

INTERVIEW III

DATE: May 5, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: FRANK MANKIEWICZ  
INTERVIEWER: STEPHEN GOODELL  
PLACE: Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: I think last time we were talking about 1967 and the last topic we discussed was your urging Senator Kennedy in 1967 to run in 1968.

M: Well, I think urging may be too strong a word. I think we all realized that it was a decision he was going to have to make, and that no amount of urging on one side or the other really was going to have very much to do with it. But whenever the question came up, I sort of assumed that he would have to make the race because I didn't see any alternative that was, in his words, satisfactory. But in June he made a temporary peace with the President. I must say I also had a sort of lingering feeling that perhaps the President would not run.

G: In 1967 you had this feeling?

M: Yes. Well, I thought the President would either run or not run, depending on what he thought would most frustrate Robert Kennedy. Indeed I think that was one of the bases for his decision that he finally made not to run. I had the feeling all through 1967 and certainly all through early 1968 that it was an unfortunate thing that the policy of the United States was being determined in large part, domestically and abroad, by what was most calculated to keep Robert Kennedy from the presidency. I think most of the major decisions in Viet Nam were made with that in mind. But the question of the campaign was really rather remote most of the time, because there was so much going on in terms of immediate issues and responses, particularly with respect to Viet Nam.

Senator Kennedy went to England in late May or early June for the funeral of Lady Harlech, who had been killed suddenly in an automobile accident. And he came back just in time for a major Democratic Party dinner in New York. He came right from the airport to the dinner and delivered a rather flowery tribute to the President. That sort of stilled things for a while. But it wouldn't stay down, and I think the President's response to the Detroit riots that summer were very important--when it became quite clear that he was no longer going to commit himself to any kind of leadership in the area of race and urban strife. LBJ's reaction to the Detroit riots, you will recall, was a day of prayer and a Commission--it turned out to be the Kerner Commission. But the original thought was that it was a Commission that was going to report in a year. It seemed odd, particularly to Senator Kennedy, just a wholly inadequate response and one that indicated that the President was--as it were--leaving the field.

At that time Senator Kennedy had been meeting with groups of businessmen and with the press on these off-the-record and background sessions, and making his view very clear that there was only one person in the United States who could get the white community to do what had to be done before it was too late, and that was the President. That the President, in a sense, had to over-dramatize. He had to bring in groups of businessmen and clergy and labor and students in universities and everybody else. He even thought, as his mind went on, I remember one night, about taking an hour or an hour and a half of prime time television to put on a documentary of what life was really like in the ghetto to show people what was going on and to demonstrate his belief based on the facts, of course, that were coming out of the Labor Department that things were worse in every way than they had been at the beginning of the John Kennedy Administration. I mean, he wasn't

talking about Johnson now; he was talking about the total failure of our education and housing and health programs, at least insofar as the ghetto was concerned. It was about that time he put in his bills for tax incentives for ghetto housing and jobs, which the administration promptly stepped on, and suddenly decided was an inappropriate approach. It was shameful, really, to see men like Robert Weaver and Wilbur Cohen and Orville Freeman and others coming up on the Hill and saying that this was the wrong approach. I mean, they had done it with the investment tax credit and they had done it with other things. It was apparently this whole task force, mobilized in the government, to knock these RFK programs down, and that created a lot of feeling, I think, in his mind that "neutrality" wasn't going to work.

Then, I think, the firing of Secretary McNamara was a profoundly important thing to him. And that worked out very badly. RFK really kept that secret, in a sense, to his grave. I remember very well that he got a call from McNamara the afternoon that it broke, and he went over and talked to him. He came back and never said anything about the circumstances of McNamara's leaving the Defense Department, even to me. I was speculating like mad, and it certainly occurred to me that a man like McNamara doesn't go to the World Bank with a year to go, at least under those terms, willingly.

James Reston--it was funny what happened, the way that thing went, we had called Reston in the morning to talk about an editorial that had appeared in the New York Times. Generally, it was a continuing situation at the New York Times, which had a pretty steady anti-Kennedy bias, and it had been reflected in an editorial and something else that the Senator wanted to talk to Scotty Reston about. Reston called back late in the evening, after the McNamara thing had broken around town. He told Senator Kennedy that the early edition of the Times was out, and that the morning edition would have a column by Reston saying that McNamara wasn't informed that he was going to the World Bank--rather

that the appointment to the World Bank had been made without his knowledge. That was Reston's story. And so the conversation with Reston which, when the call was initiated in the morning, was going to be about something quite different, turned out to be about that, about the McNamara firing.

And then the Senator went over to the Senate floor and talked about the Reston story to Ted Kennedy, who then made a speech about it on the floor. Then the next morning the Reston piece was there, and everybody was speculating like mad around town, and Robert Kennedy never said one word; and he never told me anything--so that I never said one word. I must have fielded a hundred phone calls that night and the next day about what was the real McNamara story. What did Senator Kennedy have to say about it? And I had absolutely nothing to say. Nothing! It annoyed me a little bit privately, because I suspected that there was a great deal of the story that Robert Kennedy knew, that he wasn't telling anybody.

And then the next day, I guess it was, that was when the President said that a couple of kids were spreading the story--that McNamara had been fired--and everybody assumed he meant the two Kennedy Senators, the two brothers. And then George Christian went so far as to name me as the source of the stories that McNamara had been fired. Well, I would like to have been; but Christian must have known, and the President must have known, that nothing was coming out of our office. And I remember a ferocious argument with one columnist, a pro-war columnist--Joseph Alsop--who wrote about it and said it was coming from a source close to Robert Kennedy. And I talked to him about it, and he said it was me. He said I had been calling Pentagon reporters--Hell, I didn't even know any Pentagon reporters. And it was a very upsetting four or five days; not so much for me--hell, I could take that; that was, after all, part of the job description, but I knew it was very upsetting for Senator

Kennedy. And I have a feeling that he began to slide toward a candidacy somewhere in the period between the treatment of the riots in the summer and the treatment of McNamara in the late fall. Then by that time, we were almost upon Tet.

G: Do you have any special knowledge of why in June that he declared at that New York dinner that he would support--

M: Because periodically he would decide that he would not run, and that he would put it at rest, and he'd make some statement like that. Now, I don't know who wrote that statement. I know that when he went abroad he knew he was coming back to that dinner, and I know that Adam Walinsky did a draft about something that he could say about Johnson at that dinner. And Ted Sorensen did a draft of something he could say about Johnson at that dinner. And he himself put them together on the plane and in the limousine on the way in, or whatever. I don't know really where that statement came from, but it was the kind of thing he did periodically, almost in exasperation as though to say, "Get away, I don't want to do it"--run--or "it's wrong, somehow." I mean, there was a deep political instinct in him that said he shouldn't run. Also, he was getting a lot of sober political advice from people he believed to be good political advisors, saying that he should not run. And if he was not going to run, then clearly it was in his interest to cut off all speculation as early as possible.

G: That was going to be my next question. You mentioned on the earlier tape that he was getting a lot of advice and counsel; that people were advising for and against. What was the knowledge of the temper-- I think there had been a poll showing that he was a front-leading candidate. Did this affect his decision in any way?

M: Well, his polls, you know, went down very sharply from the end of '66 until May or June of '67, as a result of a series of events, I think. The Hoover controversy was not very helpful; the Manchester business didn't help; that whole business

with the peace feeler-- Then the war was going well, or seemed to be going well; his speech to end the bombing in March put him in a minority position, and put him out further, so that his popularity, at least as measured by the polls, personally and vis-a-vis the President, was going steadily down through the first four or five months of 1967. And that may have had something to do with it too; that he began to feel that as right as his position might be, it was increasingly a minority one, and also he wasn't getting any encouragement. This was true almost right up to the end--he wasn't getting any encouragement from those people in the Senate who were basically allied with his position and who were going to have to run for re-election. He felt rather strongly that he didn't want to make a political campaign which would be the political death, in a sense, of guys like Joe Clark, Wayne Morse, and Frank Church, and Gaylord Nelson, and George McGovern, and all of the others who would have to run for re-election, because they were to be, obviously, special targets of the White House. And to put a guy like McGovern or Church or Morse or Clark or Nelson, even Bill Fulbright--and there were a number of other doves who were running--to put them in the position in the spring of 1968-- Now, from a vantage point of '67, February or March, April, May, June of '67, put them in the position in their own states of having to choose between Lyndon Johnson or Robert Kennedy was going to put them on a terrible spot, because whichever way they went they were going to lose some support and none of them felt they could lose any support and come through. So that was weighing very heavily on his mind too, and I think was a major factor in his earlier decisions not to run.

G: How did he relate to this peace bloc in the Senate?

M: Well, there never really was a peace bloc in the Senate, in the sense that it had any discipline and operated as a bloc. That was one of the problems.

Fulbright, Gore, a couple of others, could always be counted on. Gruening, Morse, but the others sort of went their own way. He didn't want to be part of a bloc; he never was comfortable in that kind of situation. I remember once Frank Church was circulating a letter--it was either on bombing or prisoners, I don't remember, and he didn't want to sign it although he agreed with it, but chose instead to go over to the Senate and give his own message on the same subject. There really wasn't ever a peace bloc. I mean, nobody ever met to decide on strategy and so forth. Occasionally, something would come up; someone would have a speech they were going to give, and they'd call around and say, "Would you be on the floor so that we can have a colloquy about it," but there was never any formal organization beyond that.

G: Was there any speculation as to the need for an organized opposition?

M: Oh, I think some of the staff people probably thought about it, but you were dealing with-- you know, when you're dealing with a lot of United States Senators who have other conflicting interests including partisan ones, it's pretty hard to do, particularly since you had a number of people in this area who were going to be up for re-election the following year, and each of them had their own problems.

G: I want to go back to the response to Detroit. Early in 1967, my recollection may be wrong, but I think it was Senators Clark and Kennedy who went on a series of committee hearings in urban areas of the country.

M: Rural, also rural. It started out in Mississippi.

G: Right. But when it came to the cities, and I'm going to relate this to the riots.

M: Yes. Well, this was Senator Clark's Subcommittee on Poverty, Manpower and Employment of the Labor Committee.

G: Right. What were the conclusions that were drawn by Senator Kennedy? What was the diagnosis?

- M: That damned little was going on, and that what was going on that was good in the area of community action wasn't getting enough support from the Administration. It was not getting enough support, and they came up with a number of proposals which got very scanty support in the administration. The government as the employer of last resort--the public works stuff. The hunger thing was outrageous, just outrageous! They came back from Mississippi-- Murphy, Clark, and Kennedy went after Secretary Freeman to see if they couldn't do something on the food stamp program, and Freeman just simply wouldn't move. He not only wouldn't grant free food stamps, he wouldn't even reduce the price at all on the grounds that they couldn't do it, which was just manifestly not so. I mean, you had a solid administration dedicated to the proposition that nothing Robert Kennedy advanced was going to get anywhere. Made it very difficult.
- G: This is my own interpretation of what you're saying, and I'd like you to comment on it. It seems to me you're suggesting that there was an obsession, almost a pathological obsession that Lyndon Johnson had.
- M: Well, pathological is a word I would leave to psychologists. I believe that politically, the dominant theme in the Johnson Administration was to frustrate the objectives of Robert Kennedy, so that he could be better defeated as a Presidential candidate if he ever became one.
- G: Do you think that this had its sources in personal animosity rather than political?
- M: I think in personal animosity and also in Johnson's deep feeling that history was being very cruel to him. I mean, looked at from his side, I think he did not want to be regarded as the interregnum between two triumphant Kennedy Administrations, and I think that's understandable. He was a man with an enormous ego, which I think is entirely apt for a politician--Robert Kennedy probably had a sizeable ego too. I think everyone has to who is willing to put himself



forward as the embodiment of ideas that he believes in. And I think Johnson after all-- I mean, in a sense he didn't seek the vice presidency and God knows, the assassination of John Kennedy came as as terrible and grievous a blow to him--perhaps more so--than to anyone else in the world. And yet there he was President, and suddenly he was a throwback to an earlier time that the American people somehow thought they had passed through. He was talking all that New Deal and Cold War rhetoric, and it was the only thing he knew. The intellectuals were against him, and he thought somehow it was because he wasn't from Harvard or he didn't speak with a New England accent--which was nonsense! That wasn't what they were talking about. What they were talking about was that he wasn't speaking the new language that they thought was going to bring our country through. It was really a very cruel accident of history, and I think it turned him into a rather bitter man. Bitter men do bitter things. And he felt that it was all part of the same historical conspiracy.

G: This is somewhat what I think Goldman is touching on when he talks about Metro America and for all of Johnson's political instincts, he lacked that certain--

M: I think the Johnson people really believed that he was disliked by the people who disliked him because he was not Ivy League educated, which is just turning history on its head. That isn't why he was disliked. As Dean Acheson said, he was not very likeable.

G: Again, 1967, I think it was in April that Martin King called the black people to oppose the war in Viet Nam because of what it was doing to the Poverty Program and other programs in the country. Do you feel that this was the time-- You were saying that his popularity may have been going down according to the opinion polls and so forth, but do you feel that this was the time when dissent in the country began to galvanize? I think it was that speech--

M: In retrospect I think that turns out to be true, although I think without the Tet offensive, we wouldn't have had that turn-around. It was an awfully powerful

sledge hammer blow, but of course the historical time had to be right for that too. If that--Tet--had come in the spring of '67, it probably would not have turned things around. As with all historical events, in retrospect everything had to converge.

G: I was thinking also of later I think it was in October of 1967, the March on the Pentagon occurred. I was wondering what the relationship was and whether or not peace groups sought out Senator Kennedy's endorsement.

M: They had learned not to, because he gave them no house at all. He was very reluctant to ally himself in any way with the sort of demonstration groups, the marchers. He wasn't a marcher, and didn't have much sympathy with people whose notion of an effective opposition was simply to protest. And he would say to them whenever they'd come to see him--of course, he'd always see these groups; they'd come to visit him in his office or he'd go talk to them down in the auditorium or something--and his response was always the same, which was, "What are you going to do? What's your proposal? If I make you secretary of state, what are you going to do?" And they were short on answers, of course, and long on rhetoric. But he'd passed beyond that rhetoric. I mean, that was all accepted. Of course, the war was immoral; but one question is "what are you going to do? What are you going to do, for instance, about the hundreds and thousands of South Vietnamese who by various actions have cast themselves with us?" Well, however many there are. But, you know, that bothered him. And he devoted an enormous amount of time in his book and in his speeches to that question, and he would not let even his closest advisors-- I mean, some of them were willing to gloss that over, and he never would let them. That whole question was a very serious one, and it's one the peace marchers never gave any thought to at all. He was always very uneasy with people who had

simple answers, no matter how strongly they might have agreed with some of his prejudices or analyses. You know, people had given long speeches about how immoral the war was, and how it was really a civil war and the government was jailing its opponents. And he'd cut them off, not because he didn't believe it, but because it was like saying that ~~this~~ is a country in which it's three hours earlier in California. I mean, that's one of the things you start with. What do you do now? And it was damned tough. And the piece he wrote in his book about the Viet Nam war took a long, long, long time whereas I think almost any other peace advocate could have taken any speech out of his pocket and just gone with it, you know. But he never liked the kind of political position that left you open to that sort of attack. Not very often anyway. So he really had no connection with the peace movement in a sense; he was not a banner carrier.

G: I think we can move to 1968 when he finally did declare. Were the circumstances or the impetus that led to this primarily the result of the TET offensive?

M: Well, as I say, I think the treatment of the riots in '67 and the McNamara incident, other things, and of course the New Hampshire results.

G: What effect did that have?

M: Well, it had two effects. First of all, it surprised him that it was as high. Secondly, it freed him in a sense from the fear that his entry would be regarded by the professionals in the party as a party-splitting act. Because it was quite clear from the results in New Hampshire that the party was hopelessly split. I think he would have had trouble in that respect if Gene McCarthy had gotten ten or fifteen, or even twenty percent of the vote in New Hampshire. Thirty percent might have been an ideal figure.

G: But forty--

M: Over forty! And indeed almost a lead in the popular vote, counting both parties, created another problem which he hadn't anticipated. It was the McCarthy problem.

G: Would you like to go into that?

M: Well, it's very simply stated. I mean, it created that problem and in a sense it stayed with us right until the end. I think it would have not stayed with us much beyond that had he lived, but certainly it was then that people of good will around the country who shared his beliefs and who really were activists and committed--the kind of people he wanted--had already cast their lot with Gene McCarthy, only on the basis of New Hampshire. And it made it damned difficult. It created a sort of diversion which, God knows, he didn't need. But there it was and once you made the decision, well, you had to go with it. I don't think there was ever any doubt in his mind that he was a winning candidate, if anyone was, and Gene McCarthy was not. And I'm not sure that there was much doubt in McCarthy's mind of that.

G: I've seen interpretations, speculation that one of the reasons that he didn't declare prior to that time was that any declaration might have been interpreted as personal.

M: Well, that's right. Prior to New Hampshire, his feeling was that it would be a party-splitting act as far as the professionals were concerned, and as far as nonprofessionals were concerned, that it was his personal pique at Johnson; that it would become personal between Kennedy and Johnson rather than the issues. And obviously, think what it would have done in terms of McCarthy had he declared while McCarthy was running in New Hampshire. I mean, once the primary is closed in New Hampshire, he really could not move until after that primary was over. I mean, it would have undercut McCarthy badly at that time; it would have split

the anti-Johnson vote in New Hampshire because you would have had a hell of a lot of write-ins. And it was an unfortunate position all the way round, considering the way that primary came out.

G: You say this came as a shock, a pleasant one, but a shock nonetheless.

M: Yes, he didn't think McCarthy was going to do that well. He thought he'd do well; he thought 30-35 percent was quite possible.

G: How do you make this kind of an analysis? It's a speculative one until it happens, but what's the process that he had gone through, or was to go through in the primary? Is it simply a matter of vote counting?

M: Well, he had a lot of friends in New Hampshire. Dick Goodwin was working for McCarthy, and he talked to him from time to time on how it was going, not with an idea of whether he was going to enter, but just how it was. You know, you read the papers, and you look at the polls; you get a sense of it.

G: What kind of opposition did Kennedy face in the primaries in terms of opposition coming from the administration?

M: Not an awful lot except from the organized party and organized labor, which turned out to be quite weak. And in Indiana, where they were running the governor and where there was a check-off on state employees' salaries, it was tough. And that was the first primary. Indiana was a tough state, and there you had the full apparatus behind Governor Branigan. But after that, damned little. In Nebraska they tried to run a labor drive for Humphrey and failed miserably. The same thing in Oregon. And in California it was pitiful.

G: I've seen the statement that Oregon was a state that Kennedy didn't particularly like, felt that people there--

M: Well, it's one big suburb. It's the best educated state in the country, more college graduates. Perfect McCarthy state, really. It's not that he didn't like it, but it was certainly not the kind of battleground he wanted to contest.

And McCarthy exploited and demagogued the gun issue there, too.

G: Was there any transferral from the 1960 organization to his campaign in 1968?

M: Not too much because a lot of those people were by then in the Democratic Party machinery. The official machinery was all on the other side.

G: I've seen the statement that Johnson was making phone calls and contacting people to hold the line against Kennedy. Do you have any other knowledge of this?

M: No, but I'm not surprised. I mean, certainly the labor response would indicate that. There was no reason for organized labor not to be for Robert Kennedy, but they were against him, and in a rather heavy-handed way.

G: Do you feel that the campaign was an efficient one? That he had made the statement, I guess if he'd lost one [state]--or maybe he made the statement; the interpretation was such that if he lost one state, this would stop him.

M: Yes, it was unfortunate statement to make, but it was a campaign where we were trying to sweep them all. We made six primaries; it turned out we won five of them. It would have been nice if we had won them all, but it was not very efficient. It started overnight. All that time he was trying to make up his mind, nothing was going on in terms of organization. So we really hit the ground running and tried to put it together, from the Senate staff and some friends and some people from Ted's staff. You know, we were rarely a day or two ahead. It was very tough.

G: Was there the thought that had he lived and gone to the convention that McCarthy would have bowed out?

M: Well, I think he would have, whether intentionally or not. I mean, after California we had something like 600 delegates; McCarthy had 135. And we were going, I think, to win heavily in New York, and there were no more primaries.

There were some conventions, but I think that's in fact what would have happened. It would have been Kennedy and Humphrey all summer.

G: You were at the convention in '68?

M: Yes.

G: I wonder what your interpretation of that is.

M: Well, it was a Johnson-run convention.

G: It was a rigged convention?

M: Well, I don't know about rigged. I mean, they had the delegates. But it seemed to me that their attitude throughout was that of a student who could get a 95 from his knowledge of an exam and cheated in order to get a 98. I mean, it was unnecessary; it was over-kill. The Viet Nam resolution thing was a very silly exercise; it alienated a lot of people. The way in which it was all run--Criswell running things up there on the platform and Marvin Watson--it finally came out in the end the last night when they cut off the demonstration after the Kennedy film. It was disgusting, really. I guess my feeling is Humphrey could have stopped a lot of it had he wanted to, but maybe he didn't have much authority either. But clearly the whole thing, insofar as it could be run from the platform, was run to create an image that just was not a valid one in the Democratic party and that's why they had all the trouble. I mean, you can do it when you've got seven-eighths of the delegates. You can't do it when you've got, let's say, barely two-thirds.

G: What was the reason for McGovern's entry?

M: Well, I don't know. You'll have to ask him. I was surprised that he entered. I talked to him about three or four weeks before, and got the impression that he was not going to enter. I think he felt that there had to be some place where people who were for Kennedy who could not take McCarthy could go. I

was very pleased that he did, and I think he showed a great deal of courage.

In effect, what he said was, "Let's see how many of us there are." And I think if he'd done it a month earlier, it would have gone a lot better.

G: Why wouldn't the Kennedy people go to McCarthy?

M: Well, I would never have gone to McCarthy. I just didn't think he should be president. It was that simple. Backed to the wall, I would have taken Humphrey over McCarthy.

G: You would. Would other Kennedy--

M: I don't know, but I would have. I felt that McCarthy was a lovely fellow to have dinner with, but mean-spirited. I didn't think his concept of the presidency was mine; I didn't think he had any real sense of commitment or concern. And frankly in those months, I was personally very upset at the way he was reacting. He talked to the California delegation in July for forty-five minutes and didn't mention Robert Kennedy's name. I found that inexcusable. I found his whole behavior after the assassination inexcusable, and I didn't like the way he campaigned either. Talking about Kennedy's supporters as the least-well educated, least intelligent among the electorate. I thought he capitalized on the gun control stuff in Oregon and I just didn't like it at all. Maybe it was not very rational, but that was my feeling.

G: Prior to the Senator's assassination, do you know what his feelings toward McCarthy were?

M: No.

G: Anything you would like to add to this?

M: No, I think that's fine.

G: Well, I'd like to thank you very much.

M: I'll get to listen to it or read it or something, won't I?



G: Right.

M: Maybe at that time I might want to add something.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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