

John A. Blatnik, Oral History Interview – 2/4/1966
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Biographical Note

Blatnik, a Member of the U.S. House of Representative from Minnesota from 1947 to 1974, discusses John F. Kennedy's time in the House of Representatives, Hubert H. Humphrey's 1960 presidential bid, and changes to the House Rules Committee under the leadership of Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

John A. Blatnik

February 4, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Congressman Blatnik, what was your first contact with John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

BLATNIK: Well, my first contact and most pleasant one, one I shall always remember and treasure, was when we of the first group of young veterans of World War II, a very small group elected to Congress in 1946, came to the 80th Congress, sworn in early in January, 1947, and served in the House of Representatives with Jack Kennedy for the next six years. We became very close personal in addition to having small group meetings with men like Sid Yates [Sidney R. Yates], Melvin Price, John Carroll [John A. Carroll] of Denver, Colorado, who later on would go on the United States Senate, Harold Donohue [Harold D. Donohue] of Worcester, Massachusetts. We were sort of young bachelors—only a small group of us. At that time the average age in the House, and certainly in the Senate, was way above the present age, so we young fellows, for our own security and comfort and, I suppose, solace, and to bolster our own morale, sort of had our own very, very small informal group. So, many an evening we'd get together. A session or two after we were here, I think young FDR, Jr. [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] joined us, too. We became very close friends. So that was the beginning of my memories with him. I recall in the early years we were going play tennis.

Jack, at that time had a limp; he was very thin and the flare up of malaria was quite regular. And I was commiserating with him because at that time I was having problems with amoebic dysentery that I picked up in Yugoslavia where I was with OSS [Office of Strategic Services] behind enemy lines for almost nine months. We were both waiting to get in better physical shape to start playing tennis. I played a little, but he never did get well enough to play. On the contrary, he finally ended up walking on crutches. He'd disappear for long periods of time when he was really ill.

I recall back in 1951 through '52, from then on, we saw very little of him. He was very busy running for the United States Senate, and we were getting constant word about what was going on up in Massachusetts. He was extremely busy at that time in a very, very difficult race against incumbent United States Senator Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge].

O'CONNOR: In the meetings that you had with him did you ever talk about policies or did you ever learn anything about conflicts with him or question...

BLATNIK: In the House he was very reticent. He was very reticent about talking too much about the war. Of course, all of us in this small group at that time didn't talk too much about it. We knew what he had gone through, and he knew what a lot of us had gone through. He didn't talk too much about the future.

To be frank, we never suspected he'd be moving on—we thought in time to the US Senate, yes; that didn't surprise us. He was keenly interested in government. I think he was more interested in learning. He was keenly interested, obviously, in the immediate problems not only of Boston but of Massachusetts and concentrated his efforts and his attention on those problems rather than anything of national or international importance at that time.

O'CONNOR: Did you ever discuss any questions such as the difficulties regarding veterans' problems?

BLATNIK: Yes, he was very.... There was quite a bit of legislation, especially from 1948 on, when

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quite a large group, a much larger group, of veterans of World War II joined the Congress. He had a great interest in the problem of veterans and the young generation.

O'CONNOR: We have been told by another man that while President Kennedy was a congressman he had been asked to cooperate with several other members—Jacob Javits [Jacob K. Javits], I believe, was one of the member—to eliminate communists from veterans organizations. Did he ever talk to you about that, or did you ever discuss it with him?

BLATNIK: No, I don't remember that. I don't remember discussing that point.

O'CONNOR: All right. Do you have any specific remembrances of, perhaps, conflicts you might have had with him on issues during your years in as a congressman?

BLATNIK: No conflicts at all. The relationship was a very positive and a genuine one—somewhat restricted at times, not restrained. He was bothered; he was not well. There was no question about it. And it just took a great effort to concentrate on the problems. They were great right after the war. We were, of course, freshmen, and, you know, in addition to being freshmen, you were supposed to be seen and not heard. In addition to that you have this constant diversion, you know, of illness, not feeling well, and pain. And I am very sympathetic to that situation because I had my little share of it—to a much lesser degree, of course, but it was there. And we were, you know, competing with the veterans, and the problems were rushing pell-mell, both national and international. So we had our hands full just trying to keep up as observers and students on the periphery, so to say, just trying to get a better idea what was going on, and certainly were not in too much of a position to try to prescribe what to do about what was going on—what to do legislative-wise, that is, until in later years.

O'CONNOR: Do you think his health problem affected his effectiveness in Congress?

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BLATNIK: I think so, yes. Of course it did. He'd be gone for long periods of time. And you could just see it; he'd hit sieges and slowly begin to decline and slip downward. Never say a word about it. He'd never complain. You could see it bothered him, and someone with him is very much aware of it, day in and day out.

O'CONNOR: All right. After he became a senator there was a problem that arose over Trieste, and you spoke on that problem. John Kennedy spoke on it also and he had proposed a plebiscite in Trieste where you criticized when the US and Great Britain later withdrew from Zone A. I believe it was in Trieste, and turned that zone over to Italy. You criticized that move, and I wonder if you ever talked to him about that and came in conflict with him.

BLATNIK: Yes, we did. I knew the situation quite well as I saw it and as I understood it from the Yugoslav point of view which gave me a better sort of an introspective view of the problem from our own US national point of view and interest. I was in Yugoslavia for the last eight and a half, nine months of the war. I was in Trieste several months right after World War II; I sat in on a good deal of the meetings in Trieste and near Trieste that established a Zone A and Zone B. I was very familiar with the Italian point of view, too, as well as the Yugoslav and the British interests

there. And I knew it would be a trouble spot. It couldn't remain divided for a long time, but we weren't able to do too much at that time.

In fact it wasn't until—you'll have to help me recollect the dates—1953 when by the sheer chance in the latter part of September I went over to Europe with a friend of mine, my assistant L.J. Andolsek [Ludwig J. Andolsek], who is now United States Civil Service Commissioner, and George Bookbinder, who was my buddy from OSS who was in Romania in World War II. By sheer chance you were over when the Trieste crisis broke out and were able, knowing the situation, to get across the line, get into Yugoslavia, talk to our own relatives and to friends and later on to Yugoslav officials, talk to our own military mission in Trieste and Yugoslavia, later on got a chance to talk with Marshal Tito himself, had

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several talks with Madame Luce [Clare Boothe Luce], the Ambassador to Rome at that time, and then with Larry Norstad [Lauris Norstad], our very good friend from Minnesota who was Deputy at the NATO headquarters, and General Alfred Gruenther [Alfred M. Gruenther]. He was simply terrific. He had a great understanding of the situation. I think it was by accident more than anything else because I had no official capacity there outside of the fact that I knew the country.

I got first indication from Marshal Tito that he was prepared to negotiate with no holds barred, no strings, no procedural obstacles such as those which the Russians were constantly bringing up in the United Nations. As you recall, we did finally negotiate the problem quietly and resolved the matter. I didn't get a chance to go into too much detail with Senator Kennedy at that time outside of one or two personal discussions. I think it was just a partial difference of opinion on it.

O'CONNOR: Well, another problem that the two of you came together on in one fashion or another was the problem of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

BLATNIK: I'm glad you brought that up. I thought of that earlier. That's one of the first problems we worked on. He was very interested in economic development of Boston. He talked at great length about the problems of any area—not just his own city or state, but an area. He was thinking soundly and correctly of economic entities, sections of the country.

O'CONNOR: New England bloc.

BLATNIK: Right. And he talked about when you rely on a single industry, whether is be textiles or washers, you're going to have problems. I had the same problem coming up at that time because I got into politics through resource use, not through my knowledge or familiarity of the government or law or legislation. I was interested in the timber resources and iron ore resources of the upper Lake region, northern Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. So that was the first thing that drew us together.

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The specific problem was the St. Lawrence Seaway. We felt that to add a fourth coastline to the United States, leading over two thousand miles from Montreal westerly, terminating in Duluth in my district, would definitely be to the economic advantage of the entire North American continent—both the Canadian people and United States people—and also in the national interest. And Jack was most helpful; in fact, the only two legislators were Jack Kennedy and Senator Aiken [George D. Aiken] at that time. I think practically all the others from New England were in strong opposition to the seaway.

O'CONNOR: That's right. It was surprising that John Kennedy voted for that issue.

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Why do you think he did vote for that issue?

BLATNIK: Well, again, he had a national perspective, at least a regional perspective, and a national perspective, because we discussed this in some detail. You're not going to make progress by keeping another part of the country poor and thereby be relatively better than they are. It's sort of a false sense of economic supremacy, you know, in that manner. He felt, as I felt, that is you improve economically, in whatever was you can, any part of the country, that contributes to the sum total upgrading of the entire structure of the country.

O'CONNOR: A charge has been leveled at him that he voted for that issue because of his father's [Joseph P. Kennedy] influence in view of the fact that his father owned that Merchandise Mart in Chicago. What do you think of that charge?

BLATNIK: I don't recall that that entered.... No, that didn't enter the situation at all. There was one group.... Chicago was strongly for it; Milwaukee stood—any port in the Great Lakes.... Our own city of Duluth was strong for it; so was Superior Wisconsin. No, that had nothing to do with his father.

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O'CONNOR: All right. You were one of the leading members of the Democratic Study Group in the mid-fifties, and still to this day, as far as that goes. I wondered what the opinion of the Democratic Study Group was on John Kennedy as a senator in the early stages and perhaps as it might have changed as he grew older.

BLATNIK: That's a difficult one. The Democratic Study Group—I think those few of us that started it.... I was one of the original founders, with

members such as Congressman Eugene McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy], who is now in the Senate, and Lee Metcalf, Congressman Thompson [Frank Thompson, Jr.] of New Jersey, earlier Chet Holifield [Chester E. Holifield], one of the senior original members. Our relationship with Senator Kennedy was more on a personal and individual basis. It was a good relationship, a good, positive relationship. One of mutual respect, but also warm, genuine admiration. We always regretted we never got to develop in a fuller sense of the word, partly because he was gone a good deal of the time recuperating, and then shortly thereafter, after 1951, he became occupied with the very difficult Senate race, which confined him. It was always our great regret we never.... Although we had a good start at getting acquainted personally and intimately it never developed the way it would have, had we had more time.

O'CONNOR: I would had expected some harsh feelings on the part of the Democratic Study Group, or certain members at any rate, toward John Kennedy because he did not have the reputation as a liberal in Congress.

BLATNIK: No, I wouldn't use the word harsh. Again probably some felt a little critical, felt he should sort of follow the so-called liberal line, be more with the group. He was, in a sense, politically and in the Congress, legislative-wise, a loner. He wouldn't talk too much, wouldn't say too much, wouldn't make too many speeches on the floor. Neither did we, by and large. We would get into some of the battles, but we would consult with each other more on what we should do and discuss the pros and cons of an issue before we voted and, by and large, we voted together, whereas John Kennedy pretty well kept his own counsel, and many times we didn't know until the

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last minute how he'd vote. No one made a real issue of it, though. There were some who did express some disappointment, felt that he ought to be more liberal, ought to be with us.

O'CONNOR: On issues such as the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] issue, I was thinking of in particular.

BLATNIK: Yes. Well, that was a major issue, yes.

O'CONNOR: Did the opinion in the Democratic Study Group change at all after he became President?

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: What were their attitudes toward the policies he tried to put through?

BLATNIK: Oh, my, his program was tremendous. At that time for a while, I was president of the Democratic Study Group, a much larger group, and we

really battled our hearts out because he had an excellent program. He just blossomed forth as a leader far beyond our wildest expectations. It was a most welcome type of surprise. He just matured just as though he came out of a cocoon; as though he shed his cloak of illness which seemed to be hobbling him right along and just emerged as a man and began to speak all these things that we had always been talking about and dreaming about, and here this man said them like he meant that he was going to do something about it. But unfortunately, one of the few times.... Here we were in the minority all the time or most of the time. You recall when we came into Congress in 1947, although we had a Democratic President Truman [Harry S. Truman], a great battler and leader and a great pro in the White House, we lost the Congress.

O'CONNOR: That's true.

BLATNIK: So we were in the minority at that time. And we sort of plodded along, and by 1952 we lost the White House. President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]

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was President, and again we lost the Congress. Then we gained the Congress, but Eisenhower was in the White House for eight years. And finally it wasn't until 1960 when President Kennedy came in and at that time we lost seats in the House, which was extraordinary—one of those unusual things—because normally in a presidential year, the party that captures or gains the White House also gains seats in both the House and the Senate. And we lost about twenty-five seats.

O'CONNOR: What do you think the reason for that was?

BLATNIK: I don't know.

O'CONNOR: Do you think religion had anything to do with it?

BLATNIK: Yes, it did on a regional basis. There were parts, I know, in my own state of Minnesota and elsewhere in the Midwest where religion did have something to do with it, and other places it didn't. It wasn't a national trend; it was a spotty thing that depended on regional or local situations and attitudes. But we battled, and it was a difficult two years. We barely maintained our own in the off-election year. So we were always off-phase here—when we had the votes in Congress, Eisenhower was in the White House; when finally President Kennedy got in the White House, we lost seats and votes in the Congress.

O'CONNOR: Okay, lets go back to the 1956 Convention. Minnesota—Kefauver [Estes Kefauver], I believe, won the primaries against Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] in 1956.

BLATNIK: Right.

O'CONNOR: But Minnesota also went for Kefauver for Vice President.

BLATNIK: Right.

O'CONNOR: Was this because of John Kennedy's farm policy, or was there another reason?

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BLATNIK: No, it had very little to do with any opposition to John Kennedy or any of his policies. Offhand, let me remind you, not that we're provincial or parochial—at least we think we're not, and I'm sure we're not out there—but East is a long ways away from us, and John Kennedy was not well known, very little known in the Midwest. And what little was known of him was identified with things that didn't attract too much support or favorable attention. One was the money, the bankers of the East. You know, this was the political background of the early Non-Partisan League days, the Progressive days of the LaFollettes in Wisconsin, the big fat-cats of the East. So it wasn't anything personal against him, but Kennedy was mainly identified with that Eastern crowd, was out East, the big money crowd, whereas, Kefauver, on the other hand, with his coonskin cap approach, his sidewalk campaigning, shaking every hand he could reach, typified what the Midwest liked, the rugged man of the soil, the grass roots man coming out and meeting people on a person to person basis. So, of course, the people responded very favorably to Senator Kefauver.

O'CONNOR: It is said sometimes that Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] caused the Minnesota delegation to go Kefauver in 1956. Do you go along with that?

BLATNIK: No, that is completely incorrect because our state convention endorsed Adlai Stevenson, and Senator Humphrey and myself and practically all of the party regulars go with the convention. We feel that the convention is the authoritative body of the grass roots, composed of delegates from all over the state, and they establish the policy which we call the platform, and they make the endorsements—and we with them, of course, exchanging our thinking; we're part of the party. But, no, Senator Humphrey, because of the party endorsement, and myself and Gene McCarthy and all the others from Minnesota, Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman] (at that time running for Governor) supported Adlai Stevenson.

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O'CONNOR: But in the vice presidential race...

BLATNIK: But the grass roots just took away.... We were very friendly with

Kefauver, very close friends; there was no personal feuding at all. But Senator Kefauver just took away the state endorsement from the convention, took it away in the primary.

O'CONNOR: All right, we can move on to the period 1959-60. There has been a great deal of discussion about the Duluth meeting of Senator Humphrey's forces or cohorts, July 11, 1959, after ceremonies celebrating the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and I believe you were there with Orville Freeman and Eugene McCarthy and Senator Humphrey, of course, and his wife [Muriel Fay Buck Humphrey]. Could you give us some information about that meeting.

BLATNIK: Yes, I recall the...

O'CONNOR: Well, there have been various interpretations of it.

BLATNIK: Just what aspects of it are interested in?

O'CONNOR: Oh, it is said that Senator Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, and you yourself were very cautious about Senator Humphrey's campaign beginning at that time or very pessimistic about the way the approach to politics in Minnesota and the campaigning in Minnesota would affect the rest of the country. Do you recall any discussions or decision as to what sort of an approach might be used?

BLATNIK: Yes, I recall discussion, but I must confess I don't recall anything nearly as definitive as that. It was a discussion in a rather rambling sense and in a more preliminary sense.

O'CONNOR: There is also a question as to whether Senator Humphrey really decided at that Duluth meeting to be off and running for the presidency.

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BLATNIK: No, no.

O'CONNOR: He had not decided at that point? What really was the purpose of that meeting? Just to discuss the possibilities?

BLATNIK: Yes, as a preliminary discussion. And as Senator Humphrey did, he talked with friends certainly all over the state, first of all home-town friends—home-state friends, I should say, and home-town friends in the Twin City area—and to friends elsewhere in the country, getting a spot check and a spot evaluation from reliable and responsible people who are yet friends of his and who would tell him what the realities of the situation were rather than what he may have wanted to hear.

O'CONNOR: Was there much enthusiasm at that meeting? Was there much feeling that he really could become President?

BLATNIK: Yes, on some parts tremendous enthusiasm.

O'CONNOR: How about on your part?

BLATNIK: On my parts always. I've known Hubert Humphrey so well, since way before the war—back actually to 1939-40. He is a tremendously able man. Far more able than is really recognized. Unfortunately, because he is so articulate—and while he speaks at a terrific rate of speed and articulation, his mind is even faster than his rate of speaking—people get an idea that he is sort of a glib type of person. He's not. This man has a real mind and a real understanding of problems, a sense of duty and a real sense of people. The thing that impressed me about Senator Humphrey at that time was how the older people would respond to him, as they did later on to Senator Kennedy. These older mothers would respond to him, as well as the younger generation, certainly. But the older folks—you'd think they wouldn't have too much faith or respect for these so-called young whipper-snappers. But they had tremendous confidence. Many of these older folks would say, "Oh my, that young man. Some day he is going to be the United States President."

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O'CONNOR: It is sometimes said that he really didn't believe that he would make it all the way, but what he hoped to do was gather enough strength to influence the drawing up of the platform or influence the candidate that was chosen. Do you feel that was so, that was felt at that meeting or that was felt by someone?

BLATNIK: I think that would be part of an end product. I think you would make an all out drive for the nomination, and if you don't make it, you don't say it was all for naught. You don't achieve that as a second goal, but you accept that as a secondary end product, which is all on the plus side and which bolsters the justification for making an all-out effort for the nomination.

O'CONNOR: How about the question of the decision to go the route of the primary? Whose decision was this? Do you recall? It is sometimes credited to James Rowe [James H. Rowe] of Washington.

BLATNIK: I couldn't answer that, and I sat in on some of the meetings, and James Rowe was there when we discussed that. I couldn't answer that. I think the only person who could would be Senator Humphrey himself, or Vice President Humphrey now.

O'CONNOR: Do you think that was the correct decision?

BLATNIK: Yes, it was.

O'CONNOR: Do you think that was the only chance he had?

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: How was the problem of financing Senator Humphrey's campaign? Was that a problem?

BLATNIK: Oh, that was a major problem. That was the major problem. I don't care how good a human being is, just the physical demands of energy,

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you know, trying to appear before as many people as you can, day in and day out, evening after evening, you just have so many limitations, and with mass media, using television, using full-page ads well done—and skillfully done, not in an amateurish way, which means you have your public relations to do it, this is their business—this costs a tremendous amount of money, and Hubert did not have that kind of money.

O'CONNOR: Do you think it really would have made the difference, for instance, in the Wisconsin primary or in the West Virginia primary?

BLATNIK: Gosh, I'd hate to be the speculator or Monday morning quarterback. I think it made a big difference.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Okay.

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: How about the organization of Senator Humphrey's campaign, particularly, for example, in the Wisconsin primary? There have been many criticisms levied at his organization.

BLATNIK: Well, our organization wasn't nearly as good as the Kennedy organization.

O'CONNOR: Do you think it was as good as it could have been?

BLATNIK: Yes, with the limitation that mainly, it was just volunteers. I was there. We just went on our own. We had no expenses paid. Again, finances were a major item, and other friends who would give all the time they could—they could only take so much time from their duties, whether they be schoolteachers,

or businessmen—professional people could only give limited amount of time. Whereas, frankly, on the Kennedy organization there were many people, able, fine young men and women working and local Wisconsin people who were hired full time just to go out and concentrate and were assigned specific jobs in specific areas so they could accomplish most of those objectives.

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O'CONNOR: All right. How about, specifically, the part of the organization that was trying to gain the Negro vote, for example in Wisconsin or in other places? Sometimes the criticism has been leveled that this group was distinct from the rest of the Humphrey organization and that this was a mistake. Do you agree with this or not?

BLATNIK: I'm not too familiar on that. I recall it, but I'm not familiar enough to comment intelligently.

O'CONNOR: Okay. How about anti-Catholicism in Wisconsin? Do you think it was much of an issue there?

BLATNIK: What?

O'CONNOR: Anti-Catholicism in Wisconsin.

BLATNIK: Yes, it was in some areas.

O'CONNOR: How about the labor question? Do you feel the rank and file of the labor organizations in Wisconsin supported...

BLATNIK: They were split. They were split in their support both of Senator Humphrey and Senator Kennedy.

O'CONNOR: One general question about the Wisconsin primary. Why do you think you lost?

BLATNIK: First, I think there was the all-out effort, the money and better organization. I think it was best summarized by Senator Humphrey himself when he said, "When all the Kennedys were there at one time..." As I recall, his mother [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] came there—charming, wonderful woman. And Senator Humphrey said he felt like a small little grocery man competing with a chain store or something to that effect. That would be number one. And two, looking back, there was just an additional something

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about Senator Kennedy that had the greater appeal. He created a tremendously colorful and appealing figure. I can't just describe it, but he did have a strong appeal. So with a good organization and with strong appeal and a tremendous amount of hard work, they did a great job and pulled off an upset, and that's what it was in Wisconsin.

O'CONNOR: What specifically did you do for the Senator in Wisconsin? What districts did you work in?

BLATNIK: I'd go to areas that I knew. Of course, I was in parts of Milwaukee where there were some Polish people and Yugoslav people. I went up to Sheboygan and in those areas, the northeastern part of Wisconsin.

O'CONNOR: Would that be the Seventh District?

BLATNIK: I forget the number of the district. And then I know the area, sort of west-central, toward the twin cities from Eau Claire, Black River Falls, that whole area reaching westerly to the Minnesota border and reaching all the way north to Superior, which is right across the bay of Lake Superior from Duluth. You see, much of the television from Duluth covers that whole area of Wisconsin, and further South is television from Minneapolis and St. Paul that covers that part of western Wisconsin. So in those areas I had a pretty good entrée, and I had been there before on numerous occasions. I had a good introductory start to reach those people.

O'CONNOR: Did you ever run into or hear of a man named Paul Corbin working in that area?

BLATNIK: Yes, it rings a bell. I don't place him.

O'CONNOR: He was in the Seventh District, and some people said he was important. I wondered if you knew anything about him.

BLATNIK: Yes.

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O'CONNOR: Did you go to West Virginia for the Senator?

BLATNIK: Not as much as Wisconsin. I think I spent about a total of two weeks in West Virginia.

O'CONNOR: Do you know who made the decision, or do you think it was a proper decision to go to West Virginia after Wisconsin?

BLATNIK: Yes, it was. It was a proper decision. Somehow in West Virginia we just never got the full story about Hubert Humphrey across to the

people. I thought, and I think the Senator himself felt, too, he would have an easier problem reaching the people there. They were so similar to the people I came from in the iron ore areas, but I don't know just what happened. We got in, and it was just entirely different. Their local political structure was much more rigid and stricter and under tighter control than we ever expected. We don't have nearly that type of control in Minnesota, or even in Wisconsin, that we found in West Virginia. That was the established pattern of political operation—the local machine operation, organized on a county basis. You would reach one or two people and, by gosh, that's how the country went. And we were just never able to break through.

O'CONNOR: How about the question of criticism of Senator Humphrey's war record that came out in West Virginia? Did you ever hear the Senator talk about that?

BLATNIK: Some. And I know it well. I know the situation well. I had some pretty harsh words with Frank Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.], who's a real good friend of mine and still is, about that. And he apologized later and admitted to me he'd made a mistake.

O'CONNOR: What reason did he give you for saying those things?

BLATNIK: Well, I don't know. I know Frank so well and so favorably. I think he's a tremendous man, a man who's never used all the potential that is his.

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I don't know. Frank probably just got carried away in one of his speeches, got a little emotional, and just hit a little hard and hit below the belt.

O'CONNOR: Well, do you think it was his decision that he just got carried away?

BLATNIK: I think so.

O'CONNOR: Or do you feel it was a decision taken on the part of the Kennedy organization to do that?

BLATNIK: No, I think it was his decision.

O'CONNOR: That's what has been said by the Kennedy organization. Some people have said that that really was only the Kennedy organization disowning that bad decision. You don't feel that that was their decision?

BLATNIK: No, I don't.

O'CONNOR: You feel that was just a slip by Franklin Roosevelt?

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: The pounding of the religious theme in West Virginia. Again and again it was pointed out that John Kennedy was a Catholic, but he should not be voted against because he was a Catholic. Did Senator Humphrey think this was also hitting below the belt?

BLATNIK: I don't know. I really don't know.

O'CONNOR: Any other comments on the pre-Convention campaign? Senator Humphrey's campaign.

BLATNIK: No, except he made a good try, and it was all sort of a catch-as-catch-can; it wasn't nearly as smooth running and well financed, well established organizational operation as the Kennedy operation was.

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O'CONNOR: It is sometimes said that the Kennedy camp put pressure on Senator Humphrey's financial supporters, and an example given is rumored pressure that John Bailey [John Moran Bailey] put on William Benton [William B. Benton] of Connecticut. Do you know anything about this?

BLATNIK: No, I don't.

O'CONNOR: Did you ever see any evidence of anything like that?

BLATNIK: No, I didn't. I wasn't in position to see. It could have taken place, and I would be unaware of it.

O'CONNOR: Would you care to discuss the relations between Orville Freeman and Senator Humphrey at the time of Wisconsin and after that.

BLATNIK: I'd rather not. I have friendly relations with both. In particular, I'm very, very close, of course, with Hubert Humphrey, although when Orville Freeman ran for governor, we went all out in our district and gave him the biggest plurality of any district in the state, and I think at least once out of the three times he made the governorship, or perhaps twice—certainly once and perhaps twice—the pluralities he got in our district made the difference in putting him in. So we have gone all out for him, but, personally, I've been closer to Hubert Humphrey all these years.

O'CONNOR: You don't care to discuss, then, what it was that estranged those two

men?

BLATNIK: I'd rather not. I think it is something that the two men themselves would have to discuss or explain.

O'CONNOR: Do you know whether that estrangement has ended or would you care to comment on that?

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BLATNIK: I think so. They've been working very closely and cooperatively all the years Senator Humphrey was in the Senate, and especially when he was the Whip, in support of farm legislation. And boy, there were some tough bills. We did the same on the House side. We went all out to support the Secretary of Agriculture, the Administration-Kennedy bills and later the Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] program. You notice on the bills we'd lose by six, eight, ten or twelve votes. I forget how many. And I think a few we barely won by two or three or four vote margins.

O'CONNOR: Getting into the Convention itself, then, before we run out of time. The Minnesota delegation was very, very badly split. Freeman was for Kennedy; McCarthy was for Lyndon Johnson or Stevenson or someone else. There were delegates for Stevenson; there were delegates for Humphrey. Would you discuss at all the split that was involved there?

BLATNIK: That would be a long story. I was right in the middle of it. We came close to bringing them together; for a while it looked like we would. It was quite a situation. No, I'd rather not comment on that.

O'CONNOR: That's a story we'd love to have, sir. I don't suppose the split has left any hard feelings.

BLATNIK: No, it hasn't.

O'CONNOR: It is reported that Herbert Lehman [Herbert Henry Lehman], I believe, came in and swayed some delegates that Orville Freeman thought he had for Kennedy. Do you know whether that's true, or do you have any comment?

BLATNIK: No, I don't know about that.

O'CONNOR: All right. Any comments on Freeman for Vice President question?

BLATNIK: I'm sorry. Repeat that.

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O'CONNOR: Do you have any comments on the Freeman for Vice President question?

BLATNIK: No, I have no comments on that.

O'CONNOR: You, I believe, were involved in the civil rights plank, pushing the civil rights plank at the Convention. Is that correct?

BLATNIK: Way back in 1948?

O'CONNOR: No, this is 1960. I thought you were involved in that.

BLATNIK: Oh, yes. I'm sorry. Yes. In the Platform Committee.

O'CONNOR: Would you have any comments on John Kennedy or, particularly, Robert F. Kennedy in connection with this?

BLATNIK: No, it was either Jack or Bob. I forget the name of that man. We were in contact with him. A very impressive young man.

O'CONNOR: You don't know who that would have been?

BLATNIK: No, I don't. I'm embarrassed. I can't even just think of it offhand.

O'CONNOR: Well, we should be able to get this...

BLATNIK: This whole thing was under.... The main thing I know I worked closely with Chet Bowles [Chester B. Bowles] at that time. And with Chet, his assistant was.... Oh my, I knew his name—Chayes [Abram Chayes]—later on worked for the State Department.... Because Chet Bowles asked me for a while to preside and handle the parliamentary procedure so they could handle the substantive language and amendments that were made from the floor and during the course of the final proceedings were adopted plank by plank—

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the whole platform—and rushed it off to the Convention.

O'CONNOR: With regard to the period from the nomination to the inauguration, it is said that you were offered a post in the Kennedy Administration. Would you care to discuss this?

BLATNIK: No, there was a very good possibility for a while—a very good possibility of either the Department of Interior, in which I was

interested because my background in resource use and chemistry, and later on another opportunity developed, or possibility I should say, in the Department of HEW [Health, Education and Welfare].

O'CONNOR: Was a post ever offered?

BLATNIK: Now, I would rather not comment because I had a very, very close personal relationship with the President himself and worked very closely with him—closely and confidentially, to be honest.

O'CONNOR: All right. Contacts during the presidency and issues during the presidency. There was a struggle, of course, to change the Rules Committee that you were very much involved in—or at least from some points of view.

BLATNIK: Yes, very much all the way through for about over a period of six years—now eight years. Chet Holifield and I together worked as a team and took a lead in constant effort every new Congress. Particularly when we had a large working majority and the circumstances warranted, we tried to get the Rules Committee changed.

O'CONNOR: Well, specifically, I was thinking of the appearance Sam Rayburn [Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn] made before the Democratic Study Group. It is said that he discussed his

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plans, his hopes to purge Representative Colmer [William Meyers Colmer] of Mississippi. And he explained to the Group, so I am told, that after he had stated that he would like to purge Colmer, some of the Southern gentlemen stated that they would in that event try to purge Adam Clayton Powell [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.], I believe it was.

BLATNIK: It's not quite that way.

O'CONNOR: Well, could you tell me how it was?

BLATNIK: I won't go into all the details, but that version was gotten around to use Adam Clayton Powell argument. It was our contention that what happened at previous Congresses was the responsibility and the duty of those Congresses, and any new Congress is a power and entity unto itself either to make any new rules or adopt the same old rules or make any changes it wants to. It has that authority and that right, the majority in control. But we were strong. We felt that the Rules Committee just had to be changed, and I was prepared to make the motion challenging the right of several Congressmen—John Bell Williams, and particularly Bill Colmer on the Rules Committee—who had opposed the Democratic nominee who was Senator Kennedy,

for the presidency, and opposed the Democratic platform—not only opposed them, but had gone on to campaign for another party, other candidates, and another platform, which was their right. We don't deny them that right at all. But I do deny them the right, after they lose, to come and sit in the councils of the Democratic majority, and because of our Democratic majority which we got through our efforts and under President Kennedy's leadership, that they then have the prerogatives of seniority, and the power and authority that goes with that seniority in an important committee like Rules.

Chet Holifield and I discussed that personally with Speaker Sam Rayburn, a great man, wonderful man, a great American. He didn't like the word "purge." It just had a negative.... And I can understand why. But it had to be done we felt. So as a compromise, he agree that he'd enlarge the Rules Committee, which was something that Chet

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Holifield and I had urged upon him earlier—two or four years previously. Still keep the two to one ratio, I believe it was eight to four, just enlarge it, and keep the two to one ratio and enlarge the Rules Committee by as many as five to ten. And he agreed to that. We had to literally force him to do it in a way, and we hated to do it, but it had to be done.

But once we got the ball under way, the Speaker responded magnificently with the real leadership which only he could demonstrate. As you recall, he carried the fight to the floor to show what a gentleman he was. I strongly advised against it because the minutes you brought the fight to the floor.... I was set to fight within our caucus. I felt that this was a Democratic family affair that we should settle within our own family circles and not make an official matter of the House. But Sam Rayburn's great love of the House and his sense of responsibility to all members of the House, to both sides, made him willing to risk defeat by bringing it to the floor. This enabled Charlie Halleck [Charles A. Halleck] to bring all his Republican forces to support Howard Smith [Howard W. Smith] and all of his Southern Democratic and Dixiecratic forces. And I forget the margin, I believe it was only four or five vote margin...

O'CONNOR: That's right.

BLATNIK: ...by which he finally made that change in the floor for a two year term.

O'CONNOR: Was Sam Rayburn in favor of changing the House Rules Committee at all? Was he proposing either enlarging or purging? Did he favor one over the other originally before you convinced him?

BLATNIK: No, he didn't.

O'CONNOR: He was in favor of letting it stay as it was?

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: I see. It is sometimes said that he planned to enlarge the Rules Committee all along.

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BLATNIK: No, he didn't like the enlarging. Again, it had a negative connotation to him; it reminded him, and he used this example, of the Supreme Court packing problem that President Roosevelt [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] had at that time. But he hated the word "purge." He detested it even much more. He took what, in his eyes, he thought was the lesser of two evils in a situation where he really didn't want to move, but while he was sympathetic to their point of view, he didn't really feel that he ought to move. And those of us who strongly felt that he should move for the party.... For the best interests of the party, for the Presidency, to support the President, and to preserve the integrity of the Democratic party, it had to be done even though it would be painful. It'd be like removing an abscessed tooth—I used this illustration—it will hurt like hell, but oh, my, what a relief after it's over with. Later on, he agreed with us. But he didn't like the word purge, so he took what in his eyes was the lesser of two evils, the "packing" or the enlarging of the Rules Committee. So that was the course which he pursued, and in the other case to be even more fair, and again to his credit, to do it the hard way. Instead of doing it right within the Democratic caucus, in which we had much greater strength, he took the fight to the floor which allowed Republicans to participate in the opposition. Which is all to the great credit to this great man, this fair and honorable man, Sam Rayburn.

O'CONNOR: Besides you and Chet Holifield, who else pushed this toward the vote?

BLATNIK: The credit belongs to Frank Thompson, Dick Bolling [Richard W. Bolling], Jimmy Roosevelt [James Roosevelt], Sidney Yates—as I recall he was here in the early groups. Quite a small group. I hate to mention names because you always leave out some good friends who also did yeoman service because, to be frank, it was really putting your neck out on a black in that move.

O'CONNOR: Did you get any support at all from any liberal Republicans?

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BLATNIK: I should know, and I don't recall. I think we did, but it was very limited. I don't think more than three or four votes.

O'CONNOR: All right. Any other comments on that very question of the Rules Committee?

BLATNIK: No, but I will say this. I know I have given a very sketchy sort of outline. It's funny how it seems so far away. There are many, many details of the whole operation that would have made a very interesting chapter in a book such as *Advise and Consent*.

O'CONNOR: It certainly would.

BLATNIK: I remember all the details, the many phone calls, the many moves you made. Talk to one person. It's like playing a chess game. The laborious, tedious processes of check and double check and countercheck move and counter move and shifting back and forth not knowing whether or not you really do have this strength and finally you think you have, yet you're not sure. It wasn't as simple as it sounds. I've given a very, very sketchy summary recollection of what actually did happen.

O'CONNOR: I wish you could remember some of those details because we'd love to hear them. Moving on to another question, you were very much involved in the investigation of the roads scandal in Massachusetts in 1962. In fact, I believe March of that year you charged that there were frauds involved. Are there any more comments that you would like to make about that?

BLATNIK: Well, there would be a lot to say about that. The hearings, I think, ended up in two.... They were under oath, by the way. They were under oath before our committee. The hearings alone and the evidence submitted resulted in two large volumes about five hundred pages each—a total of over a thousand pages of testimony.

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O'CONNOR: I was thinking of specific incidents.

BLATNIK: I have nothing specific to say. We made a very fair and thorough investigation in depth on the right of way problems. It was a serious problem. We ran into the risk of getting involved politically. I'm not going to make any bones about it; I didn't know how it would end up.

It's like digging underground for a vein. You follow that vein, and it gets larger and larger, and it curves and shifts as the seams underground bend and twist. You don't know where it's going to turn up. It could turn up to the doorstep of the prominent Democrat. It could have even led up to the doorstep of the nephew of the Speaker of the House—a very fine man, my very good friend, Eddie McCormack [Edward J. McCormack, Jr.]—who, by the way, gave us excellent cooperation, his whole office. And the same thing on the other side from the Attorney General and from his department, the Department of Justice. We got splendid cooperation from them up in Boston. So in that sense, we were going right ahead and all parties knew it. No one knew where it was going to end up or where the chips were going to fall. We went right through with the investigation. And I think when we got it all over with, the general consensus was that it was a very fair and certainly a thorough investigation.

O'CONNOR: Do you recall the name of the man who was your biggest help in the

Justice Department?

BLATNIK: Again I'm embarrassed. It's in the files. We have our own files.

O'CONNOR: Does the name Elliot Richardson mean anything?

BLATNIK: Yes. Yes, he was very helpful.

O'CONNOR: Well, there is criticism leveled at the Justice Department because of the help that Elliot Richardson gave you. It is said that he was not reappointed to his post in Massachusetts. Do you have any comments to make about that?

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BLATNIK: No, I don't. I just hope that the allegation isn't true. I was very unhappy about it and very disturbed by it.

O'CONNOR: This does not, then, reflect in any way on the Kennedy family, or particularly on Robert Kennedy?

BLATNIK: No, it doesn't. Not in any way.

O'CONNOR: They were not involved in the scandal at all. Do you think John Kennedy showed enough interest in the problems of Minnesota during his administration, and I'm thinking particularly of the threat of poverty?

BLATNIK: A great deal of interest. That's what led to this Interior proposition. I don't want to say it. I think I could indicate in fairness that a commitment had been made earlier, and on a sound basis. But I was very interested in resource use, and in talks with the President and in more detailed talks with Sarge Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.], the President indicated he wished someone on his staff knew more about his resource use problem. He had a good team of people who were well versed in municipal problems of large metropolitan areas, like slum clearance, urban renewal, transit authorities, educational problems, civil rights. On the international field he had good advisers. On basic resource problems to develop these areas such as Appalachia, where coal was a real problem, the iron ore and copper mining, you know, areas that had been denuded of timber, soil erosion, water, water conservation, water pollution—he needed more help in those areas. Greatly interested.

He gave me a great deal of time on our problems of iron ore areas at the head of the Lakes which were rapidly being eroded, about five years under way, but in time would have become another West Virginia. That's where we got the concept of area redevelopment. That's where it started. How it would be better. That's where we got the idea of community facilities, putting your people to work in upgrading the facilities of a community, making it a

better place without anybody spending money on relief and unemployment compensation and aid to dependent children. These were sort of little probes in that direction which finally led to more

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substantial programs like the Appalachian program for that one large area out East...

O'CONNOR: Area Redevelopment.

BLATNIK: And laid the groundwork for what became the Economic Development Act of 1965. President Kennedy was extremely interested in getting full support in this direction. In fact, in 1963, in September, he spoke in Duluth.

O'CONNOR: That's right.

BLATNIK: I think I happen to have an amateur picture. I made a brief introduction of him—he's sitting right behind. He spoke to a Land and Peoples Resources Conference [Northern Great Lakes Region Land and Peoples Resources Conference]. I forget the exact title.

O'CONNOR: He mentioned specifically your work in water pollution control at that speech, I believe.

BLATNIK: Yes, he did. He was very, very generous in his public recognition of any work we've done here.

O'CONNOR: Sargent Shriver, you said, was involved in that question?

BLATNIK: We discussed in detail that more attention ought to be paid to these areas that we now call distressed areas, that there are many of them rural, and that there little islands or pockets have been bypassed by the general economic well-being of the national economy. You couldn't just go by the overall economy; you couldn't just go by the gross national product. There was real severe economic distress in these areas which affected millions of people; it was easily one fifth of the total population of the country, and much of it revolved around the resources that had been exploited or poorly used or maybe exhausted. There ought to be serious concentrated attention paid to rebuild those areas, and many of them could be rebuilt.

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O'CONNOR: In pushing bills like this for area redevelopment or anything else, what do you think the relationship was between the White House and

Congress? Was it good? Was O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] effective?

BLATNIK: Yes, very effective. Very effective. Our big problem was that we didn't have the votes at that time. That was our main problem. So what we did and what we concentrated on during the first two years of the President's tenure in office.... And I learned this lesson from the late Speaker Sam Rayburn when he said, "John, I have never yet seen a bill passed by a speech." So I found out that it was just futile to keep harping on what ought to be done when we all darn well knew what should be done, and the only way it could be done was to get the votes.

As Sam Rayburn said, "You just give me one vote more than half. You give the opposition two hundred votes; give me only two hundred and one. With that vote margin I can pass any given proposition that comes up before the House; I can repeal any and all laws that have ever been passed by the Congress in the history of the United States." Which really brought home, although we knew of the importance of majority rule, the importance of that one vote more than half.

So we concentrated then our efforts back in '63 in the Democratic Study Group to work up a better organization, work up information and even get funds for more congressional seats—to get Democrats from marginal Republican districts. For the first time we worked more closely and directly with the National Democratic Committee and with the House Congressional Committee under Chairman Mike Kirwan [Michael J. Kirwan]. We made an all-out drive, and I got full support from the President on the need to get these seats, and as it turned out we all geared up and tuned up and well under way following that tragedy, that awful, awful tragedy.

And so by the time we had the presidential election of 1964, we just came in with the seats that far exceeded the best of our expectations, and we did expect to pick up quite a few. And once we had the votes, then in '65 we were able to pass all the things we've talked about for the past twenty years. We did it in nine and a half months.

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O'CONNOR: It is sometimes said that Larry O'Brien in his contacts with Congress irritated Congressmen. Did you ever hear of that?

BLATNIK: Well, yes. You hear that. And it's understandable. I guess some Congressmen.... You know, when the chips are down, you're always going to find.... I've had to make votes on issues that I just wished didn't exist. I wished they'd just blow away and evaporate and go away. But they don't. They're before you, and you can't vote maybe or partly so or halfway so. You either vote yes or no; you say aye or nay—or no—when you vote in the House. So the irritation would come with some of the pressure to come on, and you had to have that type of pressure and party discipline to get some of these strategic bills through in which you needed every vote you could.

O'CONNOR: Do you think Lyndon Johnson was really used as effectively as he

should have been in contact with Congress by President Kennedy?

BLATNIK: I couldn't answer that. We didn't have too much contact with him because he was on the Senate, primarily on the Senate side. We know when he was the Majority Leader he was tremendously effective—Majority Leader with a one vote margin. How in the world he brought in bill after bill, I couldn't comment on effectively.... I got this little bit of comment from some friends of mine in the Senate—you know, there are quite a few former House buddies of ours, real close, personal friends who are in the Senate—and in spite of their friendship, that Senate club, once you leave and become a Vice President, drops a veil between you. And there are certain proprieties and certain protocol that had to be observed in practice, an unwritten rule. You just sort of tiptoe a little more gingerly now. You didn't come in and crack the whip. And that was true certainly, I'm sure, for Vice President Johnson at that time, and I think Vice President Humphrey is finding the same thing is true now.

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O'CONNOR: You never heard any of your Senate friends say, though, that President Kennedy was wasting Lyndon Johnson's talent?

BLATNIK: No, I haven't.

O'CONNOR: All right. President Kennedy also came to Minnesota in 1962. He spoke and you were on the platform. You at least sat with him.

BLATNIK: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Did he do any good for you?

BLATNIK: Oh, yes. Tremendous.

O'CONNOR: That was during the campaign.

BLATNIK: Well, actually, I think we did him more good. We didn't need him to get elected ourselves, and if you recall, that was the time that Orville Freeman lost the governorship—although by a narrow margin. He probably thought it would have helped Governor Freeman at that time. But I think we did a tremendous amount of good for President Kennedy because once people saw him they got sort of a personal feel of his character and his personality.... It wasn't much to see it, but his voice, the way he conducted himself, made all the difference in the world. He had a tremendous audience in Minneapolis, then the affair in St. Paul, and that one brief stop I think was cancelled in St. Cloud because of the rain, and further up north, if I recall correctly, in Duluth at the University of Minnesota gymnasium, and then on to Hibbing. A large ice hockey arena was jammed; I forget how many. With a capacity of several thousand people, that thing was jammed, and he made a tremendous impression, and it swung the state of

Minnesota into the presidential column. If you recall, just by chance, I was watching television that night of the election—about 3 o'clock in the morning of our time Minnesota; I believe it was about 4 then out East. And the President, you remember, was leaving to retire, and the vote was still in doubt. And Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] wasn't going to concede. Nixon had already

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gone to bed, and at that time I got a call from Senator Humphrey. Our votes usually come up last from our district. It got to be an enormous plurality up here. I think it was about a fifty thousand vote plurality that was coming in, and that swung the state for Kennedy.

O'CONNOR: I'm talking also now about 1962, not the 1960 election, but the 1962 election. He did come to Minnesota in the 1962 election to help.... There were congressmen being elected that year.

BLATNIK: Yes, he did.

O'CONNOR: Did he help much?

BLATNIK: Yes, he helped.

O'CONNOR: Minnesota was redistricted at that time.

BLATNIK: Yes. Again, I don't know how much it helped. Minnesota is a peculiar state. We're split. For years we've had one senator Republican and one Democrat, and House members out of nine, four to five or five to four. Now, out of either, it's four to four even split. How much he helped I don't know. It would be doubtful. The situation remained pretty much the way it was.

O'CONNOR: Well, that just about does it unless you have any other comments on other specific issues like the test ban or Vietnam or Cuba. Any particular remembrances that come up?

BLATNIK: Yes, an overall feeling. I couldn't help but feel.... We were so enthused back in '63—we were gearing up the Democratic Study Group, working with the National Committee, working with Mike Kirwan and the House Congressional Committee to get the number of votes—that President Kennedy could really have gone places those four years. Well, we were all geared up to go, and we would have gone. And everything he had said—what he felt ought to be done would have been done. There will always be that great, great sadness that what we were so confident of

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would have come to pass if given the opportunity.... I think it would have been a great colorful era in American politics and American political life, both on the national scene and certainly on the international scene.

O'CONNOR: The only thing I have left, you were called to the White House a number of times.

BLATNIK: [Interruption]... God, we'd have gone to town in the campaign! And we had this new gang which we knew we would get. And Kennedy would have gone forth in the next four years. God, what a record.

O'CONNOR: He would have had something better to show than he had in the first three years.

BLATNIK: Oh, boy.

O'CONNOR: Okay, that's it.

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