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LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW XXII

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Signed by Lawrence F. O'Brien on April 5, 1990.

Accepted by Donald Wilson, Archivist of the United States, April 25, 1990.

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ACCESSION NUMBER 92-33

INTERVIEW XXII

DATE: June 19, 1987

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. O'Brien's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

O: I tendered my resignation directly to the President, as I recounted, on April 10 and that would be approximately ten days after he had announced his non-candidacy. I quickly took a trip to Indiana to survey the scene, met with the Kennedy supporters and returned to Washington. The farewell in the Post Office Department and with the President at the White House took place within a couple of days. I was then in business.

G: Why don't you describe the campaign structure, the personnel and who was doing what?

O: The obvious approach to a Bob Kennedy campaign would be the primary route. It would entail a number of primaries to prove his case, comparable to his brother's experience in 1960. At this point in mid-April as I moved into the campaign, Hubert [Humphrey] had not formalized his announcement. He announced later in April. The lines were clear. Bobby would be traveling the primary route; Hubert would avoid the primaries and concentrate on the major industrial states in a direct delegate effort.

What I was faced with, moving into the situation at this point, was to quickly organize state-level campaigns in each state. The first, an extremely important one, was Indiana. So when I took this quick trip out there, it was a matter of trying to get the feel of it. There was some activity ongoing then but it was pretty informal. There was clearly a contest between Bobby, Gene McCarthy and the Governor of Indiana, and it wasn't going to be easy.

I found that rather than engaging in some grand strategy I could best assist with grass-roots organization. Indiana was an example of how you would proceed. Matt Reese, an old friend and associate going back to West Virginia in 1960, had become, over the years, expert on a basic campaign, particularly in the utilization of phone banks. A major effort was put into setting up a phone bank throughout the state. Between perhaps the twelfth or fifteenth of April and the twenty-seventh represented a ten- or twelve-day participation by me. I issued a memorandum on a Get-Out-The-Vote program for the Indiana primary which was specific. The thrust of it was to assemble several thousand volunteers for the May 7 primary who would ring doorbells in key areas throughout the state to ensure maximum voting among potential Kennedy supporters. The bulk of this manpower, which would be extensive, would come from block captains who had been recruited by Matt Reese through his telephone operation. They would be joined by,

hopefully, a large number of student volunteers, supporters of Bobby.

I noted in launching this Get-Out-The-Vote drive that I made reference to the fact that we would not have significant manpower from labor. Labor was sort of on the sidelines in Indiana in this contest.

G: Why was that?

O: It was early on; Hubert hadn't announced, [Roger] Branigan was in the contest or would be, and labor was not making a move at that point.

G: Would it be correct that Kennedy had more support among the [Walter] Reuther people than he did among the [George] Meany, AFL [people]?

O: That's right. But as far as any mass organized effort by labor you'd have to anticipate that wasn't going to occur; by the same token neither of the other two candidates would have that kind of support. These were troublesome aspects of Indiana that I had noted very early on. You were not going to have any meaningful participation of party leaders at any level in Indiana, because of the involvement of the Governor. With labor generally and party leaders specifically my view was "Let's not spin our wheels; let's concentrate on the phone bank to elicit support and let's work arduously on the youth volunteer side to put this army together to accomplish this grass-roots effort."

The steps that my memorandum recommended be taken went to the fact that Reese had about fifteen thousand block captains in five cities. That included the major cities, obviously: Indianapolis, Gary, South Bend, Fort Wayne and Evansville. They would canvass their blocks. These were actually block captains that had to a great extent been solicited through the phone bank, and on Saturday May 4 prior to the May 7 date, they would canvass their blocks. The thrust of my recommendation was that was all well and good but let's not overlook the fact that we can repeat this effort with the same army on primary day.

So with that, each block captain should be mailed a printed invitation to attend a thank you reception. What we conceived was if we could get these people in groups, fairly good-sized groups, prior to the effort, thank them in advance, it brought us face to face with them. It tested whether or not they were truly motivated. We want to thank them in advance for what they were going to do. The bottom line was we ought to try to at least informally organize them rather than be totally dependent on brief telephone conversations that had taken place over a period of time. We would have soft drinks and some pastry. I envisioned that these various meetings would have two hundred to two hundred and fifty people present. Many would not come to the meeting, perhaps. You would have to be concerned about them not coming, because that might indicate they weren't going to be out there on the block effort or on election day, but let's try it.

Then the student volunteers--they were coming from all over the country. Also,

[Eugene] McCarthy had a large number of student volunteers from around the country that were coming into Indiana to work on his effort. We should distribute these invitations so that at least it wasn't a matter of saying, "Why don't you come to a meeting?" It was "You're invited to a meeting." That in and of itself represented a significant effort involving a great deal of manpower. I pointed out that the list of block captains by streets must be divided into local areas and assigned to the various receptions. We were going to try to check them off, try to get them formally enlisted. I did say that of the fifteen thousand block captains that supposedly existed--because they on the telephone said, "I'll be happy to be block captain," or "willing to be a block captain"--I anticipated that in this context to try to quickly organize them we would probably have a participation of about five thousand people at these various Sunday afternoon receptions.

We set up around the state about ten receptions within a period of few hours, coupled with other receptions that were organized locally that we could not handle through central headquarters. Then we had to distribute the family--Bobby, Teddy, their sisters or whoever--so there would be some presence at every one of these meetings. These meetings would be running over a period of four to six hours in ten to twenty different locations.

That was basically what we were preparing to do and I pointed out that the telephone crew would call back on Monday everyone who did not attend the receptions. This was rather a mammoth task to undertake over a relatively short period of time. Matt Reese's crew would call back and say, "We know that you were unable to attend the reception but we just wanted to advise you that we're anticipating your effort." So you do the best you could. If you have fifteen thousand people say yes and that means you have five thousand people combined with the youth volunteers then you've got a fairly good operation going. It was all emphasis on grass roots.

Complementing that, we arranged newspaper ads for the Monday and Tuesday editions listing the telephone numbers for transportation to the polls and baby sitting services and the rest. We also arranged for trailers to be added to the radio and television spots that we had planned for the wrap-up in the closing days. These trailers would give the same basic information. Outside these five key city areas we had hoped that maybe something similar to this could be undertaken, but this would not be under our thumb. We would just have to hope for the best. We had district coordinators that had been put in place, and it was up to them to see if they couldn't implement this procedure.

- G: Did you have a way of screening some of your local personnel to make sure they were the kind of representatives that you wanted?
- O: You're talking about the coordinators and that--?
- G: Yes.
- O: We had a potential for coordinators, because we had conducted a very intensive primary in

Indiana in 1960 and a very successful one. We also recognized that while we were successful in the primary, we were most unsuccessful in the election in Indiana. The religious issue in Indiana was obvious. The state was split geographically north and south. Southern Indiana had been the hotbed of the Ku Klux Klan in the early days and we recognized that we had difficulty. We did very well in the primary because you did have a massive Get-Out-The-Vote drive, you had a very intensive campaign. But when it came to the election where you had many, many more voters participating we did not fare well. So, with that knowledge and yet having been able to maintain reasonable contact--Jack Kennedy developed a lot of friends in Indiana in those days and even though the years had gone on, there was still a nucleus of friends and former supporters of Jack available. So it was not that difficult to identify capable people and get them to work on your behalf.

G: How did you appeal to the farmers?

O: Basically, we didn't get into appeals. The issues side was pretty much confined to speeches Bobby made around the state, some directed toward the farmers. In a presidential preference primary it's a different ball game. While you can enunciate issues, it is basic political organization. Build a grass-roots organization, whether it is caucus or primary; you are not talking about a mass vote. You have a great advantage if you do it effectively. Your Get-Out-The-Vote drive can make a real dent in a presidential preference primary, while on election day it may not be that perceivable or that effective.

G: Aside from the receptions that you've talked about, how did the candidate spend his time in Indiana?

O: He did a lot of personal campaigning. Going back to Massachusetts Senate campaigns, my view of my role in a campaign was not to be visiting with the candidate often. If I started to see the candidate and he saw me on a daily basis it indicated that one or the other of us wasn't doing our job. A candidate is at center stage. The organizational effort should be carried on without wasting time, frankly, in discussions with the candidate. The candidate should feel comfortable that the organizational side of it is being carried out. That's the best procedure possible.

G: Well, give me some examples of the kinds of places he would go to campaign? Would he shake hands outside factories or. . . ?

O: There was a great deal of that because to organize rallies was difficult. Again, it's the manpower, the utilization of it. Where are you going to apply the manpower, how best to utilize it? Rallies on occasion could be put together. But your best exposure was street-level, the factory gates, walking the main street of a town and then tie in a Rotary Club luncheon, a Kiwanis breakfast, meetings that take place on a regular basis.

It was a campaign very much similar to the West Virginia primary of 1960 and, of course, very similar to the one we had conducted with Jack Kennedy in 1960 in Indiana. Lacking in glamour, motorcades and the rest. That is not what happens in presidential

primaries. Photo opportunities, a lot of that. You were beginning to garner some press. It was early but national press, a handful, decided to take a peek, but it wasn't a great national story.

G: What did you do to neutralize the opposition of the *Indianapolis Star*?

O: There wasn't much we could do. The *Indianapolis Star* was the bane of our existence and of course it continued to be and always was for Democratic candidates. I think particularly the Kennedys were targets. It was very rough.

G: Do you recall specifically in this campaign what it did to antagonize--?

O: It bordered on the obscene, but not quite. It was not a class act, but nothing was startling to us. We had gone through it in 1960. The man's name was [Eugene] Pulliam. He was a powerhouse. The paper spread-eagled the state to a considerable extent. It was comparable to the *Manchester Union Leader* in New Hampshire; but not as vicious. The candidate did visit the editors of all the papers in the state. He toured the offices, hopefully had a sit-down with the top staff and perhaps a question and answer session. Bobby visited the newspaper offices in Indianapolis and did his thing. Everyone was courteous. I visited a couple of times and I can't say that anyone growled at me, but at no time did we feel that this was going to be at all productive. The courtesy of the visits for the record had to take place.

We had people at the county level in Indiana who still held county-level positions. There was a sheriff, a county commissioner here and there, who had local or area impact and visibility who joined the campaign for the second time around. There was a friendly newspaper owner, Jim Fleming, in Fort Wayne and it was a solid newspaper. Jim had been well-disposed to Jack Kennedy, so that was a help. In fact, more than a little help because it really gave us some assistance in South Bend. In that part of the state there was a reasonable amount of Kennedy enthusiasm, but as you got south of Indianapolis--Indianapolis and south--it was difficult.

G: Were the universities a factor? University of Indiana or Notre Dame or any of these?

O: They were the source of some manpower. There were a number of students involved with Bobby, but there were probably more involved with McCarthy. McCarthy had a small army of young people who were perfectly willing to travel. They would bus them in from various parts of the country. You would find them in Indiana and then you'd find them out in Oregon. He had enthusiastic support from a large number of young first-timers in politics. Bobby had a reasonable amount of support, more than the ordinary but not approaching Gene McCarthy's. The fact is that we fared well in the Indiana primary. We did not achieve a majority vote, but we ran a solid first. It was accepted generally by media as a solid victory.

G: Did you expect to do better or not so good?

O: We did about what we expected we could do. We had a short time. I was involved for perhaps a period of three weeks or so. My contribution could only be along the lines I just described.

In the meantime there were other things to do. I recall taking the opportunity to take a look at the Nebraska primary. We had difficulty with the slate of delegates. It became very complex. I decided that the best allocation of my time was to briefly visit Nebraska. Bobby picked up the District of Columbia primary. That was a given.

Hubert came into Omaha to speak at a major Democratic dinner in the midst of the primary. Our people were quite concerned that Bobby would not be at that dinner. It was a function of the state party organization but it happened to be at a time I was in the state. Consequently Hubert and I got together. We were in the same hotel overnight. He was there just for the one evening. It was suggested that we get together for a drink following his speech. We reminded each other of the conversation we had back in early April. Things had not really settled in at that point. Our focus was on McCarthy more than Humphrey, but it was becoming noticeable to us that Hubert, through the efforts of Fred Harris and Fritz Mondale, who were handling his campaign, was making real inroads in delegate commitments, particularly in the industrial east at that point.

It was hard for us to cope. You couldn't ride two horses at once. We had to go the primary route and hope for the best, prove our case. We had to be concerned about Hubert's apparent ability to break through with the party establishment in some areas. We made efforts to see if we couldn't contain him or at least keep the door open in some of these areas. That was simultaneous with the intensive, all-consuming effort through the primary route.

In that conversation that night, we agreed that there was really nothing meaningful to discuss at that point. There hadn't been any animosity. There hadn't been even concentration on the Humphrey candidacy on our part. He was maintaining a broad-based posture, talking about the issues of the day, while his people were moving on the delegate side of it in the non-primary states. We talked at some length, which was not unusual for us over the years. We both had a capacity to talk a lot--probably not say much, but talk a lot. It was very friendly. We did have the drink, and kidded a little. He made reference specifically to our early progress in the primaries, what he had been hearing about organization. I made reference to the fact that he had a lot of gumshoeing going on, that we were hoping to slow him down as we went along. It was again, as always with Hubert, a friendly conversation and it was left indefinite when we would again communicate. It was left open. He could call me. I could call him. He sent his best regards to Bobby and it was clear that we would continue that open door policy. At some time it was very conceivable that we'd want to have serious discussions and it was left at that.

We had some solid people in Nebraska. We had been there before. Jim Greene

and others were still in place. The situation was relatively good. It was one thing to vote for Bobby but they had to focus on the uncommitted slate. That made it intricate and difficult. I received a number of complaints from our local people that we were under-financed; there was little or no literature available. We were playing catch-up in that regard. Bobby, obviously, had not done much of anything organizationally in anticipation of being a candidate. He really was starting from scratch, other than a few of the long-time Kennedy associates. There hadn't been a coherent organizational effort. It was being put together as quickly as you could. You were dependent on these good friends locally to carry on the major part of all this. You'd be giving a little direction, hopefully be helpful. Obviously I took a lot of notes of the complaints and made efforts to ensure quick delivery of materials; it was basic.

- G: One other question on Indiana before we get into Nebraska. Did Senator [Birch] Bayh and [Vance] Hartke play a role?
- O: Play a role--probably the answer is no in official terms. Be helpful indirectly--some of that on the part of Bayh. There again these fellows were caught. After all, what do you have in the Indiana primary? Their governor and Gene McCarthy; in a sense Hubert Humphrey.
- G: Humphrey was known for years as a friend not only of organized labor but also of the farmer, two strong elements in Indiana.
- O: As time went on Hubert garnered a considerable amount of support from organized labor at state and local levels and in a few instances the national level. At that stage there was uncertainty. There was no desire on the part of labor to start some anti-Kennedy effort. There was no reason for them not to look kindly upon Bobby Kennedy. He had certainly a labor voting record, so that wasn't the problem. Hubert was extremely well-liked by organized labor, well-known to organized labor. He had been a long-time participant with them, and time would tell where the bulk of organized labor might land. Meanwhile, you have a McCarthy where there is no interest shown. I don't recall there was any great farm interest shown in McCarthy either. You have the shadow over you that a sitting governor can create difficulties and he's running as a stand-in, we claimed; as a favorite son, he claimed. That was our major problem. So you were dependent on a grass-roots effort.
- G: Were you involved in any of the activities in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination?
- O: No.
- G: Where were you at the time you learned the news?
- O: I had to be in Washington. That was April 4. That was prior to my resignation. In fact, it was just prior to my decision to leave government. I don't recall specific involvement on my part in the aftermath.

G: Anything on Kennedy and the black vote in Indiana?

O: Yes. We made a specific effort in that area. We had solid support from the black community. Interestingly enough, they gravitated to Bobby as they had to Jack, to some extent. I can't say that it was to the degree that they gravitated to Jack, but there was a natural tendency on their part to be supportive of Bobby, with the exception of some black political leaders who were tied into the state organization. We didn't have a problem with McCarthy in that regard. That was something that was available to us and we worked hard at it.

Talking about traveling this primary route, Indiana and Nebraska, the District of Columbia, what became a major problem, obviously, was Oregon. I'm more inclined to think back on Oregon than Nebraska or Indiana. While we knew we were in a tough contest in Oregon, we had the long-time Kennedy supporters in the forefront. We had the woman who had led our effort in 1960 in Oregon in place.

G: Edith Green.

O: Edith Green. A great reputation in the state. Consequently, because of Edith we had a goodly number of the people who had been in place in 1960.

I had had a brief conversation with Gene McCarthy in Indiana one evening just by accident.

G: How did it take place?

O: I was with a group in a restaurant and Gene arrived on the scene. He sat at a far table but he couldn't resist it, I guess. He came over to visit with me. He told me he couldn't understand why I was involved as I was, that he felt he and I had always had great rapport, shared common interests, all with a smile on his face. He made some comment that I couldn't quite understand. I think he actually repeated it in a book he wrote later on, something to the effect that "I'm sure you have another flag in your box." I was never quite sure what he meant but he thought it was funny as the devil. The reference "flag in the box" I guess meant that somewhere along the line I could support him. That was the extent of my contact with him.

Oregon was a difficult situation and we were putting a valiant effort into it. We had a little more time available to us and we had a good group in place, so you couldn't say that it was an organizational failure or a candidate failure or time limitation that impeded our effort. We made a good effort and we put everything we had into it. Incidentally, as I became more involved as we moved along, it was interesting to note that the Bobby team was composed of two or three people of my era back to the Jack Kennedy period or perhaps more. I'm talking about Ted Sorensen, Ken O'Donnell, people of that nature and a group of younger people who had been involved with Bobby in New York in the Senate contest--

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O: --particularly a couple of fellows who were very bright and who had not been involved in the campaigns but were members of Bobby's Senate staff.

G: Who were they?

O: I don't recall their names now. But I was able to discern there was some, I wouldn't call it animosity, but some feeling about me particularly, because I was highly identified. I arrived upon resignation as a cabinet member. It was never stated, but I think there was a feeling that they were being shunted aside or their roles weren't as key as they had anticipated. Whatever it was, I never had a conversation with anyone about it.

(Interruption)

O: Bobby sensed it, I guess, because a little incident occurred which was somewhat troubling. Bobby and I were in a serious discussion--I think it was probably in Oregon in the hotel room. We walked out of the room together and there was a lot of laughter and kidding around next door and Bobby immediately took them to task and said, "This is a serious business and O'Brien and I are breaking our butts and you're sitting around having a good time thinking this is a lark. I don't see the productivity anyway. Why don't you get back to Washington, stay in the Washington office." Of course, there was dead silence and they scurried away. Bobby said to me, "These fellows have to recognize who's running this show." I said nothing.

But I thought that's an indication that there perhaps is a little ill feeling around here, but it was never manifested in any way that I observed. I don't recall now anything that occurred involving the people on the Bobby campaign team that was not constructive.

G: I was going to ask if there was any resentment when you first arrived because it seemed that you had a lot of people in high positions. Steve Smith, I guess, had been designated campaign manager and Sorensen, campaign director and O'Donnell, director of organization.

O: As I've related in our discussions, if I would join the campaign I would direct the campaign. Steve Smith said, "We ought to get out a press release." This was when I had announced my resignation. I had no conversation with Smith during that period. Steve contacted me and said, "We ought to get out a press release and designate your position." I suggested not to. With Ken and Ted and I, we had been together a long time and titles were of no import. Even though I had stayed with Johnson and they had departed the scene, we were back in a race that we were comfortable with.

We went about our business. I made my decision on what area I thought I should concentrate and even though it did not excite me as it did in the Jack Kennedy days, at

least I'd been through a number of campaigns. It was clear that the most important element in that campaign next to the candidate was going to be the nuts and bolts. The primary route calls for it. So I concentrated on those primaries but not totally.

I diverted to other areas of activity from time to time and I went off on my own a good deal. Going to Nebraska, I decided, was the appropriate thing to do at that time. I went on to New York at a later date because I sensed New York could be a potential debacle for us. This was before the California primary. We will pursue Oregon and the fact that we had a closing rally with about fifteen hundred people; that was the best we could do. McCarthy's closing rally in an arena in Portland had over seven thousand people. That was a pretty clear sign that he was doing extremely well and we were fighting an uphill battle. We did from day one in Oregon and suffered defeat.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXII