



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewer's Briefing Materials John Seigenthaler Interview, 06/05/2007

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Miller Center Documents¹

- John Seigenthaler Timeline.

Secondary Source Materials

- John Seigenthaler bio, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org>.
- Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978) pp. 189-190, 216-218, 231-232.
- C. David Heymann, *RFK: A Candid Biography of Robert F. Kennedy* (New York: Dutton Book, 1998) pp. 196-197.
- "President's Representative Hurt Helping a Girl Escape Violence," *The New York Times*, 05/21/1961.
- Wallace Turner, "New Aides Try to Reverse Decline in Kennedy's California Drive," *The New York Times*, 05/10/1968.
- Adam Clymer, *Edward M. Kennedy: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1999) pp. 112-114, 124-126.

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JOHN SEIGENTHALER TIMELINE

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Miller Center, University of Virginia, 05/21/2007

1957 Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), as chief counsel on the Senate Investigations Subcommittee, starts a Senate investigation into labor racketeering. RFK and two assistants visit journalists around the country, including John Seigenthaler with the *Nashville Tennessean*, to investigate labor corruption in their respective cities. (Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978, p. 147)

RFK travels to Tennessee to testify in a case of labor racketeering and a number of Tennessee officials are convicted. Afterwards, as Seigenthaler drives RFK to the airport, the two stop to tour Andrew Jackson's home of Hermitage. RFK spends so much time there he nearly misses the last plane back to Washington, D.C. Seigenthaler later becomes a close friend of RFK. As Laurence Leamer writes, "One of those who had become privy to Bobby's thinking and feeling was John Seigenthaler... Seigenthaler had incomparable access to the Kennedys and got stories many of his colleagues could never get. Yet as the months went by more and more of what he heard and saw never made its way into his journalism." (Laurence Leamer, *The Kennedy Men: 1901-1963 The Laws of the Father*, New York: William Morrow, 2001, p. 475; James W. Hilty, *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, p. 101; Schlesinger, p. 147)

1959 RFK resigns as counsel to Senate Investigations Subcommittee. He begins to work on manuscript of what will later become *The Enemy Within*. RFK calls upon Seigenthaler to edit the first draft. (Schlesinger, p. 189)

1960 Seigenthaler serves as a campaign assistant to RFK on John F. Kennedy's (JFK) presidential campaign. (Schlesinger, p. 217)

October On the 19th, Martin Luther King, Jr. is arrested in Atlanta for his role in a sit-in. JFK calls King's wife, Coretta Scott King, offering his support. RFK reportedly disagrees with this move, fearing that it will cost JFK votes in the South and the support of Southern governors. Still, RFK talks to Seigenthaler about calling the judge who refused to grant bail to King to persuade him to do otherwise. RFK later decides to call the judge and the next day King is released. (Schlesinger, pp. 216-217)

After JFK wins the 1960 presidential election, J. Edgar Hoover tells RFK that he should be Attorney General. Schlesinger later writes that RFK tells Seigenthaler that he did not think that Hoover meant what he said. (Schlesinger, p. 231)

December Over dinner, RFK discusses the option of becoming Attorney General with his wife Ethel Kennedy and Seigenthaler. RFK decides that his answer is no. RFK phones JFK with the news. The next day RFK and Seigenthaler go to JFK's house and RFK eventually accepts the post. (Schlesinger, pp. 231-232)

1961

January RFK is sworn in as U.S. Attorney General. Seigenthaler leaves the *Nashville Tennessean* to work as an administrative assistant to Attorney General RFK. Seigenthaler notices that RFK takes time to meet the employees of the Justice Department. Seigenthaler later remarks that "The visits were a great inspiration to those lawyers buried in the bureaucracy, because most of them would never even get to see the head of their division." RFK also talks to Seigenthaler about the lack of African-Americans working at the Justice Department. RFK wants to change this and starts telling law schools to encourage minority students to apply to the Justice Department. (C. David Heymann, *RFK: A Candid Biography of Robert F. Kennedy*, New York: Dutton Books, 1998, pp. 196-197)

Freedom Riders are attacked by rioters and the Ku Klux Klan in Birmingham, Alabama. RFK sends Seigenthaler to Birmingham. Seigenthaler arranges for the Riders to be flown to New Orleans. Seigenthaler then meets with Alabama governor, James Patterson. Patterson protests any plan of either JFK or RFK to send federal marshals to curb the violence in Alabama. Patterson tells Seigenthaler, "By God, I'm telling you if federal marshals come into Alabama, there'll be blood in the streets." (Schlesinger, p. 296)

May Riots flare in Montgomery, Alabama as a white mob attacks Freedom Riders and by-standing African-Americans. Seigenthaler is sent to Alabama as a representative of JFK and RFK to meet with Governor Patterson about protection against racial violence. RFK sends FBI agents to Montgomery as part of a civilian task force of 400 ordered by JFK. (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 05/21/1961; *The New York Times*, 05/21/1961)

On the 20th, Seigenthaler becomes ensnared in the violence and takes a blow to the head as he is trying to rescue a young woman from the mob. Seigenthaler is taken to the hospital and is reported in good condition. When RFK hears the news he is "possessed by an enormous anger...as if he had been down in Montgomery himself and had been hit." RFK calls Seigenthaler at the hospital and tells him, "You did what was right." (Schlesinger, p. 297) James Hilty writes that the attack on Seigenthaler "proved one of several turning points for Kennedy on civil rights... Seigenthaler's ordeal [was a] revelation of the viciousness of the segregationists..." (Hilty, p. 323; *The New York Times*, 05/21/1961)

RFK sends Seigenthaler, Ramsey Clark, and Louis Oberdorfer, among others, to the South to prepare for desegregation which will occur in the fall. In September

the schools in New Orleans, Atlanta and Memphis desegregate without violence. (Schlesinger, p. 294)

1962

February RFK and Ethel travel around the world on a goodwill tour. Seigenthaler accompanies them. Seigenthaler recalls anti-American and anti-Kennedy protests in Japan and Indonesia. (Schlesinger, pp. 565-566)

RFK travels to Indonesia for the secret task of negotiating the release of Allen Pope. Pope is a CIA pilot held by Indonesia. RFK thinks that Indonesian President Achmed Sukarno is using Pope as leverage for the purpose of getting a deal to gain control of West New Guinea. Seigenthaler attends the negotiations with Sukarno and other officials over the return of Pope. In June Sukarno quietly releases Pope. (Schlesinger, pp. 571- 573)

Seigenthaler leaves the Justice Department to become the editor of the *Nashville Tennessean*. (Schlesinger, pp. 378)

1963

November On the 22nd, JFK is shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. Seigenthaler observes the pain RFK feels after his brother is assassinated. Says Seigenthaler, "I just had the feeling that it was physically painful, almost as if he were on the rack or that he had a toothache or that he had a heart attack. I mean it was pain and it showed itself as being pain... It was very obvious to me, almost when he got up to walk that it hurt to get up to walk." Seigenthaler goes to RFK's home, Hickory Hill, after the funeral. Seigenthaler remembers that, "Obviously in pain [RFK] opened the door and said something like this, 'Come on in, somebody shot my brother, and we're watching his funeral on television.'" (Schlesinger, pp. 612-613)

There is tension between RFK and President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ). RFK tells Seigenthaler of an incident where LBJ asks RFK if the reason that RFK does not like him is because of stories of LBJ's harsh critiques of RFK's father, Joseph Kennedy, at the 1960 Democratic convention. RFK tells Seigenthaler that he does not remember such stories and asks Seigenthaler to get the details. Seigenthaler finds a *New York Times* article about LBJ's comments on Joseph Kennedy, which Seigenthaler describes as "vicious." (Schlesinger, pp. 623-624)

1964

RFK gives a speech memorializing JFK at the Democratic convention at Atlantic City. RFK receives a 20-minute standing ovation before his speech. Schlesinger writes that LBJ is dismayed by the attention RFK receives and considers him to be a threat. (Schlesinger, p. 664)

November RFK, having resigned as Attorney General, is elected to the Senate from New York. On the anniversary of JFK's death, RFK tells Seigenthaler that he would

like to go to confession. On the way, RFK and Seigenthaler go to JFK's grave. The gravesite is locked, but RFK climbs over the fence. Seigenthaler gets the impression that RFK has visited his brother's grave before. RFK prays at JFK's grave. In the car RFK tells Seigenthaler that two days before the president was assassinated, JFK called his brother to wish him a happy birthday. RFK says that he is now troubled because he cannot remember the details of that conversation. (Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000, p. 302)

Journalist William Manchester agrees to write the only Kennedy authorized account of JFK's assassination. The piece, "The Death of a President," is to be published in installments in *Look* magazine and then as a book by Harper & Row Publishers. The agreement is that the manuscript must be approved by RFK and Jackie Kennedy. (*The New York Times*, 12/20/1966)

1965

November On the 10th, RFK and Ethel, along with Seigenthaler, Angie Novello, Richard Goodwin and Thomas Johnston, leave to go to Latin America. William and Jean vanden Heuvel join the group in Peru. Marxist students at a university in Concepcion, Chile threaten a protest if RFK goes to the university to speak. Seigenthaler and vanden Heuvel say that RFK should not go, but RFK decides to address the university. He is faced with a hostile crowd, but is eventually able to address them and engage in a debate of American foreign policy. (Schlesinger, pp. 694-696)

1966

December The manuscript of "The Death of a President" is reviewed by Seigenthaler and Edwin Guthman. Seigenthaler and Guthman think that Manchester portrays LBJ too harshly and it will reflect badly on the Kennedys. Jackie Kennedy objects to some of the material in the manuscript and eventually brings a suit against Harper & Row publisher. (Schlesinger, p. 761; *The New York Times*, 12/20/1966)

On the 21st the Kennedy family and *Look* magazine reach an agreement on the editing of "The Death of a President." The magazine agrees to cut about 5,000 words from the manuscript at Jackie Kennedy's request. The lawsuit against the publishers is dropped. (*The Washington Post*, 12/22/1966)

1968

March With the presidential election looming, RFK travels to California to attend the Mass of Thanksgiving with Cesar Chavez. Seigenthaler is on the trip as well. Seigenthaler tells RFK that he should not run for president. RFK replies, "I recognize the logic of everything you say... But I'd feel better if I were doing

what I think ought to be done and saying what I know should be said.”
(Schlesinger, p. 847)

Seigenthaler takes a leave from his post as editor of the *Nashville Tennessean* to run RFK’s campaign efforts in Northern California. (Schlesinger, p. 908)

June

RFK is shot by Sirhan B. Sirhan on the 5th at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Upon hearing the news, Edward Kennedy (EMK), Seigenthaler, David Burke, Dick Drayne and Robert Fitzgerald fly from San Francisco to L.A. In L.A. there is not enough room for everybody on the helicopter to the hospital. EMK makes sure, though, that Seigenthaler accompanies him in the helicopter. (Adam Clymer, *Edward M. Kennedy: A Biography*, New York: William Morrow and Co. Inc., 1999, p. 113)

On the 6th, RFK dies at Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. (Clymer, p. 113)

RFK is buried on the 8th at Arlington Cemetery. Seigenthaler serves as a pallbearer. The pallbearers walk too far and are unsure of where to go. Seigenthaler later says, “I could hear Bobby laughing and saying, ‘You really screwed it up again!’” Stephen Smith, a pallbearer and RFK’s campaign manager later comments that, “I distinctly heard a voice coming out of the coffin saying, ‘Damn it, put me down and I’ll show you the way.’” (*The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 06/06/1993)

August

There is speculation during the Democratic National Convention that EMK will announce his candidacy. At the convention Seigenthaler tells Stephen Smith that he thinks that EMK can win the nomination. Smith tells Seigenthaler to call EMK. Seigenthaler does so, but EMK says that he will not run. (Clymer, p. 124)