begin is: When did you first come across or when did you first meet John Fitzgerald Kennedy?

UNRUH: I can't quite remember, and I've thought about that many times. I believe it was sometime in 1956. It could've been either before the '56 Convention or afterwards, but it didn't register on me very heavily no matter when it was. It was a Democratic dinner of some sorts and the young senator was speaking at it. I can remember thinking that he was overly soft and somewhat shy, and played a little too much with his hands. And I have no recollection of anything startling that he said nor was I much impressed with the way he said it. Beyond that, I wasn't even terribly impressed with how good he looked. Matter of fact, I always thought that John Kennedy's handsomeness really didn't develop until he got into his forties. But I believe it was sometime in 1956 at a rather sparsely attended Democratic dinner held in a very small room. As I remember it, it couldn't possibly have had more than 250 people in it. It might have been as much as twenty-five dollars a plate.

O'BRIEN: Was this after the convention?

UNRUH: I said I don't remember, really, whether it was before or after. I'm inclined to think it might have been before because he did not register on me very well at that point, and I think that after the fight at the convention in '56--where I really was not for him. I was at that point a Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] fan and not for either Senator Kennedy or Senator Kefauver [C. Estes Kefauver].

O'BRIEN: Were you at the convention in '56?

UNRUH: No, I was not. I was just barely in politics then. I had just been elected in '54 and was serving my first term. Very frankly, I didn't go to the convention because I didn't feel like I could afford it.

O'BRIEN: That was an expensive year. There were some visits, Senator Kennedy came out to California on some visits after that. Do you recall, after that dinner in '56, any of the other visits?

UNRUH: Well, I recall one dinner, one visit--I don't know whether it was a dinner or just a reception--I believe, at the Biltmore Hotel. That could have been anywhere from '56 to '58. It seems to me--and I don't have a very good recollection of that--but I do seem to recall meeting him in the foyer floor of the Biltmore Hotel there, one of the ballrooms to the north. But, again, that did not register on me very much.

O'BRIEN: Do you remember whether there was any organized activity on the part of California people on behalf of Senator Kennedy?

UNRUH: No. As far as I know there was no organized Kennedy drive whatsoever in California. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] had captured the hearts and minds of California liberals in '52 and in spite of a very bad campaign in '56, even though he ran better in California in '56 than he did in '52--a bad campaign, I think, from the standpoint that they tried to change the image of Stevenson--he still had most of the activists, even right up to and including 1960. I think that as near as you could get to a Kennedy organization in California.... There were scatterings of Kennedy supporters and admirers around. But I can remember as late as, late 1959 or maybe very early 1960 Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] calling me and asking me to recommend a couple of people that they could sort of rely on in California, which meant that they didn't have very much going in the way of reliable people out here.

O'BRIEN: When was the first time that you met, well, people like Larry O'Brien?

UNRUH: Well, the first time that I met Larry O'Brien was the first time that John Kennedy ever really registered on me as a potential president. That was sometime in the 1959 session of the California legislature. I was chairman of the appropriations committee at the time and he came out here and addressed, I believe, a joint session of the legislature. Then he went to lunch at the Senator Hotel afterwards, and during the lunch, when he spoke, I sat in the back of the room and talked to Larry O'Brien.

The young fellow who was at that time working for the state central committee, had worked in my 1958 campaign for reelection, Joe Cerrell [Joseph R. Cerrell], brought him over to see me and we spent a great deal of time talking, getting acquainted. And that's the first time I remember meeting Larry. Subsequent to that we became very close. And Larry was, during the campaign, my principle contact with the Kennedy campaign both prior to the convention and after the convention in the campaign itself.

O'BRIEN: Did you have contact with any of the rest of his senatorial staff. Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell], for example.

UNRUH: My contact with O'Donnell was quite limited up until the convention. I don't believe Kenny accompanied him on any of these California trips. Larry was in charge of California and as far as I know, I do not remember meeting Kenny O'Donnell until a few days prior to the convention when they came out to California to set up the pre-convention arrangements.

I did meet Bob [Robert F. Kennedy] when he made a sweep out through the state. As a matter of fact, I remember a dinner one night, specifically, I believe, at Ed Pauley's [Edwin W. Pauley] house, that Bob came to. And even more specifically, I remember that he did something that night which we had asked him to do because we were having some difficulty in getting the Teamsters off our back. And Bob made not only a statement that night at the dinner but a public statement, I believe, the next day that the California Teamsters were a very upright, honest labor organization.

O'BRIEN: When did you...? You mentioned that you began to sense that Senator Kennedy was a real contender for the presidency when you met O'Brien that time....

UNRUH: Well, I wouldn't say that I sensed that he was a real contender, but I was impressed that, even though.... Again, I thought his speech before the legislature was relatively unimpressive. And I can remember even a little bit of resentment because at that time his Catholicism was very much in question with the American populace. And he wound up his speech before the legislature with what I thought was a relatively unwise thing for a Catholic to wind up a speech with. And that was, he said the quotation--I can't recall where it's from now--"It's better to light one candle than to curse the dark." And somehow or another he connected that with the lighting of candles and Catholicism.

O'BRIEN: I was thinking of the Christopher's program. That's the one I think it ends with.

UNRUH: At any rate. But he was much more impressive at the luncheon that day. And even though I was talking to O'Brien more than I was listening to him, I thought he was impressive. I was also impressed with Larry's grasp of politics and his understanding of the California situation.

O'BRIEN: When was the first time that you ran across the Sorensen [Theodore C.

Sorensen] memo on the Catholic vote as a factor in urban politics? Was this impressed upon you by people like O'Brien at that point?

UNRUH: No. No, I don't believe so. I don't believe so. And I'm really not terribly aware of it.

O'BRIEN: There was a series of appearances that he made here. I was thinking of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick's dinner, I believe--was it '58 or '59. Governor Brown [Edmond G. "Pat" Brown] had a luncheon at Perrino's [Perrino's Restaurant]?

UNRUH: I do not recall that, although the Biltmore meeting may have been in connection with the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. Or would that have been in San Francisco?

O'BRIEN: I think it was in Los Angeles, if I'm not mistaken.

UNRUH: Well, it's quite likely that that would have been in San Francisco, in connection with the appearance at the Biltmore Hotel that I mentioned before. I have to say, in all candor, that I did not really become a Kennedy devotee until his swing through California in the fall of 1959. There were some strange things happening in California politics in 1959, and I can remember--matter of fact, I think I still have the quote around from the fellow who was then state chairman, maybe he was northern chairman, Roger Kent. We were desperately trying to get a fund raising activity off the ground in southern California because the Democratic party up until 1959 or '60 had been starved financially--as it is again today--and we were looking for a speaker who could attract in big money. I'll have to be honest and say that the first person we went to was Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson]. And Johnson was, at that point, terrified of California politics. He had been criticized by our national committeeman then, Paul Ziffren, publicly and had been, I guess, subject to criticism by other progressive California Democrats. And Johnson was very reluctant to come to California. We needed an outstanding speaker to attract money for our Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner, and Kennedy was, at that point, available. So we went to Kennedy. The Brown administration tried to stop it and I can remember, as a matter of fact, a fellow who would probably just as soon that I didn't remember that, Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton], once telling me that that was the greatest sell-out in the history of California politics since--I don't know what it was--since somebody sold out Hiram Johnson [Hiram W. Johnson]. And the public criticism of Roger Kent, that we were dabbling in national politics and giving John Kennedy an undue platform by inviting him out to our Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner. It was not totally altruistically that we invited him. We felt he could attract money sources and we were.

It was the first large, successful dinner that the Democratic party had, ever had, in California. And we raised somewhere around a hundred thousand dollars at that dinner. It was at the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton. And I have to say that that was the first speech that I heard him give that I was really impressed with. His speaking style had greatly improved and the content of his speech was excellent. It was a general theme of a

country that has much and yet cannot do anything for those people who have little or nothing, done very well and with a great deal of humor and two or three quick phrases along the line of turn around situations. Along the line of his dinner, the Al Smith dinner [Alfred E. Smith], that he did with Nelson Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller]--Was it Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]?--earlier in that year, I believe. I have the recording somewhere. He was very impressive that night.

It was a very bad night for me because it happened to be my wedding anniversary. It was November 2, 1959. And, among other things, I hadn't seen my wife for a couple of days before that, working on the dinner. And she met me that night in the senator's suite, and I gave her, her anniversary present which she promptly proceeded to forget in there. So it was not until about six weeks later, when somebody packed him and finally discovered that, that she got her wedding present, her anniversary present.

Then, in fairly rapid-fire order after that, I can remember the other times that I saw him. I think I probably was a fan of his the night before when I heard him, I sat at the same table with him and heard him describing another fellow, who probably would just as soon that it wasn't recalled, Dick Tuck [Richard G. Tuck], in rather less than favorable terms because Dick had been sort of assigned to him as a shadow by Pat Brown...

O'BRIEN: Right.

UNRUH: ...and had been giving him a pretty bad time, including copies of a letter written by some detractor from Washington with, supposedly, unflattering photos showing him at a place and position that he shouldn't be early in the morning, which was, you know, totally scurrilous and totally improbable, as far as I could determine. But the senator knew that those were being shorn around, and he described Tuck in no uncertain terms to the governor that night, who showed mock surprise and amazement that some member of his staff would be doing such a thing. But I think that's the last time that the governor ever chose to impede the senator's progress in any way that his fingerprints would be left on it. And that rather amused me. That was the night before and it was a dinner, a private dinner, held at Bart Lytton's house.

O'BRIEN: Well, there was a comment on that trip, in regard to that Tuck incident. There was some feeling...

UNRUH: You're aware of that?

O'BRIEN: Right.

UNRUH: From other sources?

O'BRIEN: Right. But was there some feeling in the Kennedy camp that somehow or another the Brown staff, not only including Tuck but perhaps Dutton, were in some way trying to impede or....

UNRUH: Oh, I think absolutely. First of all, I think at that point Dutton was still a

Stevenson man and Tuck certainly was and Brown certainly was. Brown claims now a great deal of early affinity for Kennedy, but I think it was only after Papa Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] sort of held his feet to the fire that.... And I must say this, Brown got better ground for going than he probably should have at that point. But I'm sure there was, on the part of any very knowledgeable person around there, an antipathy toward what we were doing and a feeling that we were showing partiality toward the senator at that point, which really was not true because we had in Symington, and would have had in Johnson, as I said, had he been willing to come. And later on, the next spring, we did have all three of them out at another fund raising dinner.

O'BRIEN: Well, do you think that this was the governor or was it, perhaps, his staff that was ambitious for him at that point?

UNRUH: I think it was a mixture of both. Pat told me later on that year--maybe it wasn't later on that year, but I believe it was; it was at the beginning of '60 or somewhere along then--he said, "Jess, I've seen them all out here, Symington [W. Stuart Symington] and Kennedy and Johnson, and I want to tell you," he said, "I'm as good as any of them."

O'BRIEN: In regard to those, to the dinner party at Lytton's and, also, there was a meeting that year at Lawford's [Peter S. V. Lawford] too, do you recall anything from those?

UNRUH: Well, the Lytton party: I've described the confrontation that Senator Kennedy had with the governor and in which he referred to Dick in rather uncomplimentary terms. The meeting at the Lawford's I, for some reason or another, do not recall. I don't know what the occasion for that was. I remember meeting with Pat Lawford [Patricia Kennedy Lawford] before the dinner that fall to try to enlist her aid in selling tickets, particularly to the entertainment industry.

O'BRIEN: Well, I understand the guest list included a lot of the '56 delegates.

UNRUH: It may well have and I may have been there or I may not have been there, I just don't recall that point. I don't know why I would not have been there. On the other hand, they may have been trying to woo unwilling delegates. But you have to remember now, at that point in '59 there had been no delegates chosen, so they would have had to go on what they thought were potential delegates. Delegates were not chosen until sometime in February, I believe, of 1960.

O'BRIEN: I think it was the '56 delegates. Not many of those made it to the convention of '60; there was kind of a changeover there.

UNRUH: There was quite a bit of changeover, yes. Although there was some carryover, like congressmen, for example.

O'BRIEN: You were involved in a couple dinners in '59, testimonials to Brown, weren't they--Governor Brown--in which Senator Kennedy made his appearance? Was it '59, May or November '59?

UNRUH: No, the November dinner of '59 was a Jefferson-Jackson day dinner for the southern section of the Democratic State Central Committee. It may have taken the form of a testimonial to Governor Brown but it was not designed as that. It was designed as a fund raiser for legislative and congressional campaigns for the next year and to finance the party operations. I cannot recall any other ones he appeared at. He may have made an appearance when he was out here, spoke to the legislature, which would have been about May. But I'm not aware of any. He may have gone to San Francisco or even to Los Angeles, but I was then in session and not involved in it.

O'BRIEN: Well, by this time now, it's 1959 and going into 1960. Besides yourself, who are some of the people that are now assuming, well, in a sense, a role of leadership, taking charge of the Kennedy campaign here on the local level?

UNRUH: Well, there was a small group of self-starters, whose names I can't quite remember. It seems to me there were a couple of young attorneys by the name of Jerome Burns, Jerry Burns, and another one that formed an early Kennedy committee. The Kennedy people were never impressed by it and never paid much attention to it. I think they let it run without, you know, really putting the kibosh on it because it was so inconsequential they could disclaim any credit for it. And maybe someone back in the third level of the Kennedy things were agitating that, that it was so inconsequential that there was not even any pressure, for example, for us to take any of those people on the delegation, when it was formed. So you can understand that they didn't set much store by it.

I would have to say that of the public officials, the only other public official who was early for John Kennedy was Tom Rees [Thomas M. Rees], who is now congressman, was at that point an assemblyman--was a fellow classmate of mine, as a matter of fact, elected the same year. And Tommy was early and publicly for him, which was a difficult position for him because his district is a liberal Jewish district and very pro Stevenson, and he couldn't even deliver his own delegates on the thing. But he was for him; took quite a pounding on it, as a matter of fact. I think Tommy once upon a time told me he got more telegrams against his position being for John Kennedy than he did on any other issue that ever faced him in public life from the Stevensonians, who at that point were sort of like the McCarthyites [Eugene J. McCarthy] of 1968.

The next time I saw the senator, I believe, was in January or February of 1960. And I went back to a Western states conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico--I don't recall whether it was January or early February, it seems to me like it might have been February--at which all three of the principal Democratic contenders appeared, maybe all four of them, because by that time Hubert Humphrey was, by that point, in the race. And all of them made excellent appearances there. I don't recall that Johnson showed up there, but I'm sure Symington, Humphrey, and Kennedy did. And again, I was impressed, as I had been between May and November of 1959, with the growth in Senator Kennedy and his ability to

project, even though his speech was perhaps not any better, maybe not even as good, as Hubert Humphrey's; certainly not as long. His was clearly the better speech, not necessarily because of content, but because of the entirety of the man and the presentation, delivery, and content. I met with him during the evening in his suite and that's really when I gave him my first hard commitment. I have somewhere the letter he wrote me after that, thanking me for the conversation and saying that Larry would be in touch with me.

O'BRIEN: Just picking up a point here. You've mentioned a couple times about Lyndon Johnson and a fear of California politics. What was it based on?

UNRUH: Hypersensitivity to personal criticism, a tendency to personalize everything that ever happened to him, inability to separate political criticism from personal derision, and a general lack of understanding politics anywhere outside of Texas which runs on and on oil.

O'BRIEN: There's a comment that comes up among people who are involved in Eastern politics about California from time to time, not only then but even now, and that is that somehow or another California has no; I guess in Massachusetts rated as pols, and they're not able to play the style of Eastern politics in California. Would you care to enlarge on that or comment on that?

UNRUH: Well. I think that's very true. I'm not sure that anyone who makes that statement really understands what a political pol is anymore, because I don't know what they mean by that statement. I used to think it meant someone who had control of a political apparatus and could deliver something. But I fail to see anyone in Massachusetts, for example, who can deliver anything. Right now they're split four ways on a gubernatorial candidate and none of them look like they have much going for them, as far as I can see.

New York: I see a deterioration of the old Buckley [Charles A. Buckley] operation in Kings and Queens and a deterioration of everything there; except the little bit that's still left in Kings County which is not--and even that isn't much. Stanley Steingut, I guess, still has a fairly good hold on that country, but that is deteriorating also.

But I think California is, as it is in many other instances, a precursor; has been the precursor of new politics. For a long time we didn't recognize it and we've been sort of sensitive about being called kooky. But kooky or not, that's the way politics is going to be in this country for a while in the future. It is packaging, the ability of the candidate to project personally, personality politics, issues to a degree, but very secondary, and simple issues that can be packaged in thirty second television commercials.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever have any discussion touching on that with, well, say, people like Larry O'Brien about California politics?

UNRUH: Yes. And I think Larry understood, both Larry and Kenny understood, the difference between the way you dealt with people in California. I think that's

one reason they gravitated to me, as they felt that I had, if not the ability to deliver, which I didn't have in those days and have never had to the degree that anyone attributed it to me, but they understood that. They understood that within.... And they understood that I understood that. And so I never gave them any baloney about what I could or could not deliver. They pretty much knew.... Well, let's put it this way, I pretty much knew what I could bring with me, largely based upon personality and persuasion and friendship and a little bit on the fact that I was, even before I became Speaker, sort of the dominating influence in the Assembly. Beyond that, they understood that I understood what I could bring and they never overestimated that and, therefore, were not disappointed in me. Nor did I try to represent to them that I could bring more than was there.

I can remember very well sitting in a motel with Larry O'Brien after we had sat up at the Highland's Inn in Carmel and chosen the Democratic delegation for 1960. About sixteen of us, I guess, sat up and put together a camel in the name of a horse: that's always what a committee does. And then going down and meeting with Larry and taking the list of delegates down and checking off the ones that were clearly Kennedy delegates. Now I sat there as the organizer of that and did my best to slide in Kennedy delegates and alternatives, but there really weren't that many Kennedy people. We put everybody on that delegation who had enough prestige of one kind or another going for them who was at all friendly to Kennedy that we could think of, and we still didn't wind up with very many solidly pro-Kennedy people. He just didn't have much going for him out here in those days. Then we went down and talked to Larry and went through the list. And I can remember counting it and trying to do a very hard-nosed count of, oh, what do we have, eighty some delegates that year divided into half-votes, so it must have been, maybe a hundred and twenty some delegates that year; half votes.

O'BRIEN: It seems to me there were more than that, as I recall.

UNRUH: Well, it was sixty-three, we had sixty-three votes I believe, or seventy-three votes we finally split 35-33 1/2, something like that. Kennedy finally did get a bare plurality of the votes, like one and a half or two votes more than Stevenson had in the delegation. But we sat there and I kept telling Larry in counting them that I thought we had a maximum of fifty-five hard Kennedy votes. That would have been 27 1/2 full votes. Billy Munnell [William A. Munnell], who was state chairman at that time, assemblyman and Democratic floor leader, was inclined to soft-count it and throw in a lot of people that I thought would not be with us. And I can remember telling him after the meeting, I said, "Bill, do you know, did it ever occur to you that you may be lying to the next President of the United States?" And I don't think Bill was deliberately lying, but he just wanted to present the most optimistic picture possible. So we did our best and, as I said, we put people on that that we had to reach a ways to get on there, but we put every Kennedy delegate we could scrape up in the state and that wasn't too many.

O'BRIEN: What was the formula for arriving at that list of delegates? Did you have certain interest groups and party power seekers?

UNRUH: Well, the formula, the formulary procedure in California is that you have to pick

a certain number from each congressional district, except in counties where there is more than one congressional district. So you have to try, within that framework, to satisfy the diverse groups in those areas: labor, minorities, elected officials, finance people, friends of the governor's, and various and sundry other people. That's the general context of it.

O'BRIEN: Well, picking up something else here, too. Did Munnell ever make a solid commitment to Kennedy as far as support?

UNRUH: Yes, he did. Yes, he did. And I think he would admit, even now, that he did. Then very interesting things happened. I'm not sure of all of them. The one thing that I do know is that he and Brown had some very serious misunderstandings over patronage matters largely, I think, but it could have been over some other things I'm not aware of. I think that he felt, at the convention, that the way to get even with Brown was to be opposed to Kennedy, because Brown by that time had made his commitment to Kennedy. There are speculations that the Johnson people had been very persuasive with Bill with other techniques, but I have no evidence of that. There was a story at one time that he was playing all three roles: He was committed to Kennedy, for Johnson, and voted for Stevenson. Two of those I know it were true. Whether he ever was really for Johnson or not I don't know. But I do know that he did introduce me to several of the Johnson people, who talked to me and tried to pull me off the Kennedy wagon. And the president was quite harsh in his evaluation of Munnell's role. As a matter of fact, words to the effect that he was the only so-and-so in the entire nation who had flatly double crossed him, which he told me the Sunday before the convention started, in his hotel room at the Biltmore where I had gone with Governor Brown and, I think, Congressman Shelley [John F. Shelley].

O'BRIEN: Is there an understanding on the part of people in the Democratic party in California of idea or concept of commitment to, as there is oftentimes in more highly developed...?

UNRUH: Well, I think there is. I have to say that I think.... We have a saying that "In politics, your word is your bond," but if that was the case, there wouldn't be many people released on bond because there are a great many commitments broken in politics, both in public and in private. There's sort of a general rule around the legislative branch of government that you keep your commitments, but a lot of people don't do that. The second best thing is, if you can't keep your commitments, you go tell the person you made the commitment to and tell them, before the crucial moment arrives, that you can't keep that commitment and why you can't and ask to be released from it. In most cases the person will release you.

But I think the degree of loyalty to your commitments depends largely upon the fears that accompany the possibility of the consequences of breaking that commitment, rather than anything else. Some people's word is very good, but those persons are a very small percentage of the entire mass of politicians, as I suspect is true in other areas. I once heard someone describe academic politics. He said they're so vicious because the stakes are so

low. And I find the higher up the politician the more likely he is to keep his commitment, and particularly to another politician in a like position.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard to the conversations that you and Munnell had with Larry O'Brien, also, as I understand it, the governor, through Heller [Edward H. Heller]...

UNRUH: Ed Heller.

O'BRIEN: ...Ed Heller, made a commitment for the California delegation.

UNRUH: I have never known exactly what the governor's commitment was. As best I can determine it--and I thought it was made to Joe Kennedy--as best as I can determine it the governor's commitment was along this line. In order to preclude a primary, which clearly John Kennedy would have won, in order to keep him out and arouse a "favorite son," the governor made this commitment: If you continue to lead in the polls, if you are successful in the primaries, and if one or two other things, and then if you do not come into the primary, then I will be with you. Now the question between the Kennedys and the governor gets to be what was meant by, "I will be with you." The governor admits to doing this much. The Kennedys felt that meant delivering his delegation. That was in a bit of naivety on the part of the Kennedys that was unbecoming to, at least, John Kennedy, who ought to have known better, because the governor could not have delivered that delegation the way it was put together even had he so desired, and he did desire at the last when it was too late. His method of releasing the delegation was clumsy and inept and naive, but he did make some effort in trying to deliver individual members of the delegation. I can remember sitting with him in his suite for six or eight hours while he was calling these people in individually and trying to twist their arm but had very little luck because by that time, you know, whatever leverage he had over them was pretty much gone. And also, they all knew Pat was soft enough that if they didn't go with him they could come back around again the next time and get back in his good graces. The Kennedys, I think, felt that the governor had committed the delegation to them. The governor maintains that he committed only himself.

O'BRIEN: But at the same time you were making this one prognostication that you were going to get about what, twenty-seven?

UNRUH: That's all I ever told O'Brien that we had hard and fast votes. Now we did get up to about thirty-five or thirty--six, as I remember. And that was due partly to my efforts and partly to the governor's individual efforts where he got a few votes that were not Kennedy votes.

O'BRIEN: Well, was there an organized effort after that to pick off delegates?

UNRUH: You mean from the--Bobby Kennedy's...?

O'BRIEN: Yes, for the Kennedys by either yourself or....

UNRUH: Yeah, I worked the delegation for a week before the convention trying to get commitments, but of course, the Stevenson people were working very hard then, and so were the Johnson people, and then the Johnson and Stevenson people combined and tried to--the Johnson vote, a lot of the Johnson votes went to Stevenson. Guys like Chet Holifield [Chester E. Holifield], for example, who later on used to like to boast about what a close friend of John Kennedy's he was, particularly during the time when he was banging Bob Kennedy around, voted for Stevenson. Now he really was for Johnson, but it wasn't terribly popular in those days among Democratic circles to be for Johnson. So some of the guys took the easy way out and voted for Stevenson because that became the Johnson strategy. Those people that couldn't, just couldn't go with Johnson because of political reasons were instructed to go with Stevenson to try to hold Kennedy off nomination on the first ballot.

O'BRIEN: Did you make any effort to, well, shortly after this, to get at the CDC [California Democratic Council] Convention that took place in Fresno, to attempt to get any kind of endorsement from the CDC?

UNRUH: No, we did not, did not. And to his dying day, I ought to say that John Kennedy was not a very strong supporter of the CDC.

O'BRIEN: Or vice versa?

UNRUH: Or vice versa. As a matter of fact, I think much, if not most, of my difficulty with the CDC during those years--it's something which has never really surfaced--was my strong ties with the Kennedy administration, their great suspicion of the CDC, and the CDC's dislike of me because I had beaten their hero, or had participated in an effort which resulted in beating their hero.

O'BRIEN: The CDC during this same period of time often made the charge that you're a kind of Eastern politician. And of course, you're suggesting that you're well aware, as well as the Kennedys were well aware, that you couldn't apply the kind of pressures. Do you have any reactions or comments you'd like to make on this, on the CDC?

UNRUH: Well, I don't know if it's terribly consequential to this interview. I think there was a great deal of misunderstanding on both parts at that point and everyone felt that their way was right. I think the CDC, just as I believe of myself on some issues, saw the way that politics were going to go and were right to that extent. They were trying to involve more people in politics, were concerned about more people being concerned over the issues, but felt threatened by someone or everyone who did not agree in total with them.

And the CDC had glaring weaknesses insofar as an overall Democratic party structure was concerned. They were, by and large, a movement of the middle class and upper class

areas, good people in many cases, but there was no significant membership in CDC in either the black or brown areas and very little in the poor white areas, the blue collar areas. They were from districts where they could not elect local officials and where they could afford what I used to refer to as hobby politics, and that's not where the Democratic votes were.

So had we ever been able to work out a mutual assistance pact, we might have remained stronger in the state for some time longer than we did. But they saw my efforts in trying to organize the minority communities where the votes were as a threat to their system of voluntarism. It was not, should not have been construed as such. But I had moved along so fast in politics and in many ways my friendship with the Kennedys and support of them and their consequent support of me, again, contributed to many of my problems in California, because, I suppose, no one would have felt particularly threatened by Jess Unruh, but Jess Unruh who was John Kennedy's man in California was a threat to everyone, including the governor.

O'BRIEN: Do you think this split still exists?

UNRUH: Not insofar as the CDC is concerned because I think the CDC over the years first of all deteriorated; secondly, many of them became successful; third, many of them dropped out either through the form of appointment or through a loss of interest in the particular issue that might have motivated them in; fourth, the ones that did remain were realists, understood the necessity of turning out the black and brown votes; and fifth, I think that in many ways my politics have changed and I have come to understand the necessity of broadening out the political base and of involving those people who have taken enough from this society that there is an obligation on their part to give some of it back.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to this period between the...

UNRUH: But I can remember what John Kennedy told me about the CDC when, after the '60 convention as we drove out to the airport, where he was catching a plane out of Los Angeles, he said, "Jess, you're never going to have a party in this state until somebody takes those sons of bitches on and beats them." And then in '62 when I beat them, when I elected my candidate chairman of the Los Angeles County Central Committee, I took our Democratic nominees back there--and remember our reapportionment in '61 is what preserved his legislative majority for him up to the '62 elections, of which he was duly appreciative--and he said, "Congratulations, Jess. I understand you won a great victory the other night." And I said, "Well, you know, you just can't depend on those people because when you need them, they're not with you." And he said, "That's right. You leave yourself exposed," he said, "and they'll gut you." This is while he was standing on the White House steps while the congressman were moving around having their pictures taken with him, you know. He was standing there, I was standing behind him conversing with him *sotto voce*.

O'BRIEN: What's the circle like now of people involved in the Kennedy campaign prior to the, you know, the Democratic National Convention in '60 here in California?

UNRUH: Well, do you mean, what is it now in 1968 or...?

O' BRIEN: '60, 1960. What's the circle of support, in a sense. There's yourself, Roger Kent....

UNRUH: Roger Kent was a very late-comer and a non-believer in the Kennedy thing. Libby Gatov [Elizabeth R. Smith Gatov], I think, who has always sort of associated--she was Libby Smith then--with Roger, was a genuine Kennedy supporter. She was there because she felt that he was the best candidate. And Roger came, I think, because he felt that as the state chairman or whatever he was at that point, that that's where he was supposed to be because of the governor situation. So were a number of the other San Francisco people. Ben Swig [Benjamin H. Swig] was there because, as I said, he was a Stevenson supporter, but I think he was there because of the governor. The Hellers, I think, were genuine Kennedy supporters, and we used to meet, the Kennedy caucus used to meet, in Heller's suite. There were a few legislators, most of whom were friends of mine, that came with us and a very few finance people. But it wasn't really very big.

O'BRIEN: How about Bart Lytton? When does he come into this?

UNRUH: Ever hear of the great Kennedy statement on Bob Meyner [Robert B. Meyner]? "As I need him less and less, he's with me more and more." That's about applicable to Lytton. Lytton, at the beginning stages of the convention--the first vote, I believe--cast his vote for Chester Bowles. And I think, I don't know, whether that's the way he finally went down or whether he finally switched and transferred that vote to Kennedy or not.

O'BRIEN: How about Joe Cerrell?

UNRUH: Well, Joe was inconsequential in the Kennedy thing. Joe was, at that point--see, at that point Munnell was Democratic state chairman; I was the executive director of the State Central Committee; and Joe was my assistant. Joe, I think, shared my early enthusiasm for Kennedy, but Joe almost lost his job over all the maneuvering there with his boss, Bill Munnell, going one way and he going the other way. And I left the state committee before the convention so that I could go to work for the Kennedys. I mean go to work; I was never on their payroll, but I was working for them before the convention. And Joe was actually fired by the State Central Committee. He worked during the summer, but as soon as the election was over Munnell fired him, and he went to work for Stanley Mosk, who was Democratic national committeeman, and Carmen Warshaw, who's, I don't know whether she's women's chairman or southern women's chairman, something like that. They saved Joe's job. After that Joe, who is a very good travel arranger, became fairly close because he was always around the party and helping to set up when the president visited out here, which was fairly frequent, as you know. He liked to come to California. And Joe generally set up those things, the details of them.

O'BRIEN: How about the Wymans [Eugene and Rosalind Wyman]?

UNRUH: Gene was hardly active at all in politics in those days, was bitterly anti-Ziffren, and I am not sure whether that's not what brought him in. Roz was a fairly early supporter of John Kennedy's and a very strong ally of mine in those days.

O'BRIEN: Does this....

UNRUH: As a matter of fact, that Kennedy campaign made the Wymans pretty much, because I fed off, as a campaign manager, I fed off the involvement of the entertainment community to Roz, and that's where, as far as I know.... Up to that point she didn't know any of those people very well, although she was a city councilwoman at the time. But as far as I know, she didn't know any of them; it was through the Kennedy contacts that they began their contacts in the entertainment industry. Gene came into the campaign fairly late and helped me raise money. We had very little money in that campaign. I spent a total of three hundred thousand dollars in the entire southern California campaign.

O'BRIEN: Now as I understand you, in Los Angeles at this time you have some faction politics....

UNRUH: I don't know of any place that doesn't.

O'BRIEN: Does the Kennedy campaign get involved in this at all, primary campaign?

UNRUH: What are you talking about? Next year?

O'BRIEN: Well, no. I mean, I'm talking about 1960.

UNRUH: Oh, in 1960....

O'BRIEN: Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said primary.

UNRUH: In trying to put the campaign together after the convention, pull the Stevenson people back in, liberals, if you will, CDC, whatever you wish to refer to them--and they're somewhat synonymous--there were other strong efforts made to bring other people in. There were efforts made to dump me as campaign manager, and I must say that Kennedy stayed with me, hard and tough, through all that period.

I think we did pull a few back in, and by and large, I think most of them voted. The Los Angeles vote for Kennedy--considering he was a Catholic, at that point new to the state, it was Richard Nixon's home town as well as his home state, and Kennedy really only made one trip. He came out to make two appearances. The first time he came he had no voice and stayed for only a few hours. So I think the Kennedy strategy, and I don't know this, but I think the Kennedy strategy was to write off California. They went five times to Ohio, for example, and lost Ohio by half a million votes; he came for less than two days total to California and lost California on the absentee ballots.

[END OF FIRST INTERVIEW]