

Jacob “Jack” Rosenthal Oral History Interview –JFK#1, 12/8/2004
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Rosenthal, journalist, government official; U.S. Department of Justice, Assistant Director of Public Information (1964-1964), Director of Public Information (1964-1967), discusses working with Robert F. Kennedy in the Justice Department, contributions of the department, and the Civil Rights Movement, among other issues.

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Jacob “Jack” Rosenthal – JFK#1

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	The Justice Department during the Kennedy Administration
3	Emergency measures during the Cuban Missile Crisis
6,18	Civil Rights Movement
7	Criminal justice under Robert F. Kennedy [RFK]
8	Raising money for the John F. Kennedy [JFK] Library
10	First contact with JFK and the Ole Miss riots
12	The Justice Department building and working environment
14	Relationship with RFK and personal recollections
16	RFK’s decision to leave the Justice Department
19	Wiretapping during the civil rights movement
21	Reunion at the Justice Department in the 21 st century
22	The Justice Department’s contribution to the rights of defendants
23	RFK’s commanding personality

Oral History Interview

with

Jacob "Jack" Rosenthal

December 8, 2004
New York, New York

by Vicki Daitch

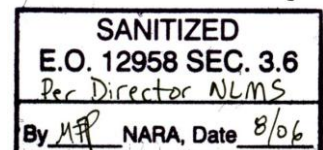
For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: I'll want to just set up the tapes by saying that I'm Vicki Daitch, and I'm talking with Jack Rosenthal at the New York Times Foundation office in the city. And we're going to be talking about Mr. Rosenthal's participation in the Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] Administration. Maybe you'd just fill us in, just to begin, with on how you came to be part of the Justice Department.

ROSENTHAL: I was a young reporter in Portland, Oregon, amazingly jealous of my roommate who had just gotten a job in the New Frontier in the beginning of 1961. That was something every young person in America wanted to do. I think it's impossible to exaggerate the sense of change of generations and of momentum in the New Frontier. And my roommate had gotten a job as the counsel to the House Committee on Education and was about to move to Washington. And I was organizing a goodbye party for him when I got a call from Washington, saying did I not only want to come to Washington, but was I interested in being interviewed to work for Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]. It's a complicated story. But an older reporter friend of mine had already gone to Washington and had recommended me.

DAITCH: Was that Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman]?

[-1-]



ROSENTHAL: It was Wally Turner [Wallace Turner] at *The Oregonian*, who was rooming in Washington temporarily with Ed Guthman, and Ed had needed a lot of help in the Justice Department. Ed came home at night complaining to Wally about the old political hack in the department, in his office. And Wally said, "Well, you need somebody with a strong back and a weak mind, and I've got just the person for you." [Laughter] They called up, and I think it probably took me about fifteen minutes to get to Washington. [Laughter] It was a thrilling time for young people then. Georgetown was just a symbol of it. There was a wonderful *Life Magazine* piece, probably in the spring of '61, about young singles in Georgetown. And they focused on . . . we had a black-tie dinner in our little Georgetown house with people like John Brademas and his then famous date. And there was a really lively, interesting, generational change in the city, and we all knew each other. Liddy Dole was part of that circle then. She was, I think, a young lawyer in the FTC. And a lot of people that I'd known in college. Milton Gwartzman was working professionally for Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy].

DAITCH: Who was that?

ROSENTHAL: Milton Gwartzman.

DAITCH: Oh, Gwartzman.

ROSENTHAL: Jay Iselin had come to Washington to work for *Newsweek*. Michael Halberstam was there as a young doctor. Joe [Joseph Albright] and Madeleine Albright had a big house which they used to entertain frequently. There was a wonderful, energetic circle of people who worked a hundred hours a week, but still managed to find time to socialize a great amount. I don't think there's been that kind of fraternal sense since. Maybe at the time that Reagan [Ronald Reagan] was elected. But this really took the city, and the country, by atmospheric storm.

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm. Yes. So what exactly were you called to do in Justice?

ROSENTHAL: Well, the pretentious title was assistant director of public information. What that meant was I was the No. 2 man in a two-man office. [Laughter] It's astonishing when you look at the Justice Department's press office now. They must have twenty-five people. We had two plus clerical staff of three or four. I doubt that they do as much business now as we did then.

DAITCH: Really!

ROSENTHAL: Well, when you think of the Justice Department then, it meant civil rights, antitrust, organized crime; and then the Attorney General's relationship with his brother - that got us into everything everywhere

else. So when there was the Billy Sol Estes Case in the Agriculture Department, we were as involved in that as the Agriculture Department was. For a lot of different reasons. But the

[-2-]

lawyers had to go help keep the people in Agriculture from getting their feet into it deeper. So we got involved in pretty much everything around the government, whether it was a Cuban prisoner exchange . . . that was run by people at the Justice Department. It was also an important time . . . most times are important, for the Supreme Court. But that was unusually so in an era of both civil rights and one man/one vote, reapportionment, and criminal decisions.

So it was a purely. . . . I was just twenty-five years old. To come to Washington and suddenly get. . . . The first day I was there Guthman threw me this huge pleading several inches thick that we're about to sue Floyd Patterson, the heavyweight champion of the world, for some big tax case. I knew nothing about tax law, I knew nothing about the case, I knew nothing about federal jurisprudence particularly. And he said, "Go master this and get a press release out by tomorrow morning."

DAITCH: Wow!

ROSENTHAL: Well, you had to learn fast because Ed was . . . if I was snowed by that, think what he was when he had to deal with Robert at most times of the day. But we learned fast. It was a thrilling place to work. And there was plenty of time for fun also. I can remember, it probably was the spring of '61, James Bennett, James B. Bennett, the wonderful old director of the Bureau of Prisons for maybe twenty-five years, was about to retire. A grand old man at the agency. And the Attorney General wanted to have some kind of do for him. So I got involved and arranged with the Attorney General's chef to have a cake baked with a file in it and make sure that he got that cake. And he tried to cut it, and clank! [Laughter]

DAITCH: So were you often called upon to do these non-public information kinds of things? I mean that doesn't really fall within your job description probably.

ROSENTHAL: You mean outside the Justice Departments at other agencies or social?

DAITCH: No, just things like the cake baking stuff or. . . ?

ROSENTHAL: I guess I did my share of it. I remember on . . . this would have been November 20th '62 . . . it was the Attorney General's birthday. And I made him a hat out of an Anti-Monopoly game. There's a funny picture of him grimacing at it. There were a lot of other moments that didn't necessarily have to do directly with the historical events. Probably the most dramatic, outside of civil rights, was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Pierre Salinger, Andie Hatcher [Andrew T. Hatcher], Mac Kilduff [Malcolm M. Kilduff], who were in the White House Press Office then. You look at

that office now, and I think that's magnified even more than the Justice Department. On the other hand, then there were probably . . . I doubt that there were hundreds of full-time members of the White House Press Corps. And now my guess is there's probably a thousand.

DAITCH: Yes.

[-3-]

ROSENTHAL: But at any rate, they were, needless to say, hugely occupied with the direct action that was going on in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Nobody, it turned out, had ever gone back over the emergency planning should the balloon go up. All this had been developed during the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration, which had built a huge, secret relocation site. There were several of them: one for Congress. . . . But the one for the executive branch was,

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Anyway, I got detailed from the Justice Department, seconded over there to go work out these emergency plans. Because if we were going to Decon-5, it would be the first time ever, or for years, somebody had to think about getting this place operational. And nobody thought about how to deal with the press there. How would you. . . ? First of all, there was room for only fifty reporters there. Somebody had to choose which fifty. I never felt more godlike in my life. [Laughter] I knew lots of reporters because a lot of them did business at the Justice Department.

And then it was mostly press as the important media. The media heavyweights in Washington were the bureau chiefs of big newspapers. Yes, TV was coming along. But still '62 was early for that. There were correspondents, and you dealt with them regularly, and they were seen on television. But the TV news was about fifteen minutes. So choosing them was one thing. Figuring out how to organize them in case there was an emergency was another. How to transport them to the site. And how to get information to those occupied at the site where much of the areas would be. . . . It was a big place, but still, for 1,000, 2,000 government officials, how would you control them in the site and keep people from personal contacts for security.

So it was a very complicated undertaking. And I suddenly began . . . I got really engrossed in it, had to. It was day and night work. They gave me a helicopter to go out to the site and back. They gave me Room 1 in the basement of EOB as an office. It was a room that had a combination safe for a door handle. I learned later it was the office used by E. Howard Hunt, the head of the infamous Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] plumbers unit. And I got issued an I.D. card, which was really interesting at the time. Color photography was unusual then. It was a laminated I.D. card not only with my colored picture on it, but with gold thread woven over the picture. And then on the back it didn't identify itself except as property of the U.S. Government - if found, Post Office Box Such-and-such. To get into the site, you had to

present this card. And the guard at this particular gate had to go through his file and find an identical one to match it with these red numbers on it. And then you could go in.

Ed McDermott [Edward A. McDermott], who was then the head of the Office of Emergency Planning, told me the story at that time of going up to the Supreme Court to see the Chief Justice [Earl Warren] with a copy of his pass. And the Chief was quite gracious and invited him in for coffee. Ed explained that there was a site for emergency for the 2,000 highest officials in the government, and here is his pass. And if there was an emergency, here's how he would get there. And the chief looked at him benignly, and he said, "Oh, well, I don't see the pass for

[-4 -]

Mrs. Warren [Nina Warren]." And McDermott said, "B-B-But, well, you see, sir, you're one of the 2,000 most important people in the United States." He said the Chief very gently pushed the pass back to him and said, "Well, here you'll have room for one more important official."

DAITCH: Wow!

ROSENTHAL: Which tells you a lot about his relationship with his wife.

DAITCH: Yes. Absolutely.

ROSENTHAL: It's an astonishing place. I haven't been there since, well, forty years now. But at the time there were huge sleeping areas with 800 blue hammocks in three tiers. Eight hundred because you slept in three shifts. A huge cafeteria with plastic flowers on the tables. A war room which you can imagine from sets of movies what that war room looked like at that time with what passed for electronics. And with a computer that probably had about the capacity of my digital phone.

DAITCH: Right, right. [Laughter] This might be a good place to mention, too, if there's anything that you think might be still sensitive, I don't have any sort of special clearance or anything.

ROSENTHAL: I'm sure there's nothing. I think the thirty-five-year rule is way past. I read, you know, that the secret relocation site has been. . . .

DAITCH: Secretly relocated?

ROSENTHAL: No, Fletcher Knebel wrote a novel about it, where he described at least the way to get there, you know. So I think he just changed the name slightly. And I haven't given you the name, so. . . .

DAITCH: Right.

ROSENTHAL: There were other strong moments. This is a dumb little personal story. But the first day that Robert Kennedy came back to the office after the JFK assassination. . . . The assassination was on a Friday. The funeral was on Sunday. It was probably Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week. He came back, and I arrived at the office about the same time he did. And he looked unbelievably haggard. And I was . . . we were all in such shock then, and I couldn't imagine what he was going through. I had not a clue as to what to say to him other than the obvious. And he went into his office. I went into my office across the hall; Ed Guthman's office was between us. After a little while he came out, came across the hall to his office. A few minutes later Ed buzzed me to come into his . . . to come in to talk to him. So I went in there to talk with him. And he said, "Could you do me a big favor?" "What's that?" He said, "Well, did you see the story in the *Wall Street Journal* today?" There was a story by Monroe Karmin about how the Kennedy loyalists felt about their new president. And it quoted one person from the Justice

[-5 -]

Department, unnamed, who said, he said, "Well, he's done fine on civil rights and in other respects. But I can't get over the idea of having a wheeler-dealer as president." And Ed said, "You know . . . you talk to the *Wall Street Journal* reporter every day." It wasn't Karmin. "Could you call him up and ask him who that was?"

Well, first of all, The Justice reporter was Jody Mathewson, not Bud Karmin. And second, do you really call up a reporter and ask for his sources? But I could see that this really tortured Robert Kennedy. "Well, I'll try." So I called up and Mathewson said, "Oh, I'm really embarrassed to tell you this. Who was the source? It was you." "It was me!? What do you mean? I never said anything like that." He said, "I know. But remember on Monday when I called around, we'd gotten a bureau-wide message that we want to put together a piece on a subject that other reporters ask about on their beats. And you said, 'He did fine on civil rights, but we weren't sure about his shit-kick personality.'" Well, he couldn't put shit-kick in this. So Bud took it upon himself to change shit-kick into wheeler-dealer."

Well, as angry or as offended as I would have been by that, I had bigger fish to fry at the moment. Because now I had to go back into that room with a stricken Attorney General and say, "It was me." I could have not said anything. But I gulped, and I went in there and said it was me. "And you'd better let me explain." And Kennedy said, "Never mind. What a relief!" Because an assistant Attorney General had been heard to say the same thing and say other things at a dinner party like a couple of nights before. And if that's who it was and that got back to Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], that would sound like serious disloyalty. But if it was just some schmuck in the press office, it didn't make any difference. [Laughter] I guess there's. . . . Can I back way up?

DAITCH: Sure.

ROSENTHAL: There's an aspect of the New Frontier, that I'd like to mention, before I got there: the context of change. We were young Democrats in Portland, Oregon, caught up with things like Emmett Till and the civil rights cruelty and hideous events of the fifties. And we took it very seriously in the way that

only people who live a long way from reality could do so. I guess it would be fair to call us civil righteous. We did things like subscribe to the *Petal Paper*, a little weekly newspaper published in Petal, Mississippi, by a character named P. D. East, who used to write things that'd offend Mississippians to their soul. But he developed quite a following around country. You could kind of demonstrate your bona fides as a civil rights supporter by being a subscriber. And be at big rallies when there was something like the Emmett Till murder.

So we came full of virtue. So much so that at the time, people like Burke Marshall and Nick Katzenbach [Nicholas de B. Katzenbach] and Robert Kennedy and Archie Cox [Archibald Cox] understood something about law that us easy, sanctimonious, virtuous types didn't understand. In other words, you can't force law down people's throats. It took time for us to begin to understand. It took more than just Federal court orders or winning lawsuits. They probably had as hard a time with people on the left being so impatient, so demanding, so imperious about why don't you make this happen? as they did with the racists on the right. I would guess that was probably a powerful lesson for a twenty-five-year-old to learn. Just because you have won the election, because you're sitting there in those seats of power, that doesn't mean you can say, do this and do that, and it will be done.

[-6-]

DAITCH: Do you think that, based on your experience in Justice and with interactions with the civil rights community, obviously there was a huge contingent of civil rights activists who did not understand that. But do you think that some of the more mature civil rights activists were well aware of the limitations of government?

ROSENTHAL: For sure. And step back half a step from that, I think they also understood that they had to be the point of the spear. It was their lives, it was their history, it was their culture, and their intelligence and their fire. We talk about the contributions we made to the civil rights movement. Sure. But we were instrumentality figures. We helped along the ultimate transformation of a caste system that had been created here for 300 and some years, all of it but minor instrumentalities, compares with people who put their lives on the line regularly. People who ranged from Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.], Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Fred Shuttlesworth, and innumerable others; to guys like John Lewis and Vernon Jordan; and then to people like Freedom Jones whom I met during the Selma to Montgomery March in '65. Freedom Jones was a sharecropper who had the most dazzling smile because his two top front teeth were gold, but they had . . . they were cut out in the shape of stars. So there are these two white stars in these two gold teeth. And when he smiled, you knew it.

We met some amazing, strong, some not so strong,.... But what an extraordinary introduction. One of the most moving moments of my life, this is getting a little beyond the JFK years, but during the Selma March, I was in charge of federal press relations. So I walked that distance twice . . . ran some of it. [Laughter] The second or third night out we marchers camped in a field in Lowndes County, which was known for its violence against uppity blacks. And the buzz on the march was that maybe Martin Luther King would come to visit the march that night. And sure enough, as the campsite was being established in a farm

field, flatbed trucks were brought up, microphones set up, big speakers brought out. And as we, the marchers, arrived, you just saw streaming over the hillsides from every direction hundreds of people, women in flour-sack dresses pulling little kids; farmers in overalls with battered hats; but just streaming slowly across the fields. And in the fading light to come toward this sight. . . .

Then a helicopter came, and it brought Martin Luther King who . . . and by now spotlights are set up. And I'm standing halfway back in this great circle of several thousand people. And right next to me was this young black woman, holding onto one little child and trying to balance a little kid in her arms, and she couldn't manage them both, and they're starting to squall, and people are shushing her. So I took the little kid and put him up on my shoulders. And she gave me kind of a bashful, nervous look. What interested me about it was the child, probably maybe three, spent the entire time, paying no attention to Martin Luther King, playing with my hair. And it dawned on me at that moment that that was the closest that child had ever been to a white person's hair. It made an indelible impression.

I could talk about a couple of . . . three things I guess I'd like to mention: One is an aspect for the Kennedy Administration that I think has never gotten adequate attention or credit was criminal justice. I don't mean crime. Robert Kennedy once said, he was

[-7 -]

determined that this become not just the department of prosecution but truly be the Department of Justice. And that began very early. September '61, the department started its first two halfway houses for people who'd been in prison to gradually integrate them back into society. It was a revolutionary idea at the time. It sounds old hat by now. But that was the first. They started in September and then two more later on.

In March of, let's see, in '63, we started drafting the Economic Opportunity Act, which arose out of Robert Kennedy's preoccupation with juvenile delinquency and youth crime. Tried to create opportunities for youth instead of just throwing them into jail. And that was his work with David Hackett. But the Economic Opportunity Act, which was finally passed in '64, was the prototype for the War on Poverty. Lyndon Johnson picked that up and really ran with it.

In May of '64 while Robert was still at Justice, we organized the first national Bail Conference to reform the use of bail around the country. Probably about three weeks before he left the department, Robert created the first Office of Criminal Justice in the department, which later grew into Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. Now it's spread out into a whole lot of parts of the government. And probably a week before he left, Congress passed the Criminal Justice Act of 1964, which guaranteed people the right to lawyers in federal cases, legislating, putting into statute, what the Supreme Court had, in effect, said in the *Gideon v. Wainright* Case about the right to counsel.

Probably . . . lots has been said about immigration, and I don't think I need to. One thing that I don't know if the Library knows much about (I know when I was there last they didn't seem to) was how the Library was financed. At that time, maybe it's still true, there were three sources; three different institutions were created at the same time. One was the Museum, one was the Library, and the third was the Institute of Politics which is now part of

the JFK School. The government would pay for the operations of the Library but not for its creation. I think that's true in the case of the Clinton Library also.

Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] was made in charge of raising the private money, and he came over one day to talk about having a mock groundbreaking so they could have silver shovels, and they could have a fund-raising PR campaign and so on.

DAITCH: Was this after the site was already decided upon?

ROSENTHAL: No, no, long before.

DAITCH: This was long before.

ROSENTHAL: And he hired a public relations man named Tom Degan [Thomas Degan]. They came to pronounce this created event as a media op, and I was kind of offended by it because it seemed to me such blatant press agency. Especially when an architect hadn't been selected and because we didn't know where it was going to be.

DAITCH: Oh, so this was really early.

ROSENTHAL: This was sort of a mock stunt. But Smith was impatient to get rolling,

[-8-]

and I don't blame him because you wanted to . . . there was a lot of public sympathy that you didn't want to dissipate. So what I suggested was instead of doing that, what if we got . . . Back up a half a step. The *Today Show* had wanted to do some kind of display, a show of JFK artifacts like the coconut on which he'd scratched the risky message and so on, the rocking chair and so on. And I'd somehow gotten involved in helping assemble the stuff. There's some memos here in the file from me to the Attorney General saying, You want to do this? You want to do that? And they did that. And it was a very successful. . . . They had like five or six things. And then it occurred to me there was so much interest in that, what if we made a museum-type exhibition out of JFK memorabilia like those and have a big black-tie thing in Washington to kick it off? And then send it on tour to a lot of museums around the country. So that it wouldn't just be a few rich people in the Northeast donating to do this. But people all over the country could participate if they wanted to.

DAITCH: Sure.

ROSENTHAL: And if the rich people in Philadelphia or in Los Angeles wanted to have a black-tie opening, good, and they could charge a lot for that. But then the show would be there for ordinary people to come.

DAITCH: Great idea.

ROSENTHAL: Well, that worked out.

DAITCH: So that happened?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, it did. In fact, it opened in New York just before what would have been JFK's forty-seventh birthday in May. They got the space in then new IBM Building at Fifty-seventh and Madison, that huge, atrium space, which was a great success. Somehow I got to be the person who was responsible for this, and they sent me daily reports of how much money had been collected that day for the I guess it was a bank in Boston. And in the six months from. . . . Let's see, all totaled, the total had gone to \$3,950,000 from 390,000 people.

DAITCH: Wow!

ROSENTHAL: And I'm really proud of the 390,000 people. I made myself some notes at the time. The opening reception in New York was at the St. Regis Hotel up on the roof. There were crowds lining the street anticipating that Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and the Attorney General would come in. There were police everywhere. The reception was pretty small with about a hundred people: Eugene Black, head of the World Bank; Pydie Gimbel; all members of the family except Teddy who was in Europe. I was standing in this little circle talking to a few people, and over came Rose Kennedy [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] in a white suit and hat and long white kid gloves. She came over, and she extended her hand and introduced herself. "I'm Mrs.

[-9 -]

Kennedy, the president's mother," she said with a grim look. She shook hands lightly, and then she went on to the next circle doing her courteous duty. . . . What else were we talking about? Do you want some grand JFK stories?

DAITCH: Actually, yes. Absolutely. I have a list of questions, and maybe you. . . . You have such a nice set of memories from what you've been reviewing. Let's go with that. And then if I have anything left over. . . .

ROSENTHAL: All right. I've got a couple or three I can just pass on.

DAITCH: Okay.

ROSENTHAL: This would have been on a rainy Sunday in September of 1964. It was a meeting about the Library. Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman], who'd been White House counselor, had come over with a draft of his book, *A Nation of Immigrants*, and Bob asked me to review it. I think maybe it was Feldman who helped JFK compile it. So then people just started chatting. And Bob was talking for the first time, this is now September '64, he was talking kind of nostalgically about his brother for the

first time in my experience. And he told a story about how JFK had made a . . . something JFK had said to Dave Powers [David F. Powers] on a 1963 trip to Ireland. On the campaign trail in this country, JFK used to note that “the nuns would holler and the priests would stand with their arms crossed looking sullen.” [Laughter] But when they got to Ireland, even the monsignors were waving and hollering. Powers said, JFK turned to him, and he said, “So all the pricks moved to America.” [Laughter]

DAITCH: Are these notes that you’re looking at from some sort of a journal that you kept?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I, like all of us, promised myself I would keep a diary. And I probably kept it often enough to qualify for a quarterly. But there were some notes that I had that . . . maybe every month or so I’d write something down. Well, this isn’t exactly a JFK story. But during the rioting at Ole Miss (in 1962) there were probably 500 marshals armed, most of them, with just billy clubs and maybe a few service revolvers, and here was a murderous crowd outside. It was my first time. . . .

DAITCH: You were there?

ROSENTHAL: No, I was in. . . . Guthman was at Ole Miss. I was at the other end of the phone in Washington. In fact that was my first personal contact with the President. When they published the first transcripts of White House phone logs, I was startled to discover that this phone call from me to the White House was the very first one.

DAITCH: Really!

[-10-]

ROSENTHAL: Truly. They’d just started the taping system. It was like four or five o’clock in the morning. I was there manning our phones. And a French reporter name Paul Guihard had been killed by the rioters. And I just heard that and called the White House to pass that word along, and the President answered the phone which first of all I didn’t believe it was him. The usual kind of misunderstanding. I said, “Cut the crap, you old bastard,” thinking it was the reporter next door.

DAITCH: So those were your first words to the President.

ROSENTHAL: Right. [Laughter] How did I get into that? What were we talking about?

DAITCH: You said you were reporting the death of. . . . How did that conversation go? I’m sure we have the recording, but. . . .

ROSENTHAL: He said, “Mr. Rosenthal?” [Laughter] And he said, “Yes, you work for my brother, don’t you?” “Yes.” And he said, “How’s he doing?” He couldn’t have been more disarming... Just miscellaneous little memories: November 20, 1963, was the night of the Judicial Reception at the White House, annual Judicial Reception for the Supreme Court. It was also Robert Kennedy’s birthday.

DAITCH: Right.

ROSENTHAL: So it was nonstop celebratory things all day. Black tie, state dinner at the White House for this reception. Not a state dinner, a reception with black tie. My then wife’s first time in the White House, which for me by then was pretty standard stuff. It wasn’t a thrill to be in the White House anymore, but for her it was an amazing thrill, and to meet the President! And she got all dolled up and etc. And as we finished going through the receiving line, she just looked up and said, “He’s beautiful. . . .”

DAITCH: [Laughter] That seems to be a common reaction.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, I know, I was talking about lists. At one point Guthman had called Kennedy; we were on a speaker phone. And at that point the crowd was moving in on the Lyceum Building where the marshals were guarding James Meredith.

DAITCH: You mean Bob Kennedy.

ROSENTHAL: And Ed said to Robert Kennedy, Now he knew what the people at the Alamo must have felt like. And Robert Kennedy said, “Well, you know what happened to those guys.” [Laughter]

[-11-]

DAITCH: Oh, my God! That was mean. But all’s well that ends well.

ROSENTHAL: That was the kind of humor that I guess we all traded in, and maybe still.

DAITCH: Well, tell me what it was like. . . . Sort of just generally, can you kind of recollect the atmosphere, describe it for me a little bit in Justice. I mean it sounds like you were quite close to Bob Kennedy’s office.

ROSENTHAL: Yes.

DAITCH: And you saw him frequently probably.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes. Yes. We were all on the fifth floor corridor of the Justice

Department. . . . This is a building built when the Federal Triangle was created in the 1930's in a Mussolini [Benito Mussolini] mausoleum style, marble. The fifth floor corridor was like triple height with 30-foot high ceilings, with frosted Venetian glass across the tops, marble pillars every now and then. Marble floors. Very solemn and echoing. Robert Kennedy's office was 5111 on the left side of the hall . . . Ed's office was 5110 on the right side. My office was 5114 on the right side. And if anybody was walking down the hall, you heard them from about a mile away. You could always tell when somebody from the FBI was coming because they had to come all the way down the hall. It was a place where you would imagine people with three-piece suits being somewhat hushed. So it was occasionally interesting to see the Attorney General come with his huge dog, Brumus, a St. Bernard.

DAITCH: A Saint, really!

ROSENTHAL: A Newfoundland. And now and then some of us would go out in the hall. It was the time when. . . . Do you remember a toy called the Super Ball? It was a ball about the size of a squash ball which bounced, had an amazing bounce to it. So some of us, including the Attorney General at one point, got into a game in the hallway, bouncing this thing down the hall. It was a very much shirtsleeve atmosphere. It was extremely hard-working. It was also un-competitive in the sense that later environments I worked in with people who worked together were also trying to nudge each other out of the way or be in favor. That was I'm sure true to some extent. But it was at least courteous and generally friendly. We were all very close.

DAITCH: You hear so many things about the Kennedy Family, all the siblings being very competitive. Did Bob Kennedy do anything to. . . .?
[Change to Side B of Tape]

ROSENTHAL: In terms of the family, I only saw him in just obviously in relationship with JFK, a somewhat closer relationship with Teddy. And that was

[-12-]

not at all competitive. That was congenial and supportive. And there was a fair amount of overlap between the staffs. We all knew each other and all sort of felt part of the very much extended family.

DAITCH: What do you mean overlap? I wondered about that because. . . .

ROSENTHAL: Well, someone like Milton Gwirtzman, whom I'd known in college. He was a couple of years ahead of me at Harvard. Ended up as a speechwriter for Ted Kennedy at the same time I was a speechwriter for Robert Kennedy. And we all knew Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] in the White House who were writing for John Kennedy. And often enough when you needed a joke for a speech or you wondered about a quote, this

was the time before there was any email, you'd call each other up. I remember compiling a book of quotes which I shared with these others.

DAITCH: Quotes from?

ROSENTHAL: Well, some of them JFK quotes and others. Things from their own reading.

DAITCH: Do you still have that?

ROSENTHAL: I do.

DAITCH: That would be fun to have at the Library. We may already, but. . . .

ROSENTHAL: I doubt it. There were probably only three copies of it. See those two little green notebooks over there on the second shelf?

DAITCH: Yes.

ROSENTHAL: That's that. I guess the other part of it that probably seemed more heroic then than it does now was the hours. We really worked long and hard. Robert was, for somebody with such a good sense of humor, such a wry sense of humor, very serious about work. He didn't fool around. I guess I should share with you one other anecdote while I'm thinking about speechwriting. This may be the all-time ghostwriter story. My father was a judge in Germany until Jewish judges lost their popularity and he ended up, a long story, in this country. He became a bookkeeper and then an accountant. The summer that I graduated from Harvard, he came home one day with two armloads of enormous books; he'd enrolled in night law school. "Why have you done this?" my mother said. "At age fifty you're going to practice law?" "No. I just want to show the sons of bitches that I was a person of consequence."

Four years later he had graduated first in his class in this little night law school. I had just gone to work in the Justice Department. So I asked the Attorney General, would he be willing to write my father a congratulatory letter. He said, "Of course. You know the facts.

[-13-]

Why don't you draft something?" So I did. It said something like how proud this country is of people like my father who come here and do so well. And then when he signed it, he added in his spidery handwriting, and how proud my father should be of the contribution that his son was making to the American government. I loved it. Couldn't have asked for a nicer message. Off the letter went.

The following Sunday was Father's Day. So I had an excuse to call. My father said, "The most wonderful thing has happened and the most terrible thing." "What's that?" He said, "Well, I got this amazing letter from the Attorney General. I'm the envy of my classmates. You didn't have anything to do with that, did you? Never mind. I have a

problem.” “What’s the problem?” “I have to answer this wonderful letter. Would you draft something for me?” [Laughter]

DAITCH: That’s cute. And so did you?

ROSENTHAL: I did. [Laughter]

DAITCH: Double ghostwriting. That’s funny. I’ve heard all these nice stories about Bob Kennedy being, I don’t know. . . . I don’t know how well you knew President Kennedy. But in terms of comparing, and obviously there are always comparisons which are not necessarily fair. . . .

ROSENTHAL: I hardly knew the President. I encountered him socially on a few occasions.

DAITCH: Well, without comparing him to the President, from what I’ve read and heard, he was a genuinely sensitive person in terms. . . . I mean obviously he also had this reputation for being rather tough on organized crime and so forth. But the sensitivity to say . . . to write a nice little hand note at the bottom of this little letter to your father and that sort of thing.

ROSENTHAL: Well, you mentioned sensitivity. One of the things I looked up in one of the notebooks, I found a story. George Tames was the famous *New York Times* photographer who took the memorable picture of JFK in silhouette looking over his desk with the Oval Office windows in the background. This was in Hickory Hill one Sunday at what RFK called a working breakfast or whatever. And Tames was there to take a shirt-sleeved picture of him. And afterward he sat down with us for coffee. And he told us a story about his little boy who had gotten a hold of a cigar the night before, gotten very sick, and had lost his cookies all the way to the bathroom. And the rest of us responded with a kind of amusement that I think George intended us to have from the story. But to my somewhat surprise, Robert leaned forward very intent, and he asked him, “Poor little fellow, how is he? Is he better?”

DAITCH: Aww...

ROSENTHAL: So these surprising moments. Just as he would say, “You remember

[-14-]

what happened to those fellows at the Alamo,” you know, another side to his personality. He was really good with kids.

DAITCH: Yes?

ROSENTHAL: And not just his own. You see picture after picture from the campaign.

Or the famous picture of him in Mississippi in a dirt-floor little hovel squatting down to play with the kids. It wasn't just a picture, it wasn't just a photo op because it came natural.

DAITCH: Right. And I had read that he was the same with elderly people or people with disabilities, that sort of thing. Just very compassionate and gentle. And yet he could be so tough. Just an odd kind of juxtaposition.

ROSENTHAL: Yes.

DAITCH: Did you continue, after he left the Justice Department, did you continue to have a relationship with him? Did you see him when he was a senator and so forth?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, yes. He asked me to come. . . . I'll tell the story. I wanted to go with him to the Senate, first to the campaign and then to the Senate. But he said, "No, I can't really leave Katzenbach with nobody around." Well, there was a bright side of that for me because then I was a GS-14 and Nick, who was acting Attorney General for five long, painful months while Johnson kept him dangling, Nick said, "Just because one of us is an Acting doesn't mean both of us have to be. You're director of Public Information as of right now."

DAITCH: Oh!

ROSENTHAL: Which meant a raise from \$15,000 to GS-18, \$24,000 overnight.

DAITCH: Wow!

ROSENTHAL: That was the top of the civil service. And for somebody who was just married and had just had a child . . . actually I hadn't had a child; the child came the following year . . . it was a thrilling moment. But yes I saw RFK from time to time. In fact, I went to ask his advice about several things. And then in '68 he asked me to come work for him in the presidential campaign, which was one of the most tormenting decisions of my life. I said, no. I had just gotten married, and taken a Kennedy fellowship at Harvard and was about to get back to Journalism finally. I was creating *Life Magazine's* urban affairs beat, etc., etc. It didn't work out anyway.

DAITCH: It just wasn't possible.

[-15-]

ROSENTHAL: I found the letter that I wrote him in these files I went over this weekend. Brought it all back all over again. I was right and wrong and right.

DAITCH: Despite not being able to go work full time for his campaign, did you see him occasionally or do any work, speechwriting, things like that?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. For sure, for sure. No, I couldn't do anything overt now that I was back as a journalist.

DAITCH: Oh, I see. Right.

ROSENTHAL: So I at least had to maintain the appearance of neutrality. That didn't mean I lost interest.

DAITCH: Right. And how was he. . . . you know there's this whole thing about this deep depression that he went into after his brother was killed. What was your experience of, you know, just seeing him and being around him?

ROSENTHAL: Well, we surely saw all of that. I guess one thing that I was struck by was how much reading he did afterwards. One thing that was true of Robert Kennedy was he never had any money. You didn't dare go off anywhere with him unless you were prepared to pay for the cab fare and to buy lunch. He would then make up for it in some grand way, unpredictable and eloquent. When I got married, he and Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] sent me the most amazing Steuben crystal. You didn't mind paying for lunch.

DAITCH: Right.

ROSENTHAL: But the other thing was he also . . . you couldn't ever trust him with a book. [Laughter] Because he would read it, he would devour it and make notes all over it. Then he left it out in the rain at Hickory Hill. And you'd get it back a year later warped. But he really did read a lot and remembered things from his reading. It was said, I don't know this, but it was said that Jackie got him to read Aeschalus and Edith Hamilton. And he quoted from them a fair amount. I found myself reading Edith Hamilton just so that I could keep up with what he was saying. "What did she say about. . . ?" So rather than depressed, I guess I would say deeply introspective. I guess that's as good an answer as I can give.

DAITCH: Yes. Was it pretty clear to you pretty quickly that he was going to leave Justice sooner rather than later?

ROSENTHAL: Well, that's interesting. I'll tell you something I don't know if anybody knows this: December . . . maybe ten days after the assassination,

December of '63, a dozen or so of us who were close were called into the Attorney General's office. There wasn't going to be a Christmas party that year for understandable reasons. But he wanted to give us something. So he gave each of us a little blue box from Tiffany. And inside were gold cufflinks with the Department of Justice seal engraved on them, on each one. On the back it said, "RFK to JR, 1961 to 1963." It occurred to me that you cannot get twelve or fourteen sets of cufflinks so engraved by Tiffany in ten days. This had to have been in the works way before the assassination. So what did that mean? It meant he was preparing to leave Justice. And the widespread rumors at that time were that his secretary, Angie Novello, had already been at the State Department measuring for curtains. I don't know if that's true or not. I just know the objective evidence was it said, "'61 to '63."

DAITCH: That's interesting.

ROSENTHAL: So I think the chances are that he would have gone somewhere, and ended up staying in Justice longer because he would have had this relationship to work out with LBJ, which isn't . . . there's a lot written about that already.

DAITCH: Right. Any comments just from your personal experience of this relationship with LBJ?

ROSENTHAL: Oh, I can't add anything to what people who were closer to them know. I know how impressed I was by how diplomatically and intelligently Nick Katzenbach handled that. There was a . . . one of the great tormenting experiences in the history of the department was when the department was discovered in the Fred Black [Fred B. Black, Jr.] tax case to have been illegally wiretapping or electronic eavesdropping. Not on phone conversations but on bugs. And we were then summoned to the Supreme Court . . . this had to be submitted to the Supreme Court. There arose this fire storm about whether J. Edgar Hoover had done this, the FBI had done this, without permission. And what does that say about the FBI and its general practices in a time when the FBI's civil rights credentials were much questioned anyway? Versus the FBI saying, "But this was authorized by the Attorney General." "Well, so show us where he authorized this." "Well, it was verbal. These were not things you talked about."

Well, by that time Nick was the acting Attorney General, and he had to say something to the Supreme Court. So what did he say? He said, "I honestly believe that the Attorney General did not give his approval, but that the FBI director thought he had. [Laughter] I'm not quite doing justice to the line he said. He was about as good as one could do when you're caught in the middle that way. Johnson pressing him from one direction and RFK pressing from the other direction. How Nick was caught between those two is a story that will be told one day, first at Justice and then at the State Department where RFK became a passionate foe of the Vietnam involvement, and Johnson was stuck with it, and Nick was Undersecretary of State. And Johnson would ask him to go and see if we can't get Kennedy to do X,Y,Z and so on. And I don't want to say anything more. That's for the LBJ Library.

DAITCH: Yes. Both maybe. I'm enjoying talking about Bob Kennedy because we do collect, you know, Bob Kennedy's papers. And we have an oral history program specifically dedicated to him. But a lot of what I'm doing now is about both.

ROSENTHAL: It overlaps.

DAITCH: Yes, it overlaps. And speaking of the wiretaps, I was talking to Andrew Young the other day. You know he said basically that they didn't . . . that obviously they knew, especially after a certain point, that they were under surveillance. But at the same time they never made any secret about the things that they were planning to do. And I take it that Ambassador Young was probably the person who sort of spearheaded that sort of information to Justice and in local areas, too. When they were planning the march to Birmingham, they would get together with officials in Birmingham and say, This is what we're planning to do, these are our goals, and so on. What is your . . . I mean do you remember or did you have much involvement with those sorts of relationships with especially SCLC but other civil rights organizations?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I know that what dealings I had with Andy Young were always sensible and straightforward and reasonable. I can remember when we first . . . The President sent Ramsey Clark and John Doar and me to Montgomery at the time of the Selma, and at the time. . . I had a little piece of it. I was in charge of press relations for whichever reporters wanted to cover the march and trying to get security for them. On the first night there, some of the more grandiose, windy black leaders were carrying on and demonstrating. And they obviously had not made much in the way of plans. And it soon became obvious that all of this huffing and puffing, the purpose of it all, was to get the federal government to pay for the food trucks and the security, and so it was carefully staged to do that. Well, it wasn't going to happen, and we had to make that clear. We were there to see the law was enforced, not to manage this. Nobody thought a thing about how the reporters were going to get their stories to the papers. Well, there are pay phones. Well, there were only three pay phones in fifty miles.

DAITCH: Sounds like a rural area.

ROSENTHAL: When you have fifty or a hundred reporters and each of them only spends ten minutes on the phone, they're going to be in line for six hours.

DAITCH: Right.

ROSENTHAL: Anyway, so I couldn't make sense out of this inner group because they were all showing off to each other. I took Andy on the side afterwards, and we worked it out in five minutes. Very sensible and smart. And then there was the young Jesse Jackson. It was really interesting. He was then just a

functionary. He hadn't yet gone to Chicago. He hadn't yet created . . . what was the name of his project?

DAITCH: Operation Breadbasket?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, right. Keep hope alive. He couldn't have been much older than I was then.

DAITCH: He was a young man, yes. Do you remember anything about the . . . ? The wiretapping, I think, was a big deal and sort of. . . . I mean obviously now these many years later it's an embarrassment and this horrible thing. But at the time, you know, there were genuine concerns about Communism. Did you get the impression that anyone in Justice really believed that there was any connection with, say, I don't know if you remember the Stan Levison [Stanley Levison]-Jack Revell thing. Did anyone really believe that there was a potential problem there, that there was some big connection with the civil rights movement and communism?

ROSENTHAL: That's a complicated question, and there have been pretty authoritative pages written about it. From my perspective, it was very secret. Not because anybody on the Justice side thought there was anything to it, but because we were afraid the civil rights movement would get smeared if this information got used in a lot of ways. I hope this is not an irresponsible thing to say even these years later. But I think there were people who feared . . . who believed that there were those in the FBI who were so offended by what was going on, that they would not have shrunk from . . . in fact there may have been some information passed to members of Congress to justify surveillance, microphones on the desk.

I know for a fact that there was an occasion when Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee], then the bureau chief of *Newsweek*, was called into, he and maybe some other reporters, were called into the assistant director's office at the FBI and were played a tape made of King with a woman in a hotel room in Georgia somewhere as a way of tainting him.

DAITCH: Right. Nasty stuff. You were in the South a fair amount, I guess, at least a few times.

ROSENTHAL: Yes.

DAITCH: I think there was certainly a perception, and it seems to be accurate from the evidence that we know, that the FBI agents in the South, many of them were from the South and were very sympathetic with the segregationists. And they were not only not helpful, they were . . . what's the word I'm looking for?

ROSENTHAL: Obstructive?

[-19-]

DAITCH: Obstructive and even participatory in some cases in terms of the things that the law enforcement, the local law enforcement people, were doing.

ROSENTHAL: I'm sure that's right. But I think it's very hard to generalize. That is, there's probably a spectrum of possibilities. For sure law enforcement people have sympathies with law enforcement people. It doesn't have to have a racial element to it necessarily, not *qua* racial. That is, you stick up for your soul brothers in the. . . . It is also true that the bureau had some deep-plant sources among the Klan and other racist groups, notable example, as the moral complexity of this began to get intensified. The last day of the Selma March, the night after the march ended, John Doar and I were having dinner in the Elite Cafe in Montgomery when an FBI agent came and got us and said, A woman named Viola Gregg Liuzzo had just been shot in her maroon Corvair on Highway 80. That's a whole other chapter. But it turned out she'd been shot from a passing car with four white men, one of whom was named Gary Edward Rowe, who was a successfully persuasive good ole boy, but in fact was a deep cover agent for the FBI.

DAITCH: Really!

ROSENTHAL: I've forgotten now. It was very complicated. Was he going to be tried for being an accessory to murder or other crimes that had been committed with his knowledge? And was it right for him to let crimes go on when he knew they were going to happen, and he could happen to do that without either putting himself in danger or blowing his cover? The only point I'm making is that the morals . . . the ethics of the situation were probably a lot more complicated than they seemed from a crystalline historical point of view.

DAITCH: Sure. Very much so. Switching gears, in another interview that I looked at, Bob Lewis. . . . No, it was Paul Southwick. He talked about a set of documents that he compiled. He was trying to develop, on a regular basis, a progress report for the administration, and he mentioned you in particular, that you had been helpful with that. Do you remember anything about I guess passing along the information in terms of summaries of what progress Justice was making in certain areas?

ROSENTHAL: Remind me who Paul Southwick is.

DAITCH: He had one of those sort of anomalous positions. I don't know if he ever even had a formal title in this regard. But he was in the White House. He was, I think, one of those special assistant-type people. And I suppose he was tasked with this.

ROSENTHAL: In Pierre's office? It's still only coming back to me that there was a beginning of a PR operation. It wasn't news management. It was more like professional public relations.

[-20-]

DAITCH: Right. And I think it was sort of late in the administration. It started coming together late in the administration, I think. And something that Johnson apparently found very useful.

ROSENTHAL: Is that the kind of thing? [showing something]

DAITCH: Something like that, yes.

ROSENTHAL: You're welcome to that. I have another copy of it.

DAITCH: Oh, great! Thank you. Yes, that's terrific. *Chronology of Significant Events in the Department of Justice*. I think this is exactly what he was talking about. With an eye toward the coming election.

ROSENTHAL: I did have another one that came from the Katzenbach years.

DAITCH: Oh, terrific. Yes, this is wonderful. These are the kinds of. . . . I don't want to take up too much of your time. But is there anything else that you can think of, sort of anecdotal things or of the people that you were. . . . I mean, as you said, somebody. . . . I think this has been attributed to a couple of different people so I don't know what the source was. . . . but the term "a Band of Brothers."

ROSENTHAL: Well, Ed Guthman made that the title of his book, his recollections of this time. The only thing I would say is when we all went back a couple of years ago to just the building, invited to this renaming as the Robert F. Kennedy Justice Department Building, it was a remarkably gracious thing of President Bush [George W. Bush], W. Bush, to do. And it was the last, maybe the last, reunion of that circle. It was quite a touching time; also a hilarious time. Because the first thing I noticed when we went into the Great Hall where the ceremony. . . . The President came and made welcome remarks. In that art deco building, in this great marble hall, it was built at the time that the wonder metal was aluminum. In fact they bragged about having metal aluminum window frames and radiator covers.

And in the Great Hall is this giant, maybe 12-foot statue made of aluminum with a bare-breasted figure of Justice holding scales. [Laughter] And it was always a joke to go through that lobby where, that Great Hall, except this time she wasn't there. Well, yes, she was. But she was swathed in blue cloth. [Laughter] Attorney General Ashcroft [John Ashcroft], offended by the thought that these large aluminum breasts would be projecting over the President's head when he was making his speech [Laughter] had her curtained her off.

DAITCH: Suave. . . . That's funny. Oh, my gosh. I suppose those stories about, you know, the very serious nature of what you were doing at the time. But yet the fun and the Super Ball.

ROSENTHAL: Yes. I tell you, Vicki, the aspect of this that really touches me is, and is

[-21-]

recurrent now increasingly, my then wife used to say, we'd go to a party, and she'd say, "Well, once again we're the youngest persons there." And I may have been the youngest person there. And the idea that I who was a peripheral figure, who was the young assistant, sort of an outlying person, might end up being the one of the last members of all this is jolting and makes me feel really inadequate to it. I wish I knew more.

DAITCH: Well, that's what these things are about, to try to create some sort of record that people can learn from, listen to, develop analyses. Speaking of (and this will be a last question; I know you probably need to go), but speaking of developing analyses, can you . . . this may be a grandiose question . . . but anything in particular that you can think of in terms of speaking to the legacy of John Kennedy or Bob Kennedy, you know, things that we might want to be thinking about now as we move ahead?

ROSENTHAL: I mentioned briefly criminal justice. There's been lots written on the organized crime side, economic side, civil rights side. But it may be that fifty or a hundred years from now what will be the most important . . . not the most important but one of the signal achievements of the era that they began was paying attention to the rights of defendants in a way that. . . . I know I've said this before, when somebody got arrested, of course they got thrown into jail unless they could pay a million dollars in bail. Of course they didn't get a lawyer. And of course we didn't think about the system of administration of justice. And of course it's just open government to put out a press release announcing somebody they've just indicted. Screw them if they couldn't answer back. These were just the way things were done. It was the standard when I'd been a legal reporter in Portland, Oregon, and these were the transcendent national values. You just stayed on the right side of the law; and if the police came and got you, you had to be bad.

DAITCH: Right. You must have been bad. Do you think that is . . . was that something that came directly from Bob Kennedy? I mean he. . . .

ROSENTHAL: No, not just him.

DAITCH: Who?

ROSENTHAL: Partly him and partly Nick Katzenbach who was deeply involved in

criminal justice when he was teaching at Chicago. But these were things that Bobby felt. This was not something that he just did for effect or didn't really bother about. He cared about these things.

DAITCH: That would be a good place to end. I really appreciate your. . . .
[Pause] One last word.

ROSENTHAL: When, at the beginning of September of '64 when Robert Kennedy was leaving the Department of Justice, we had a goodbye party for

[-22-]

him at the Federal City Club. It was then at the back of the Sheraton-Carlton Hotel. And there were a lot of gags and funny songs. And Jim McShane [James J.P. McShane] and Harold Reis tried to do a New York accent with a Boston accent. But the toast was given by Burke Marshall, who was one of a dozen extraordinary, smart, visionary people in the Justice Department; he was the head of the Civil Rights Division. And he said something that just stopped everybody in the room. He said, "I just have a one-sentence toast." And he raised his glass. "To Robert Kennedy, who brought out the best in all of us."

DAITCH: Oh, yes. . . . And everybody agreed with that.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes . . . oh, yes.

DAITCH: I'm fascinated by that. I mean he was Robert Kennedy, and he's this big myth, you know, for people of my generation. He was only what? thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight years old?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, he was born in 1925.

DAITCH: Yes. I mean most of you were young, too. But how does a man that age, he's just a kid really, command that much. . . ?

ROSENTHAL: It's a very interesting question, and it wasn't limited to the Justice Department. If you go back when he became counsel to the Senate Rackets Committee, that would have been probably 1957 when he was thirty-two years old, and he thought that was a sinecure accomplished by his brother, he soon developed a cadre of reporters around the country . . . Clark Mollenhoff in Des Moines, Ed Guthman in Seattle, Wally Turner in Portland, and on and on and on, probably ten. . . . Oh, Seigenthaler [John Seigenthaler], Nashville . . . maybe ten or fifteen reporters who were a team or a fan club. And they were all older men compared to a thirty-two-year-old Robert Kennedy.

Think of the fierce devotion they had to him. Why? Because he was a stand-up person. He didn't take any bullshit. If people tried to make excuses to him, he was really nasty to them. I was in the room on occasion when people tried to find excuses for not having

done what they'd agreed to do, and he would really wither them. But he also did exactly what he said he was going to do, and he did it honestly. There are some remarkable examples. Very early in his administration at Justice, they had won the Indiana primary largely because the mayor of Gary, George Chacheris, had organized for them. Several months later the Tax Division, I think it was the Tax Division, came in with a criminal tax case against George Chacheris, and I think the lawyers there half expected that it would get deferred, and it would get muddied. And he said, "Let me think about it." And he did over the weekend. And he came back on Monday, and he said, "Go!"

DAITCH: Wow!

ROSENTHAL: And it was events like, moments like that that made believers out of

[-23-]

people.

DAITCH: Politics is politics, but what's right is right.

ROSENTHAL: Yes.

DAITCH: But he understood politics, too. I suppose maybe John Kennedy was more the political animal, but clearly. . . .

ROSENTHAL: Of course. And if George Chacheris' crime had been a misdemeanor, who knows? But also JFK the same way. When . . . I've forgotten the details of this, but Judge James Landis, who had been the first head of the SEC, I believe, a federal judge, been a great friend of their father, had been kind of an avuncular figure to them growing up, in his dotage some, I've forgotten if it was a tax case or some criminal thing. . . . And it was another test of would they do the right thing? And they agonized about it, and I think it dragged on for a week. But they finally let it go ahead.

DAITCH: And the same for the civil rights, you know, knowing that it had a lot of potential to hurt politically to support civil rights in various cases.

ROSENTHAL: Oh, well, yes, talk about. . . . Lyndon Johnson said on the day he signed the Voting Rights Act, that Voting Rights Act of '65, he said something like (I wasn't there, but this was reported), "This is the right thing to do, but it would cost the Democratic Party for the next thirty years." And he was wrong. It's been fifty.

DAITCH: Exactly. Yes. Well, okay.

ROSENTHAL: We're done.

DAITCH: You're sure? I'm happy to listen.

ROSENTHAL: Yes, we're done.

DAITCH: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-24-]

Jacob "Jack" Rosenthal Oral History Transcript – JFK #1
Name List

A

Albright, Joseph 2
Albright, Madeleine 2
Ashcroft, John 21

B

Bennett, James B. 3
Black, Eugene Robert 9
Black, Fred B., Jr. 17
Brademas, John 2
Bradlee, Benjamin C. 19
Bush, George W. 21

C

Chacheris, George 23,24
Clark, Ramsey 18
Cox, Archibald 6

D

Degan, Thomas 8
Doar, John M. 18,20
Dole, Liddy 2

E

East, P.D. 6
Eisenhower, Dwight D. 4

F

Feldman, Myer 10

G

Gimbel, Pydie 9
Goodwin, Richard N. 13
Guihard, Paul 11
Guthman, Edwin O. 1-3,5,6,10-12,21,23
Gwirtzman, Milton S. 2,13

H

Hackett, David L. 8
Halberstam, Michael 2

Hamilton, Edith 16
Hatcher, Andrew J. 3
Hoover, J. Edgar 17
Hunt, E. Howard 4

I

Iselin, Jay 2

J

Jackson, Jesse 7,18
Johnson, Lyndon B. 6,8,15,17,21,24
Jones, Freedom 7
Jordan, Vernon E., Jr. 7

K

Karmin, Monroe 5,6
Katzenbach, Nicholas de B. 6,15,17,21,22
Kennedy, Edward M. 2,9,12,13
Kennedy, Ethel Skakel 16
Kennedy, Jacqueline Bouvier 9,16
Kennedy, John F. 1,5,9,10,12-14,22
Kennedy, Robert F. 1,3,5-8,10-18,21-23
Kennedy, Rose Fitzgerald 9,10
Kilduff, Malcolm M. 3
King, Martin Luther, Jr. 7,19
Knebel, Fletcher 5

L

Landis, James M. 24
Levison, Stanley 19
Lewis, Bob 20
Lewis, John L. 7
Liuzzo, Viola Gregg 20

M

Marshall, Burke 6,23
Mathewson, Jody 6
McDermott, Edward A. 4,5
McShane, James J.P. 23
Mollenhoff, Clark R. 23
Mussolini, Benito 12

N

Nixon, Richard M. 4
Novello, Angela M. 17

P

Patterson, Floyd 3
Powers, David F. 10

R

Reagan, Ronald 2
Reis, Harold F. 23
Revell, Jack 19
Rowe, Gary Edward 20

S

Salinger, Pierre E.G. 3,20
Seigenthaler, John 23
Shuttlesworth, Fred L. 7
Smith, Stephen E. 8

Sorensen, Theodore C. 13
Southwick, Paul 20

T

Tames, George 14
Till, Emmett 6
Turner, Wallace 2,23

W

Warren, Earl 4
Warren, Nina 5

Y

Young, Andrew J. 7,18