

John J. Burns, Oral History Interview – RFK#3, 2/25/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: John J. Burns
Interviewer: Roberta W. Greene
Date of Interview: February 25, 1970
Location: New York, New York
Length: 30 pages

Biographical Note

Burns was Mayor of Binghamton, NY (1958-1966); chairman of the New York State Democratic Party (1965-1973); delegate to the Democratic National Convention (1968); and a Robert Kennedy campaign worker (1968). In this interview, he discusses Lyndon Baines Johnson's hostility towards Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) and RFK's associates; and Robert F. Kennedy's involvement in the 1965 New York City mayoral race, the 1966 New York gubernatorial race, and the 1967 New York constitutional convention, among other issues.

Access
Open.

Usage Restrictions

Copyright of these materials have passed to the United States Government upon the death of the interviewee. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any

concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

John J. Burns, recorded interview by Roberta W. Greene, February 25, 1970, (page number), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Project of the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Interview

Of

John J. Burns

Although a legal agreement was not signed during the lifetime of John J. Burns, upon his death, ownership of the recording and transcript of his interview for the Oral History Program passed to the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.

The following terms and conditions apply:

1. The transcript is available for use by researchers.
2. The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.
- 3; Copyright to the interview transcript and tape is assigned to the United States Government.
4. Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request for a fee.
5. Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

John F. Kennedy Library
380 Trapelo Road
Waltham, Mass. 02154

STATEMENT REGARDING THE LISTING AND USE OF THE UNEDITED ORAL
HISTORY TRANSCRIPT OF JOHN J. BURNS

Until I review and edit the transcript of my oral history interview for the Kennedy Library, and sign a statement of agreement governing the terms and conditions of access to and use of the interview, I hereby give permission to the Library to include the interview among its published list of holdings. It is understood that the transcript and tape will not be made available to anyone without my specific written permission. Should I not review the transcript of the interview during my lifetime, all rights in it will immediately pass to the Kennedy Library.

Signed: _____

John J. Burns

Date: _____

3/7/74

John J. Burns—RFK#3

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
68	1965 leadership fight in the New York State Assembly
71	Becoming New York State Democratic chairman
72	William H. McKeon's relationship with Robert F. Kennedy (RFK)
73	Burns' relationship with the Democratic National Convention
74	Lyndon Baines Johnson's hostility towards RFK and RFK's associates
77	1965 New York City mayoral race
80, 90	1966 New York gubernatorial race
88	1966 New York State Democratic Party convention
91	RFK's relationships with Frank D. O'Connor and Nelson A. Rockefeller
92	1967 New York State constitutional convention
97	RFK's impact on New York State politics

Third of Three Oral History Interviews

with

John J. Burns

February 25, 1970
New York City

By Roberta W. Greene

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

GREENE: Why don't we begin with the leadership fight in '65 and just what your contacts with the Senator [Robert F. Kennedy] were on this?

BURNS: Well, in '65.... Let me put it this way, after the '64 election, when there was a big sweep in the state, the Johnson-Humphrey [Lyndon Baines Johnson; Hubert H. Humphrey] ticket and Senator Kennedy won. They carried in the assembly and the senate for the first time in something like thirty some-odd years—very unusual for us. Prior to that time there had been developing in New York City a big split in the party between Wagner [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] and Steingut [Stanley Steingut], Wagner being the mayor. Steingut emerged as the leader of Brooklyn even though Wagner opposed him and later tried to beat him again. It was a growing thing which continued over a long time.

When Bob Kennedy went into office, his nomination was supported by a lot of the anti-Wagner people. He was also supported by Wagner, although Wagner waited until the eleventh hour before he gave his support to him. Most people think that he really wanted to run himself, that he was chagrined over the situation, and finally decided the only thing he could do would be to support Kennedy because he was going to be nominated anyway by Wagner's enemies. Then there was no more feuding through the campaign.

After the campaign was over, and we found we'd won the assembly and the senate,

then the so-called anti-Wagner forces started maneuvering. We had won a lot of upstate seats in both houses, particularly in the assembly, which we didn't have prior to that. McKeon [William H. McKeon], who was then the state chairman, incidentally, had become estranged

[-68-]

from Wagner too. He had originally been put in there by Wagner. Over the period of time between when he went in, which was around '62, I think it was...

GREENE: I think that's right.

BURNS: ...to that point, why, there was a growing antagonism and he became closer with Steingut and his forces. So, by the time that this election was held, McKeon was very much in the camp of the Steingut people. He and Steingut had a partnership. They organized and fought for votes within the Democratic caucus of both houses, which caucused and which picked Steingut; the assembly picked Steingut, then the thing fell apart. They also picked Julian Erway [Julian B. Erway]...

GREENE: Frank.... Oh, Erway originally, yeah.

BURNS: ...in the senate. He turned out to be a very lightweight guy, who had no conception of human rights and so forth. He made some ridiculous statements about it, saying, "I like the colored. Every Christmas my maid sends me a Christmas card," or something like that, which was then used to.... When he did that, then some of the senators who had supported him withdrew their support and threw the whole situation wide-open again. Using that as an excuse, the Wagner forces, who were supporting Anthony Travia [Anthony J. Travia], who had been the minority leader, and Joseph Zaretzki [Joseph L. Zaretzki], the senator who'd been nominated—both very fine men, incidentally—then felt that the commitments were off and that it was a new ballgame. They started holding out.

Well, under the rules of the Assembly and the Senate, the whole body must vote, not just the men of one party, to elect a speaker in the Assembly. In other words, if a man doesn't have more than 50 percent of the whole body, even though he has a majority of his own party, he can't be elected. That's essentially what happened week after week after week in both houses. There were all kinds of bargaining sessions that went on; there were accusations back and forth; there were changes in their pacts, putting up different people in the senate, for example. It was a very tough impasse and embarrassing to the Democratic Party. The wheels of government just came to a standstill for about six or seven weeks.

During this period Senator Kennedy was not publicly associated with it. I was not, I was in Binghamton. I know that he was disgusted with it, but I don't know too much about what role he played, except I feel that he didn't direct it or do anything with it. He was merely informed by John English [John F. English] and others of what was going on. He made some efforts to try to correct it. One of them was to have everybody sign a statement that they would abide by a majority decision. Averell Harriman [William Averell Harriman] signed it, Bob Kennedy, and Wagner signed it. Then on the heels of that, Wagner's close

associate, who was then the county leader of New York county, Ray Jones [J. Raymond Jones], came out with a big blast that he'd been offered a deal which was tantamount to bribery...

GREENE: Double lulu?

BURNS: ...double lulu, that's right, and accused McKeon. So, all hell broke loose.

[-69-]

They had a hearing before the State Investigation Commission [New York State Investigation Commission]. It was really a very depressing and embarrassing time for the Democratic Party.

GREENE: Were you present at that session where Jones says this offer was made?

BURNS: No, I was not in any of the sessions. I wasn't in Albany at all during that time. I remained neutral, didn't take sides. I was friendly with everybody. I was the Mayor of Binghamton, just stayed there and minded my own business, except I had to go around Binghamton apologizing for what the Democrats were doing in Albany. Of course, as you know, the impasse was broken by Rockefeller [Nelson A. Rockefeller] swinging Republican votes to Travia and Zaretzki. They made a deal on the sales tax, and that was that.

After that was over that was when McKeon was put in a very untenable position, his side lost.

GREENE: Was that, do you think, the point of Jones' accusations, which apparently were pretty much unfounded, to embarrass McKeon and force him out?

BURNS: Well, it was a tactic I think, as I recall.... [INTERRUPTION] What was the question?

GREENE: That's a good question.

BURNS: Oh, McKeon?

GREENE: Yes, McKeon. Wasn't this whole thing arranged to embarrass him and force him out?

BURNS: Yes. I think, too, it was a tactic to get Mayor Wagner off the hook from the document he had signed. He'd signed a document saying...

GREENE: Saying he'd go, yeah, into the caucus....

BURNS: ...he'd go along with the majority of the caucus. They knew that they would

lose the majority of the caucus. So, then they—I'm guessing this, I don't know—had to have some ostensible, legitimate way to get out of that.

GREENE: At what point did it become clear that they were going to need a new chairman and that you were a likely candidate?

BURNS: I think after the fight was over it became clear. You see, at that time we didn't

[-70-]

have a Governor and there was a lot of patronage that we were going to get for the first time in Albany. When you have a majority of each house there's a lot more patronage than there is for the minority. They were dispensing the patronage around McKeon, without consulting McKeon at all, around the state. They offered me a job. McKeon was just rendered.... He couldn't, for example, have a meeting of party, or a dinner, or anything because half the party wouldn't show up—although I supported him to the end. I would not have run for state chairman if he wanted to stay in, because he was my friend. Nevertheless, he knew himself that he was in a position that was impossible. So, he finally made the decision to get out. During that period Senator Kennedy—I guess not, maybe that would be before.

GREENE: Very casually, I think.

BURNS: At one point Bernard Ruggieri [Bernard J. Ruggieri] called up, who was counsel and still is counsel to Senator Zaretzki, and who was very close to Wagner, and said that the Governor had to appoint a Democratic member of the State Liquor Authority, a pretty good job in terms of money and other benefits but it was a scandal ridden agency. It was always, over the years, being investigated and was not, from that point of view, not too attractive. Nevertheless, at that point in time I was looking around for something better than the Mayor of Binghamton because I have a big family and I couldn't live on the salary. When I was offered that job I called Senator Kennedy. I talked to Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Guthman] first, and then got the Senator on the phone. The Senator said, "Well, don't take that job." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, I want you to be state chairman." He said, "Come to New York. I'll be there a day or two later and we'll talk about it," which I did.

At that time he was in the Carlyle [Carlyle Hotel]. He thought that it could be done. He thought we'd have to have Wagner's support and I should go to Wagner and not tell Wagner that I'd been to him first or that he'd thought of it. He thought that that might hurt me.

Then Wagner had been saying nice things about a guy named George Van Lengen, who was then the Onondaga County chairman, [who] was not friendly to Kennedy. Wagner was also being wooed by a guy named Francis Kelly who was not friendly to Senator Kennedy.

Wagner, as he always was, would not finalize a commitment. He'd lead people to think they were getting his support without actually saying it. I knew that Bill McKeon had

had a full commitment from him so I went to him and just said that I wanted to be state chairman and I was hoping for it. I had maintained neutrality in the big fight and I thought I had a good relationship with all elements of the party and so forth, and I asked him to support me. He said he thought I'd be a fine candidate, and so forth, and to proceed.

I then went to Ed Weisl [Edwin L. Weisl, Sr.] and spoke to him. He was also not friendly with Senator Kennedy. He was then a national committeeman. Then later Senator Kennedy went to see Wagner and they talked about it. I think that he had to talk to him two or three times. He always seemed to get an agreement from Wagner but it was hard to finally pin him down. It wasn't really until the day before I was elected that Wagner had passed the

[-71-]

word to his supporters in the state committee that he wanted them to vote for me, although he had indicated to Kennedy earlier that he would.

GREENE: Your relations with Wagner had been pretty good up until then, hadn't they?

BURNS: Yes, and I kept them good. That was just the man, the way he was, and I knew that—I had dealt with him many times in the past—and I accepted that. We had been friends for a long time, long before he was Mayor of the City of New York, so, we had a history of friendship. When I became chairman he was satisfied that he had a friend in the chairmanship, although he knows I was very friendly with Senator Kennedy. Of course, then, within a few months he was out of office and he decided not to run again. He was more or less off the scene as a political power in New York.

GREENE: I wanted to ask you one thing before we get into this dimension. How did McKeon feel about Robert Kennedy as a result of this whole leadership fight and the fact that he was kind of forced into a resignation?

BURNS: McKeon, as far as I know, was quite reasonable about it. I don't think he felt that Kennedy was forcing him out for any other reason than the fact that he was just in an untenable position. I don't think Senator Kennedy put McKeon in that position. I think if McKeon, for example, wanted to stay neutral in the Albany fight, Senator Kennedy would have certainly been happy with that. McKeon on his own decided to take sides and had his side won he would have been in a very powerful position but it lost so he wasn't.

GREENE: Was there anything done for him?

BURNS: Yes, he was helped both through his private law practice and was given a position with the state legislature, which was pretty good. I don't recall what the salary was, but it was as counsel to one of the legislative commissions. It was a good job and it was not a demanding job. The combination of the two, both private practice which he picked up and that compensation for the loss of salary as the state chairman for about two years.

GREENE: Did Robert Kennedy help him make this arrangement?

BURNS: Yes, through Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] and through me. I worked with Travia, who had become the Speaker, who was really mad at McKeon, didn't want to do anything for McKeon, but he did it because through me the Senator had asked him to. He knew that it was only because of that that we were able to get McKeon to resign. He wanted McKeon out so he went along with it but it was very reluctantly.

GREENE: How did the Senator feel after it was all over, about Zaretzki and Travia, did he feel he could work with them?

[-72-]

BURNS: Yes, he did. I think he was trying to and I think he did. I think as time went on they became closer to him and fond of him and began to follow his leadership in many different ways.

GREENE: That letter that he wrote to them after the fight was over about promotions through merit rather than patronage, did that do any real harm?

BURNS: That rubbed Zaretzki the wrong way. I guess it rubbed Travia the wrong way, but Zaretzki spoke out on it publicly.

GREENE: Was it just a blunder on Robert Kennedy's part, do you think?

BURNS: Yeah. I don't think it was good protocol. I don't know who suggested it to him but it would have been better not having been written. He could have told that privately but to do that publicly was an embarrassment to them, they had to react. That was probably the low point in his relationship with them; after that it began to pick up.

They never really knew, and I don't think they know yet, to what degree he was involved with the Steingut forces. There were all kinds of rumors but there was never any proof that he was involved with much Steingut, and I don't believe he was either. I think his feelings would have been hurt if they had won but, nevertheless, I don't think he was behind it, masterminding the thing. For a long time there was suspicion on the part of Zaretzki and Travia that he was. Then, I think, later they came to the realization he had great public support him and that he was a very convincing leader and they became very friendly with him.

Wagner went off the scene. Wagner had a great hold on them because the Mayor of New York has great power, particularly over the majority leader or the Democratic leadership in the legislature because most of the Democratic legislators come from the city and they respond to their district—this is the old days; it's slightly different today in some places, still the same in others—but they respond to their district leaders. The district leaders

get all kinds of things from the mayor, all kinds of favors, so he has great power. Once he was out of office and Lindsay [John V. Lindsay] was in, they were more free agents than they'd ever been in their careers, and they were really released. It was then that they began to consult with Robert Kennedy and follow his lead on some things. He didn't try to dictate to them or tell them what to do on everything, only certain issues that he became interested [in] he would talk to them about. They'd usually go along with him.

GREENE: When you first came in what kind of a relationship did you have with the National Committee [Democratic National Committee]?

BURNS: Well, the first thing I did was to go to Washington; I went to the National Committee and presented myself. They knew I was elected and was coming; they knew I was a Kennedy man....

[-73-]

[INTERRUPTION] What was the question again?

GREENE: I asked you...

BURNS: Oh, the National Committee, yes. There's a guy named Carter—what was it?—from Texas...?

GREENE: Cliff Carter [Clifton C. Carter].

BURNS: Cliff Carter, yes. He had called me when I became chairman, asked me to stop down—I think Weisl had spoken to him. I said, "I'd be happy to." I went down and met with him and he made it abundantly clear to me that John Bailey [John Moran Bailey] was only window dressing and that anything that I was to do with the National Committee would be done through him or his subordinates, but with him particularly, and he was pleased to cooperate with me in every way. He took me over to the White House for lunch where the staff eats and so forth. Later, we witnessed a bill-signing ceremony that President Johnson had and shook hands with the President.

Then I came back to New York and found that they just had no desire to work with us in any way. When they'd make appointments of people from New York they'd never consult with us ahead of time. Sometimes they'd tell us ahead to let us know about it but they'd never check with us to see if we wanted someone else instead.

GREENE: Did this happen right away or did it happen after it became clear you were allied with Kennedy?

BURNS: No, it happened right away, but it was clear then. I had allied with him in his campaign. Johnson was never friendly to me. I was co-chairman with Wagner of the "Volunteers for Johnson-Humphrey and Kennedy," which was

essentially a Kennedy vehicle. Nevertheless, I'd made many speeches for Johnson-Humphrey in a lot of these places around the state that I appeared and worked hard in their behalf, although they would have won it big no matter what any of us had done because it was that kind of a situation.

I remember writing President Johnson a letter as Mayor of Binghamton congratulating him and so forth, and I got an answer back from some underling. I didn't get an answer back from the President, which I thought, "Well, it's probably just bureaucracy," and so forth, and I didn't think too much about it.

As time went on I found a lot of antagonism and no cooperation. They did as much as they could through Weisl, who was Johnson's close personal friend. He had a lot more to say about what went on in the state in terms of the Johnson Administration than I did; I had nothing to say. Senator Kennedy even had problems on jobs that.... I remember, for example, there was a job that Sean Keating held, was called the Regional Director of the Post Office Department, which does not require Senate confirmation but which generally the Postmaster General would, whenever we had a Senator of our party, check with him on who he was

[-74-]

going to appoint and check with the state chairman. The Senator wanted to get somebody pretty good for that job: he wanted to get somebody with business experience and political experience. We came up with a name, Jerry McDougal [Jerome R. McDougal, Jr.], who was a leading Democrat from Nassau County. He's presently a vice chairman, but I don't know if he was at the time, I've forgotten. He'd been active in a number of campaigns; he'd been in the assembly that unseated Joseph Carlino [Joseph F. Carlino] in that sweep of 1964. He was a very able guy. He didn't seek the job, we sought him out, worked with Steve Smith [Stephen E. Smith] on it.

Then the Senator spoke to him and he was interested. So, the Senator put his name in with Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien], who was then the Postmaster General. Larry, after looking over the field, went along with it, and later told me he had the appointment all ready and had already mimeographed the announcement of it and was ready to release it when the White House called and told him to hold on it. For two more years they held, never filled the job permanently. They brought a guy in from Texas to fill the job, allegedly on a temporary basis, but he was in until Johnson left office. It was the only case in the country where that was done, I found out later from Larry O'Brien. In fact, you ought to talk to Larry O'Brien.

GREENE: He will be interviewed. He hasn't been started yet.

BURNS: It was obviously the anti-Kennedy White House behind it.

GREENE: Was O'Brien sort of window-dressing at this point too, or did he still have some power?

BURNS: Well, like any other department head, he had power, but if the White House wanted to overrule him they could; in this case they overruled him, but he had

made his commitment to Robert Kennedy on McDougal. I'll say this for O'Brien: he never went back on his commitment, he stuck to McDougal until the end. The point was that they wouldn't. So, no one else could get appointed because the Postmaster General wouldn't take any other. A lot of other candidates had their names sent in in various ways through different people but the Postmaster General had made his commitment and he kept it. The only thing is he couldn't deliver. But he never changed to another candidate. The White House never would permit Kennedy's man to get in it, so the job was never filled.

There were other instances; all kinds of things. You know the White House appoints all kinds of trade commissions and study groups and a lot of honorary things and so forth, and New York would get its share of them, but never through us. Occasionally, they'd call up and say, "The President wants to appoint so-and-so at such-and-such address. Have you any objections?" And we'd call back and say, "You know, we have an objection." They'd say, "Well, we're going to appoint him anyway."

GREENE: Who would you be dealing with at the White House on that?

BURNS: That would be the National Committee, now. They were minor things. The big thing, of course, the major Cabinet posts, we didn't expect to have any—nor should any state committee have a say on that—that's purely up to the

[-75-]

President. On other things we should have some. For example, when Howard Samuels [Howard J. Samuels] was appointed Assistant Secretary of Commerce we were never told about it until it happened. They did check with Kennedy and Javits [Jacob K. Javits]—no, not even Javits, I don't know—but they did check with Kennedy because I think you had to have Senate confirmation—probably checked with Javits too. But, they made it abundantly clear that they were not going to work with us.

Then they'd come in every year to what is known as the President's Club [President's Club of New York] to put on a dinner, where they'd raise a fortune. The President's Club first started under President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]. The first two they had they shared the revenue with the state committee. After President Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson became President, they stopped sharing the revenue. We got nothing after that. We were going through some very difficult times financially. They were coming in taking all kinds of dough and they paid no attention to us.

GREENE: What was the Senator's attitude towards this? Did he ever try to confront them on it or did he just, you know, sort of throw up his hands and say, "That's the way it is"?

BURNS: He was upset about it—maybe not upset, nothing upset him. He thought it was unfair and he didn't like it. I'm sure he told people like Arthur Krim [Arthur B. Krim] and a number of others who actually raised the dough here for the President's Club how he felt about it. He never did anything to cooperate with that dinner, except he might show up at it or something. You see he had the problem of not looking

like—I don't know how to describe it. He didn't want to look like he was a spoiled brat, or a stubborn boss, or a kid, or anything in his relationship with Johnson. For example, if Johnson came to the state, and then he didn't show up at a dinner it would look bad—the Senator would look bad, not the President—and he didn't want to do that kind of thing. So he'd do the perfunctory things but there was never any love lost between them.

I remember one time on one of those dinners. We had a dinner for the state committee the same night the President's Club had its dinner. The President, the Vice President, Lady Bird [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson] and Lynda Bird [Lynda Bird Johnson Robb], and Senator Kennedy were all on the same dais. After dinner was over they all got in the car. I was in the car with Johnson and Mrs. Johnson, Averell Harriman, Robert Kennedy, Lynda Bird, and we rode in the car from the Americana [Americana Hotel] to the Waldorf [Waldorf-Astoria Hotel]. It was an interesting little ride. I don't remember exactly what was said but it was sort of like they were trying to act polite, type of thing. You could just sense that there was no friendship there....

GREENE: Yeah, estranged.

BURNS: Estrangement.

GREENE: I guess now we can go on the mayoral race, unless there's anything else before that in '65.

[-76-]

BURNS: The same split, you know, spilled over into the mayoral race.

GREENE: Right.

BURNS: What came out of the mayoral race was the candidacy of Abe Beame [Abraham D. Beame]. He was the Steingut candidate in the primary election. Frank O'Connor [Frank D. O'Connor], then the Queens District Attorney, wanted to run for mayor, and might have won that, incidentally. In those days he was a pretty good candidate. When he ran for Governor he was a lousy candidate, but in those days he was a good candidate. But anyway, there was a meeting held with the so-called bosses, Beame's people and O'Connor. O'Connor agreed that he'd accept their support for Council President to run on the Beame ticket and in return for that they'd support him for Governor the following year.

GREENE: This is what blew up the Governor's thing the next year?

BURNS: That's right. O'Connor always denied the meeting was held, but Charlie Buckley [Charles A. Buckley], in my presence and on his death bed, told Senator Kennedy that the meeting had been held and that what he was denying had actually happened.

GREENE: What was the Senator's interest in the race in the beginning? I know that he contacted people or had his representatives contact people like Larry Hogan[?] and Ted Kheel [Theodore Woodrow Kheel], who wanted it out in the clear.

BURNS: Yes, he did.

GREENE: Was he really interested in getting it outside?

BURNS: See, that was in '65. I didn't become chairman until July of '65, and by that time the primary was already underway. So I wasn't working with Senator Kennedy....

GREENE: At that point.

BURNS: It was just before I started working with him, but I do know that he had searched around to try to find a good candidate. I think he liked Paul Screvane [Paul R. Screvane] very much, as a matter of fact. He ultimately stayed neutral, the Senator did.

GREENE: He convinced Screvane to take Moynihan [Daniel Patrick Moynihan] on, didn't he?

BURNS: Yes, as a running mate.

[-77-]

GREENE: Well, why did he decide to remain neutral? That's what I suppose the big question is.

BURNS: Well, I don't know. I don't know, I wasn't there. If I were to guess, I'd say because a lot of the people who had been his friends and had urged him to run and delivered a lot of support to him in New York were with Beame. I don't think he wanted to go against them at that point in time. I think maybe he also felt that Screvane would win it anyway. But I don't know those things to be a fact.

GREENE: How did he feel finally about the Beame-Procaccino [Mario Angelo Procaccino]-O'Connor combination?

BURNS: Well, he thought they were nice guys without any vision, without any program, and he was very disheartened by that ticket. He thought compared to Lindsay, you know, they looked like a bunch of losers, which they were—well, not all of them, although Beame was. He liked Abe Beame as a person. I think he respected him as a decent, honest man but in his campaigning for him he couldn't find anything to say about him except, "He's a decent, honest man. He's a Democrat and we

always want the Democrats to win.” He was so embarrassed about that, but he did it. He campaigned for Beame. I was with him many times.

GREENE: And yet there were complaints that he didn’t do enough, weren’t there?

BURNS: There always were that, but that’s not true. He did everything they asked him to do. The same thing happened in the O’Connor campaign. They complained he didn’t do enough, but he did plenty for O’Connor. O’Connor was an incompetent candidate, that was his problem. This is all going in the archives, I hope...

GREENE: Right.

BURNS: ...if anyplace.

GREENE: What was his feeling about Lindsay at this point? He apparently thought he was the better candidate. Had the animosity already built up there?

BURNS: Between...?

GREENE: Kennedy and Lindsay.

BURNS: Yes. I don’t know the genesis of that animosity, but it had. Yes, I think it had already been there. It might have gone back to their days in Washington when they both were in Washington. I just don’t know.

GREENE: Yes, that’s what it seems.

[-78-]

BURNS: I think one thing that Lindsay was trying to do was trying to look like he was a Kennedy. I mean his campaign style, the whole way they do things, and his youthfulness. The newspapers kept saying, “There’s another John Kennedy type.” You know, “That’s what the people like,” sort of thing. He really wasn’t and I don’t think that Senator Kennedy appreciated that very much.

GREENE: Did his attitude towards Lindsay change at all over time? Did he gain any more respect for him?

BURNS: I think he respected him in terms of his liberal position on issues. I think he felt that Lindsay had a lot of incompetent people around him.

GREENE: Was there anyone in particular that he disapproved of?

BURNS: I can’t think of anybody offhand. You know Senator Kennedy used to tour the city a lot, through the slums especially. He’d get very frustrated with the city

government and the terrible record it had in providing services in many respects: health, sanitation, air pollution. He used to get awfully mad. He used to look out his window, at his UN Plaza apartment right down south of here, at two big Con Ed [Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc.] stacks, which would belch out smoke every once in a while. One time he called them up and gave them hell for it. I don't know who he talked to but he was really upset about it. He felt, you know, that nobody was doing anything about it. It was really a city problem.

I think he liked what the mayor did in terms of his gut feeling about blacks and that sort of thing, although I don't think he felt that the mayor produced for the blacks. He had the right spirit but he was unable to do much about it. His record on housing and in many other respects was not good. So, I think he was objective about Lindsay but Lindsay didn't like him at all. I think he felt Lindsay handled the labor negotiations kind of bad, particularly the subway strike, which was the first thing that hit him when he became mayor.

GREENE: Well, Robert Kennedy got a lot of criticism for that too, for kind of...

BURNS: He went down to City Hall one day, and people said all he thought was they were going to settle it today and he was going to show up for the settlement, or something like that, which wasn't true. He just wanted to show that he was interested as United States Senator and was interested in trying to help. It was quite obvious that Lindsay wasn't getting anyplace. He should have called on Senator Kennedy, it was the natural thing for a mayor to do if he was really completely nonpolitical about it, that's true.

Tom Johnston [Thomas M.C. Johnston], in Senator Kennedy's New York City office, worked with various people in the Lindsay Administration on a lot of projects they had in the ghettos. I think Tom felt that he was getting pretty good cooperation from at least some of them, maybe a lot of them, I don't know.

GREENE: Well, he was very cooperative on the Bedford-Stuyvesant project particularly, Lindsay.

[-79-]

BURNS: Yes.

GREENE: Did Kennedy feel that the Beame defeat, which was kind of inevitable, I guess, really hurt him; particularly with the liberals and independents that he had been cultivating?

BURNS: Yeah, I think he felt it didn't help him any. He was cultivating them and then he ends up campaigning for Beame, who many thought was just a hack. He thought more of Beame than they did. They are a pretty tough bunch of people, and they don't have any regard for party loyalty at all. He regarded them as people that were right on the issues; that had integrity in terms of issues and so forth in the campaign; were incompetent in terms of translating their zeal into real action and real

political result; that they were overcritical of him and others; and were not willing to go as far as just to leave the party.

GREENE: Is there any direct connection between his effort on behalf of Beame and maybe his wish to neutralize some of the harm that had been done in the surrogate's race? Was that something that he took on, do you think, to improve his position with these people?

BURNS: Well, in the surrogate's race he did improve his position with most people.

GREENE: But was that a major reason for it, do you think?

BURNS: I think it was part of it, yes. I think he was appalled by the big political deal that was made over the nomination to begin with, but it gave him a chance to work with these people with whom he had an estrangement but yet were allied with him on issues many times. Without him they wouldn't have won that.

GREENE: What was your involvement in that? Were you consulted on the decision to do it in the first place?

BURNS: Well, yes, but he wanted me to stay out of it. He often would say, "Don't get involved in these fights, because I want you to be able to talk to everybody." If I got involved, why, you know, my usefulness would be more limited. So, I'd stay out of it, although I was well-informed on what was going on all the time even if I didn't do anything about it.

GREENE: You didn't take any soundings for him in the beginning to see how the party organization would respond to this?

BURNS: No. I told him I thought it would respond though.

GREENE: What was that?

[-80-]

BURNS: That the regulars would be really mad, and they were....

GREENE: And they were...?

BURNS: And that Ray Jones would consider it a personal put-down, which he did.

GREENE: What was the Senator's response to that?

BURNS: Well, he didn't like Ray Jones and he was glad to take him on in a fight; he was happy to meet him head-on.

GREENE: Yeah, that's what I thought.

BURNS: Trimmed the sails for him, he did. Later on, when Ray Jones quit, he said he quit because Kennedy forced him out, although Kennedy hadn't actually forced him out. He, in a sense, rendered him pretty useless in terms of any great following, and that sort of thing. He didn't go to him and say, "You've got to get out now." Jones did it himself. Kennedy showed that Jones didn't have the ability to win the primary and that he, Kennedy, did.

GREENE: What was the situation in this race before Kennedy came back from Africa? I had heard that they were in trouble, especially after Jones' attacks on Robert Kennedy as a racist.

BURNS: They were in trouble because there were a lot of things that only Kennedy could answer and only Kennedy's presence could compensate for. They were getting well-organized. Steve Smith ran the thing, and he's probably the best in the country. They had Jerry Bruno [Gerald J. Bruno]. He brought in a lot of people that worked in Kennedy campaigns in the past and they were a determinative organization that shaped up.... The public organization aspect of it required Senator Kennedy's presence and everybody was anxious for him to get back. He couldn't come back too soon but once he was back he did a lot.

GREENE: How did he feel about Silverman [Samuel Joshua Silverman] as a candidate?

BURNS: He thought Silverman was extremely well-qualified for the job but, like many judges, as a candidate he is not, you know, no charisma or anything. He was just not a guy who could get any votes for himself. I think he respected and was fond of Silverman but he was a lousy candidate in the sense of his ability to campaign.

GREENE: Can you remember talking to him after Silverman had won about how this might affect his own position, again, with the various factions? What he'd have to do....?

[-81-]

BURNS: Yes, I remember talking to him. He was aware of the fact that the regulars in other counties were on their guard that he wouldn't try to come into their counties with the same thing. He wanted me to assure them that that wasn't his intention at all but that he wanted to work with them. He was also aware of the fact that it strengthened his hand with them too, because it was good to have them fearful of Bob, although we wanted to be friendly. He was very much aware. He was one of the most politically aware men I've ever known. He knew all the aspects of it, all the ramifications.
[INTERRUPTION]

He called through me, we called in the county chairmen from around the state in groups. He laid it right on the line with them, you know, "I think Frank O'Connor is a fine fellow but I just think that the liberal community is not going to support him in spite of the fact that Rockefeller is low in the polls now. But we're going to get beat. I don't particularly want to just try to be your big boss and lynch the party and deprive him of it. But I want you fellows to know that and I want to get your ideas and suggestions." They all pooh-poohed it, they all said, "O'Connor will be here," almost to a man. A few were for Samuels, and others. But.... [INTERRUPTION]

In the meantime he sent vanden Heuvel [William J. vanden Heuvel] up to talk to Sol Linowitz [Sol M. Linowitz] in Rochester. Had Sol Linowitz [Sol Myron Linowitz] shown interest I think Robert Kennedy would have made an effort on his behalf. He would have been happy to support Nickerson [Eugene H. Nickerson] had Nickerson shown any support outside of his own county. [Inaudible] his staff, including Jack English, just was not able to get anybody to declare for him. It came down to a situation where the Senator was going to have to deliver to Nickerson and would have one very tough time to do it, rather impossible. Then he would not only blur the nomination but had to elect him too, stay with him practically every day on the state....

Frankly, you know, there were all kinds of articles nationally at that time that he was going to try to take over as the big boss and that he was ruthless, and so on and so forth. He didn't like that, he didn't want people to think that he was being essentially the big boss. [INTERRUPTION]

He decided, finally, that he was not going to get himself into that kind of a position where he was going to force Nickerson or anyone else on the party when the party wanted O'Connor, although he knew that O'Connor was not going to win. He told everybody that, including O'Connor. It turned out just the way he predicted. *The New York Times*, *The Post*, the liberal community, were against O'Connor. The Liberal Party was against him; had their own candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., who took over half a million votes. It just was a lost cause, but he did campaign for O'Connor. He was campaigning around the country that fall for a number of senators and governors and so

[-82-]

forth, but he came into the state many times and campaigned for O'Connor. Steve Smith went over to help O'Connor, sat over there trying to do what he could for him, but most of his recommendations rang on deaf ears. He got very unhappy with it.

GREENE: Why did he think that was? Why couldn't Smith...? I mean obviously he has the ability, why wasn't he respected?

BURNS: Why? Because O'Connor, like many candidates, came from.... The genesis of his campaign, which was probably three to four years old, was several people around him: Jim O'Donnell [James F. O'Donnell], who was a relative of his; Joe Lane [Joseph Lane], who's a close personal friend; and Larry Peirez [Lawrence Peirez], who was a close personal friend. He surrounded himself with them, they really ran the campaign, and they were not capable of running the campaign. They were not that well

experienced. O'Connor did not want to make changes which would hurt their feelings or go against them. That kind of man was too soft to them. O'Connor himself didn't see a lot of things in terms of what he was saying, his speeches, his theme. It was too diverse. A campaign should follow a theme. You hit two or three issues and you hit them hard, and you don't try to talk about other different things because it gets lost that way.

Coming out of the convention O'Connor did not inspire the major contributors to the party to give money. As time went on it got worse and so the money got worse. We ended up not getting anywhere near the money we needed to run a campaign on television and all that sort of thing.

GREENE: I had heard also that he'd complained that they tried to remold him, instead of letting him campaign in his own kind of old-fashioned, back-slapping style, they wanted to make an issue candidate out of him, which was unnatural, and so he just didn't fit in anywhere. He kind of blamed that on the Kennedys. Does that fit with what...?

BURNS: No, actually, what he did was the issues he took were unpopular issues although they may have been "right." For example, he took the civil libertarian point of view on the issue of drug addicts on the streets.

[INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: One of the things I wanted to ask you is besides Linowitz, who you already mentioned, he apparently contacted Perkins [James Alfred Perkins] from Cornell [Cornell University], and Watson [Thomas J. Watson, Jr.]...?

BURNS: Yes, vanden Heuvel went to see Perkins.

GREENE: Were these his own ideas, or were they things being suggested by...?

BURNS: I think Perkins was probably vanden Heuvel's idea. I don't know about Linowitz—that may have been Bill vanden Heuvel's idea, I don't know. He

[-83-]

thought of Ted Kheel, I believe.

GREENE: Yes.

BURNS: And...

GREENE: Hogan [Frank S. Hogan].

BURNS: ...Frank Hogan, that's right. I was the one that talked to Hogan.

GREENE: Why again was the interest in getting an outsider? Did he feel it was just going to end up in a stalemate otherwise?

BURNS: By an outsider do you mean someone who wasn't already an announced candidate?

GREENE: Right, someone from outside the party or outside the regular organization.

BURNS: Well, I think he felt that none of those that were in the picture were strong candidates; they might lose. He wanted to get a winner, also someone who was in agreement with him on issues and that sort of thing. So, he was looking around. He didn't want to just limit to those who had got into it on their own.

GREENE: There was a lot at the time, and in books subsequently, that he really could have dictated the candidate in the beginning, that the party was simply waiting for him to decide what he wanted to do. Do you think that's an exaggeration or did he really have that much power at that point?

BURNS: Well, I think it's an exaggeration.... I think he could have done it but I don't think the party was waiting for him. I think the party was on its own moving, wondering what he'd do. In the meantime commitments were being made to O'Connor. See, the Senator never gave the word out, you know, to "Hold off until I decide what I think would be best," or something. So, some waited for him; some didn't. It wasn't general waiting on the part of the whole party.

GREENE: Do you think his reluctance to get behind anyone, particularly behind Nickerson, was that they were "losers," and even if he had to campaign for one of them, if they lost, he didn't want to be the kingmaker, so to speak, of a loser?

BURNS: That might have been it. I think he figured Nickerson could probably win if nominated but it would be an awful job getting him nominated, that Nickerson on his own was unable to get any strength outside of his own county. He didn't feel that he should have to take that kind of a candidate, who had no strength outside of his own county. Had Nickerson picked up strength—a few hundred delegates or something,

[-84-]

where he had a hard-core support—then you could do it with a lot more justification and a lot more ease. But to just say, "Here's a guy. He's not popular, because he's not getting any support, yet I want to force him on the party." He just didn't feel that he should do that for many reasons, including his own self-interest but not exclusively that.

GREENE: What about the open forums? Did they have any noticeable effect on the

situation?

BURNS: They didn't change what would have happened anyway in terms of support because it was a convention system, not a primary, with the convention pretty much under the control of political leaders with the exception of the Reformers. They brought some good publicity to the party, pointed up issues, and gave us a chance to get an extra exposure for our party in general and for candidates in particular.

GREENE: Was his interest in supporting them getting exposure for Nickerson to see what Nickerson could do, or...?

BURNS: No, I think he felt it was a good thing for the party to do to show it's an open party. We wanted to go to the public and say, "Here's the guys we have; what do you think of them?" type of thing. Let your local Democrats know and your convention delegates know who you support. You only get to a very small fraction of the public that way but at least it's an effort to open up the party to the public. I think that's chiefly why he wanted to do it; he wanted to be identified with that. We're coming to the people instead of saying, you know, "everything in the back room," type of thing.

GREENE: Right.

BURNS: Then he found we certainly were able to compare candidates in their ability to speak and whether they did their homework or not, that sort of thing.

GREENE: Would you agree with those who seemed to think that Nickerson did best?

BURNS: Yes.

GREENE: But it didn't have any noticeable effect on his strength in the party?

BURNS: No, no noticeable effect at all. He did best in terms of his homework and I thought he was an excellent speaker but for some reason Nickerson was doomed. Not everybody feels that way; they think he's kind of a... At that time anyway... I think he's changed since then, improved. He was not a good speaker then, he was kind of an affected speaker. You're liable to compare him to Averell Harriman, but he was a lot better than Averell Harriman as a speaker. But he had that yoke around his neck and couldn't get rid of it.

GREENE: How did you first find out about the FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] memo?

[-85-]

Do you remember that?

BURNS: Let's see. The FDR memo, that was where he claims he wrote a memo to

himself based on the conversation he had with Steingut and Buckley and other leaders. He was threatening to use that. I wasn't sure what form it would take at the beginning when I heard that he had a memo.

GREENE: Do you know what the Senator's reaction to it was? Did he encourage Roosevelt to use it or suggest he keep it quiet?

BURNS: I don't know. I know the Senator saw Roosevelt a couple of times; I don't know if he told him anything about the memo.

GREENE: Because I know that...

BURNS: The thing about Roosevelt was, though, that he was going hat-in-hand to these same guys looking for their support and had he been able to get their support, he would have been very happy to get it. Because he didn't he tried to make it look like an evil thing that someone else got it.

GREENE: Yes, because he accused Kennedy of having leaked the memo and I've heard from a lot of different people that they heard firsthand from him himself and that he'd actually showed it all round and then accused Kennedy of having it.

BURNS: Yes, right. Kennedy didn't leak the memo. I'm sure. No, he wanted it leaked and even had paid ads on it later on. That was his only real big issue.

GREENE: Did the Senator, was he urged to use it to help Nickerson on the other hand?

BURNS: I've forgotten the timing on it now, but maybe Nickerson was out of the thing by then?

GREENE: No.

BURNS: He wasn't?

GREENE: No, he was still in it. It seems like Kennedy wouldn't want him to use it.

BURNS: Well, for a while Kennedy didn't know if the meeting had been held or not. I think he figured it probably was but it wasn't really confirmed until Charlie Buckley told him. He didn't like it, obviously he didn't like the idea, but I don't think he tried to use it in his own interest.

GREENE: He didn't, from what I heard, if for no other reason than that it would have meant turning on Steingut and Buckley also and he didn't want to do that.

BURNS: That's true.

GREENE: Anyway, I guess it wasn't too much longer after that that English went to Kennedy and asked him if there was any final thing they could do to try to promote Nickerson before they caved in, and he made that swing around the state. Do you remember that?

BURNS: Who made a swing?

GREENE: English...

BURNS: English, yeah.

GREENE: ...promoting Nickerson with Robert Kennedy's reluctant blessing.

BURNS: Yes. He was telling people Kennedy was for Nickerson.

GREENE: Without arm-twisting, right?

BURNS: Yes. I remember that.

GREENE: What was the effect of that upstate?

BURNS: Well, it wasn't enough, it wasn't enough. I think they wanted to hear from Kennedy himself, not because they disbelieved Jack, but in politics you often hear that so-and-so's backing a certain candidate and it's not necessarily quite that way. So I think that they took it with a grain of salt.

GREENE: Do you think at that point had the Senator come personally, telephoned personally, that he still had enough strength behind him to swing it to Nickerson?

BURNS: The later it got the more difficult it would have been.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1; BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

BURNS: I don't know, I'm sure he could have gotten some of that vote. By that time I think Steingut was fully committed and Buckley was fully committed, you know, it would have taken an awful lot of smaller counties to make up for those big ones that he couldn't change.

[-87-]

GREENE: Well, anyway, I guess then after the Suffolk [Suffolk County] caucus, that made it kind of inevitable that O'Connor was going to get it. Was there

anything else further that Robert Kennedy attempted to do at that point to prevent it?

BURNS: When Nickerson pulled out? You mean before he pulled out?

GREENE: Suffolk caucus and then he pulled out, it was almost simultaneous.

BURNS: No, I think that was it.

GREENE: What about his role at the convention in the selection of running mates? Did he really care who it was since he thought they were all losers anyway?

BURNS: Well, he wanted us to put up a good slate. He suggested to O'Connor that Jack Weinstein [Jack B. Weinstein], who's now a federal judge, be the attorney general candidate. He told O'Connor more than once while there—and I was present more than once—that it was O'Connor's ballgame and he could name anybody he wanted and he, Kennedy, would support them. He didn't even suggest the Orin Lehman nomination. I don't even remember if he knew that it was under consideration. It was kind of a hectic way the operation was being worked up there.

GREENE: He was Steingut and Tannanbaum's [Martin Tannanbaum] man, as I remember, Orin Lehman?

BURNS: Originally, the name came from some of the reformers to O'Connor. Then Steingut and Tannanbaum thought that it would be a good idea because of the name Lehman. They thought it would bring some support to the ticket that they didn't think Samuels would bring to the ticket. You couldn't have too many Jewish people on the ticket—already had Arthur Levitt.

Kennedy wasn't in on that, he suggested Jack Weinstein. He thought he was a superb lawyer and an articulate, bright guy. O'Connor asked Weinstein to join him on the ticket—I sat there and heard him. He told him how glad he was that they were going to be on the ticket together and everything. Then Weinstein was writing his acceptance speech when in another room O'Connor said, "I've got the ticket. I've made up my mind. It will be Lehman, Levitt, and Sedita [Frank A. Sedita]." I looked at Frank and said, "Well, what about Weinstein? He's over there writing an acceptance speech." He said, "Well, we'll have to tell him he's not on it."

GREENE: What do you thing had transpired in between...?

BURNS: Well, O'Connor had been vacillating for twenty-four hours. He was at a point where the convention was getting out of hand. Then it was an embarrassment, showed a lack of leadership and so forth. I think, at some point he said, "Well,

I've got to do something." This looks like the way he did it. I don't know why he did it. He did it very suddenly. By that time it was so far out of hand on the convention floor that he couldn't put it over. He had to go over and withdraw and open the convention up, and say, "Nominate whoever you want, I'll run with whoever you pick," like Adlai Stevenson did one year in '56.

GREENE: '56.

BURNS: But the difference between what he did and what Stevenson did was that he didn't do it intentionally from the beginning, he was forced into that position; it made him look weak. On the floor the people that were for Ray Jones, and some of Samuels' people, thought that Kennedy had put Orin Lehman on that ticket.

GREENE: And that was...

BURNS: And that was not true. Kennedy had nothing to do with Orin Lehman getting on that ticket.

GREENE: What was the attitude towards Samuels in these sessions where they kept talking about Lehman's...

BURNS: None of them liked him. O'Connor told Kennedy he didn't like Samuels; he didn't want him on the ticket with him.

GREENE: And he ended up telling the press that he was only doing it in deference to Kennedy.

BURNS: Kennedy told him, "I don't care who you take, Samuels or anybody else, I'll support whoever you put up." Then he said, "If you want any suggestions from me I'll give them to you." He never said, "Don't put Samuels on the ticket," his suggestion was Jack Weinstein. He also suggested a guy named Joe Julian [Joseph D. Julian].

GREENE: From Syracuse.

BURNS: From Syracuse, from the Maxwell School [Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs] who was very young at the time and an attractive, bright guy. They sent the *Caroline* down for Joe Julian, and when he got there he was so young looking that the O'Connor people almost laughed. Yet, he was a competent fellow. Kennedy didn't force any of these things on O'Connor. It was at O'Connor's asking him for suggestions that he made these suggestions. He didn't want to try to dominate the scene; he got blamed for the damned thing anyway. A lot of people that were responsible for killing it thought they were fighting Kennedy when they weren't.

GREENE: And at the end, as I remember it, O'Connor, when asked what had happened,

said that he had wanted Samuels all along but had kept him off the ticket in

[-89-]

deference to Kennedy.

BURNS: I don't remember O'Connor saying that. He said that publicly?

GREENE: Well, I got it from the *Times* [*New York Times*].

BURNS: Oh, then I guess it was pretty public.

GREENE: I mean, I would wonder how something like that would affect Kennedy as far as his willingness to campaign?

BURNS: He was convinced that O'Connor had lied to him about the meeting. He more or less had more pity on O'Connor, I don't think he trusted him either, so I don't think that would have surprised him.

GREENE: Is there anything specific on the campaign? You've already said that you don't think the criticism of his not doing enough was justified. Is there anything else?

BURNS: I don't think I have anything else. They set up their own campaign mechanism and bombed out. They did lousy advance work, they had poor PR [Public Relations], lousy speech writing. The whole thing was bad. Those of us who were associated with it were becoming increasingly embarrassed because we thought we'd be held responsible for it even though we weren't responsible for it. Within the politics of the campaign headquarters we couldn't work our way into displacing the favorite people around O'Connor. We didn't want to fight; we weren't looking for a big battle with somebody to get near O'Connor. Who cared? But it was an embarrassment. O'Connor kept thinking he was ahead. The *News* [*New York Daily News*] polls showed him winning; in fact, the final *News* poll predicted he would win. The *News* was really shocked when he lost, but I wasn't, nor was Robert Kennedy. Kennedy sensed it very well.

GREENE: How did that effect his own political standing, to once more back a loser who was not even a reform loser?

BURNS: It didn't help. It didn't help at all. He was under criticism for having stayed neutral and not having put up somebody in opposition to O'Connor to begin with; by the O'Connor people for not helping him enough; and by the others for doing too much for him, identifying with him. It was a game that he couldn't win.

GREENE: Some people have said that they thought that Robert Kennedy really never wanted another Democrat in the state, that he would have preferred to remain

on top. Does that make any sense to you?

BURNS: He wouldn't want another Democrat who was willing to be antagonistic towards him, or more friendly to Johnson-Humphrey than to him.

[-90-]

GREENE: And this was already clearly true of O'Connor?

BURNS: It was clear for O'Connor, yeah.

GREENE: So you don't think he was terribly disappointed when he lost?

BURNS: That's true. Interestingly enough Gene McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] came up and campaigned for O'Connor on the left side of the net.

GREENE: I didn't realize that.

BURNS: Yeah, that was before he was identified as a dove on the war and so forth.

GREENE: Well, is there anything else on that race, the gubernatorial?

BURNS: No, I don't think so.

GREENE: But his relationship with O'Connor seems to have been downhill from that point on, if it hadn't been before that.

BURNS: It was never great, it was friendly. He was never impressed with O'Connor or any of his associates: thought he lied to him. He didn't care much for people like that. It did go downhill after that. As you know, Senator Kennedy made a break with Johnson on the Vietnam War. Immediately, O'Connor issued a statement backing the President. He kept running down to Washington all the time, meeting with Hubert Humphrey and others. Obviously, he was their support in New York State to try to overcome the Kennedy influence. He wasn't very impressive for the task.

GREENE: What do you know about his relationship with Rockefeller?

BURNS: Kennedy's?

GREENE: Yes, particularly from this point on.

BURNS: I think, during that time, Rockefeller regarded Kennedy as a possible foe in the presidential race and he treated Kennedy like that. They were cordial when they were together, which wasn't very often, but they didn't like Kennedy and

they would do everything they could to hurt him. Whenever he'd propose anything they were lukewarm, proposals like the extension of the Appalachian program in New York State, where a number of counties were added to it, which ultimately resulted in a lot of money coming into those counties for construction of public works facilities. Right from the beginning you could see it was a good thing but Rocky [Rockefeller] did very little for him on that. Other things that Kennedy proposed—like the Medicaid program which was passed through the legislature—his office worked closely with Speaker Travia, who bargained with

[-91-]

the Governor on a compromise program. They didn't like that—I mean the Rockefeller people didn't like that. They didn't like Kennedy at all; they were out to get him, I'm sure.

GREENE: And what was his feeling about them?

BURNS: His feeling of them was that he knew a lot of people that were out to get him. You know, he was pretty objective about it. He didn't like it but he never went out of his way to hurt them. He was a pretty formidable foe; if they wanted to have a head-on collision, he wouldn't back away from it.

GREENE: The next, and really the last, thing that I have is the '67 Constitutional Convention, where again Robert Kennedy plays a kind of strange role. In the beginning he indicated that he planned to spend not full time, but a lot of time on this issue and he considered it most important. Then in the end, of course, he ended up campaigning only very reluctantly for it.

BURNS: Yeah, but he, I think, was disappointed in the final result. I think he was for a lot of provisions in it. Bill vanden Heuvel was the vice president of the convention because Kennedy wanted him to be and we tried to go along with him. He made a deal supporting Travia. I think that the fact that Travia insisted on everything being in one package bothered Robert Kennedy.

GREENE: Did he actively oppose that?

BURNS: I didn't talk to him. The Senator worked awful hard to get the eighteen-year-old vote in there, called people and all. They put in a wishy-washy provision, which said that the legislature may, if it wants to, by passing a law, lower the voting age without having to amend the constitution which, in other words, is a much longer process. We found that the Democratic majority is made up of a split party. There are an awful lot of conservative Democrats elected and they were tough to move on certain issues. I think, although he liked the final document, you know, everything is a compromise. It wasn't as good as he hoped it would be. I mean I don't think he liked it all in one package. He would have preferred to have the public vote on it in pieces so that the parts that were unpopular could be voted down but the rest of it could have been adopted.

GREENE: What was his feeling on what became the most controversial issue: the repeal of the Blaine Amendment? Did he favor the way it was finally worded in the form of the First Amendment to the Federal Constitution?

BURNS: I don't know if he ever made a statement on that issue alone. He favored the constitution once you included that. I don't recall whether he made a statement on that.

GREENE: He didn't exert any pressure in the drafting process to have it worded any differently or leave it as it was?

[-92-]

BURNS: I'm sorry, I don't remember.

GREENE: What about the selection of the experts that he got together to prepare the policy statements on the various facets of the whole thing, like Weinstein and a bunch of educators?

BURNS: Do I know anything about them?

GREENE: Yes. Were you involved in their selection? And, how satisfied was he with his office?

BURNS: No, I wasn't. I knew that he was doing it but he didn't do it through me. He did it through others like vanden Heuvel, for example.

GREENE: Why do you think he selected vanden Heuvel, first, to such an important role in this thing? Did he have that much faith in his...?

BURNS: Yeah, he had a lot of confidence in vanden Heuvel. He liked him, thought he was a bright guy. I felt he thought it was a chance for vanden Heuvel to emerge publicly as a public figure with a good political career ahead of him. It was a test really.

GREENE: Was he satisfied with his leadership?

BURNS: Yeah, he was. When vanden Heuvel first went up there he was very unpopular; they thought he was just Kennedy's errand boy and he was rather pompous. He gave a long speech the first day, and went on and on and on. As time went on, vanden Heuvel gained the respect of almost everybody up there. He performed well, he was bright, he did his homework, he was friendly with people, he helped others and sought their advice and worked with them; he was very cooperative. He came out of it, I think, a person they called wrong.

GREENE: What about Scotty Campbell [Alan K. Campbell], who did quite a bit on Robert Kennedy's behalf too? Did that work out well?

BURNS: Yeah, he was good, that worked out well. Scotty was very good. He was also a great favorite of Speaker Travia's. He was obviously one of the best-informed educators in the state on questions that were before the constitutional convention, so he was regarded as a great expert on these matters.

GREENE: He was my urban government teacher.

BURNS: Is he?

[-93-]

GREENE: Syracuse [Syracuse University], yeah.

BURNS: You go to Syracuse? [INTERRUPTION] Great guy....

GREENE: One of my favorite professors.

BURNS: Yes, he's good.

GREENE: He is really good. That was his first year there, I'm ashamed to admit how long ago.

BURNS: When did you go?

GREENE: I graduated in '64.

BURNS: He's now the dean, as you probably know.

GREENE: Yes, I know. What about Kennedy's feelings about the eventual composition of the convention, the fact that there was so many legislators and judges and people like that who already had kind of a vested interest?

BURNS: He didn't like that at all, particularly the judges. The judges were there for two things: for the pay, because they could keep their public salary going; and, two, to protect themselves and the judicial system from being drastically changed. They were all concerned that we wanted this process for selecting working judicial posts, such as the supreme court. It was rather shocking to read their salary as a judge and the salary they got as constitutional delegates and the other booze or whatever else they might get.

GREENE: Was there anything you could do on something like that to correct it?

BURNS: No, they ran and got elected. You wanted them to prohibit it. They get paid at least \$15,000 as delegates and....

GREENE: Just a couple of months.

BURNS: As tradition-bound a kind of convention delegates.... They get around \$35,000 a year as judges. Some of them made a contribution. Some of them are very bright men who have been passing on the constitutionality of legislation of that sort for a long time; the court's trying to get the sense of the laws, what the intention of the legislature was, that sort of thing. Many of them had been legislators earlier

[-94-]

in their career but it wasn't necessary for them. It became a patronage vehicle for the party, not the state party on a statewide basis, but in certain counties where he had full control and cooperations and just nominated people when he wanted to get them running.

GREENE: Did Kennedy consider at any point becoming a delegate himself? He was criticized for that by Johnson and some others.

BURNS: We talked about it, but he decided not to because he couldn't do justice to both the Senate and the constitutional convention. We did talk about putting him on the ballot. We would have had to run statewide; we talked about running as an at-large delegate. Most all of our at-large delegates won.

GREENE: He had wanted the at-large delegates to be nonpartisan and the Republicans turned that down.

BURNS: Yes, we tried to work that out. He made a big thing out of that. We went to meetings where the Republicans, Conservatives, and Liberals attended and we took the extra step, but the Republicans were never willing to do it.

GREENE: Why do you think that was? It would seem to me it would have worked to their advantage since they were the minority.

BURNS: I don't know why. They thought with Javits running and so forth that they were bound to win but they didn't. Javits lost that one. We thought they made a mistake.

GREENE: There were two things that I know were said in the *Times* [*The New York Times*]: one, that they wished to see a confrontation between Javits and Robert Kennedy, figured that was one way; also because Kennedy had hinted that if they didn't accept the bipartisan proposal that he might run himself as a delegate and they wanted that to happen also. Does that sound...?

BURNS: Well, I think maybe, you know, he said that, so it was probably used.

GREENE: Okay. Then there was a debate pretty early in this thing about the character of the constitution; whether it was going to be concise and limited in scope like the federal or whether it was going to be broader and in two parts. Do you know where he stood on that?

BURNS: I think he was for a shorter constitution than what we had because the constitution which we had, and still have now, is really a conglomeration of so many things. It could have been streamlined considerably without losing anything. He was for doing that, I'm sure. He made a speech at the opening of the constitutional convention—you probably have a copy of that?

[-95-]

GREENE: Yes.

BURNS: It pretty well covers his thoughts on it.

GREENE: Did he get involved at all in the drafting of the charter personally?

BURNS: Not much. I really don't know that for sure. See, the way we functioned, I saw him a little on political matters but on substantive matters he would deal directly with Bill vanden Heuvel or with Tony Travia or his staff, like Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman] or somebody who could do it. I was not involved in those conversations so I don't really know for sure.

GREENE: Well, you say that he was disappointed in their decision to submit it as a single package and that there were a lot of things in it that he didn't like. Why did he go ahead and support it when it was politically an unpopular thing to do? Was he obligated at this point to support it under any circumstances?

BURNS: I think he felt it was better than what we had; it was a better document than what we had. It was progress. It wasn't as good as we could have had but it was better than what we had.

GREENE: Was he worried about it publicly?

BURNS: He was telling Rockefeller to give lip service to support him, although...

GREENE: Very reluctantly, not until almost the end.

BURNS: Yes, and then he had his own people knocking the hell out of it but he said he was for it.

GREENE: Was Kennedy involved in getting his support? I think Travia was.

BURNS: Yeah. Kennedy, I don't think he was too much.

GREENE: It probably didn't mean that much at that point.

BURNS: He had his budget director issue a statement saying how much it would cost to implement it, which was fantastic. The Blaine Amendment was probably the chief thing at the time.

GREENE: Was Kennedy at all—well he must have been—concerned to get him.... You know, he was really with the conservative forces on this even though his reasoning may have been very different from theirs. I mean, he ended up with the more conservative elements in the state, whereas Javits and Lindsay and all the liberal groups were opposing it.

[-96-]

BURNS: They were opposing it mostly on just one or two things and scores of things were in there.

GREENE: And he just couldn't go on.

BURNS: He didn't want to do that. He certainly wasn't trying to be a conservative. He was unhappy about the conservative influence but the combination of conservative Democrats and Republicans that are up there dominated the scene.

GREENE: Anyway, was it fairly apparent in the course of the campaign for it that it was going to lose and lose heavily?

BURNS: Yes. They had no newspapers; the newspapers all over the state were knocking the hell out of it.

[INTERRUPTION]

GREENE: Anyway, is there anything else on the constitutional convention?

BURNS: No, I can't think of anything.

GREENE: Well, I have nothing else unless you would like to add something that I don't know about that you think we ought to discuss.

BURNS: I can't think of a thing right now. I'll probably think of something after you leave.

GREENE: Well, let me know and I can come back.

BURNS: All right.

GREENE: What about, in conclusion, saying something about your own observations of the Senator's impact on New York State and the politics of the period that he was here?

BURNS: He had great impact on the state. He was the most dynamic leader the state's had, probably ever. He came into this situation at a time when the party was in disarray. It is beginning to polarize more, it has since he's died. The great middle ground isn't there, you're either left or you're on the right.

He was faced with a dilemma of giving his time and attention to becoming a political leader, which would require almost daily attention to bring the party around to the way he would have liked it. He didn't choose to do that because he was more interested in the Senate and issues before the Senate, world and international and national problems. He was more

[-97-]

interested in being a good senator than he was a party leader. So, he didn't really try, to the extent that he could have, to shape the party. It would have been a most difficult thing to do, he would have been considered a tough guy, tough fellow. He had no patronage. You know, in politics, particularly in this state, power comes from patronage, withholding favors from people that you didn't go along with. His main power was public opinion, as he demonstrated in the Senate. He was able to articulate issues very well.

At the time of his death, you know, we were right in the middle of a big campaign here. Two weeks after he died he would have been in the primary and that would have been the culmination of several years in the state just to see where he would go. I think he would have had a pretty good chance, although early in the campaign it didn't look that good, pretty bad. I think, in fact, that he was the only Democrat, excluding Arthur Levitt, who never tried to exercise any political power at all. He just wanted to be an independent controller and stayed out of partisan politics. He was the only statewide official who just did not have the time or the desire to do that every day.

[END OF INTERVIEW #3]

[-98-]

John J. Burns Oral History Transcript – RFK #3
Name Index

B

Bailey, John Moran, 74
Beame, Abraham D., 77, 78, 80
Bruno, Gerald J., 81
Buckley, Charles A., 77, 86, 86, 87

C

Campbell, Alan K., 93
Carlino, Joseph F., 75
Carter, Clifton C., 74

E

Edelman, Peter B., 96
English, John F. “Jack”, 69, 82, 87
Erway, Julian B., 69

G

Guthman, Edwin O., 71

H

Harriman, William Averell, 69, 76, 85
Hogan, Frank S., 84
Hogan, Larry, 77
Humphrey, Hubert H., 68, 74, 76, 90, 91

J

Javits, Jacob K., 76, 95
Johnson, Claudia Alta “Lady Bird”, 76
Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 68, 74, 75, 76, 90, 91, 95
Johnston, Thomas M.C., 79
Jones, J. Raymond, 69, 70, 81, 89
Julian, Joseph D., 89

K

Keating, Sean, 74
Kelly, Francis, 71
Kennedy, John F., 76, 79
Kennedy, Robert F., 68, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77,
79, 80, 81, 82, 84, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91,
92, 93, 94, 95, 97
Kheel, Theodore Woodrow, 77, 84
Krim, Arthur B., 76

L

Lane, Joseph, 83
Lehman, Orin, 88, 89
Levitt, Arthur, 88, 98
Lindsay, John V., 73, 78, 79, 96
Linowitz, Sol M., 82, 83

M

McCarthy, Eugene J., 91
McDougal, Jerome R., Jr., 75
McKeon, William H., 68, 69, 70, 71, 72
Moynihan, Daniel Patrick, 77

N

Nickerson, Eugene H., 82, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88

O

O’Brien, Lawrence F., 75
O’Connor, Frank D., 77, 78, 82, 83, 84, 88, 89, 90,
91
O’Donnell, James F., 83

P

Peirez, Lawrence, 83
Perkins, James Alfred, 83
Procaccino, Mario Angelo, 78

R

Robb, Lynda Bird Johnson, 76
Rockefeller, Nelson A., 70, 82, 91, 92, 96
Roosevelt, Franklin D., Jr., 82, 85, 86
Ruggieri, Bernard J., 71

S

Samuels, Howard J., 76, 82, 88, 89
Screvane, Paul R., 77, 78
Sedita, Frank A., 88
Silverman, Samuel Joshua, 81
Smith, Stephen E., 75, 81, 83
Sorensen, Theodore C.,
Steingut, Stanley, 68, 69, 73, 77, 86, 87
Stevenson, Adlai E., 72, 89

T

Tannanbaum, Martin, 88
Travia, Anthony J., 69, 70, 72, 73, 91, 92, 93, 96

V

vandal Heuvel, William J., 82, 83, 92, 93, 96
Van Lengen, George, 71

W

Wagner, Robert Ferdinand, Jr., 68, 69, 70, 71, 72,
73, 74
Watson, Thomas J., Jr., 83
Weinstein, Jack B., 88, 89, 93
Weisl, Edwin L., Sr., 71, 74

Z

Zaretzki, Joseph L., 69, 70, 71, 72, 73