

CSEA HISTORY PROJECT

CHRISTOPHER FINAN INTERVIEW

January 25, 2006

INTERVIEWER: Good. Do you pronounce your name Finan?

MR. FINAN: Finan.

INTERVIEWER: Finan. We're speaking with Chris Finan today who is an author, an historian, has written extensively about Alfred E. Smith, one of the most significant Governors in the history of New York State. We are speaking in New York City on January the 25th, 2006.

And Chris, to begin with, why don't you tell us a little bit about how you became interested in Al Smith as a subject.

MR. FINAN: Well, I was -- I was -- in the beginning very interested in the Irish in American history, in -- when I was in college my senior thesis was about Irish Americans and at that time there was very little written about them. There were just really a couple of books if you can believe it.

And I first came across Smith when I was working on my senior -- my senior project and he was a fascinating character because although he was born poor and raised on the

streets of New York City and entered politics through the Tamany Machine he went on, in fact, to have this career as a reformer and really to have a foot in both worlds and so he really ran against the grain of the poli...the Irish politicians that you read about, you know, in the -- the end of the 19th Century and the early 20th Century, so he was unusual.

And then when I decided to go to graduate school and I was looking for a Ph.D. topic, again there had -- there was no full biography of him even though he was the first Catholic to run for President on a major party ticket and so graduate students are always hungry for things that haven't been written about and -- and that's how I started.

INTERVIEWER: H-m-m. Now why was it that no biography had really been produced?

MR. FINAN: Well, there -- there are a couple of problems. Smith presents a couple of problems. One is that he -- he had to leave school in eighth grade right -- which was the last primary grade, but right before graduation because of the death of his father. He had to

go to work to support his family and he was never able to pursue education beyond the eighth grade, so he was not, you know, a well-lettered man so -- in one -- so to speak.

And he, as opposed to Franklin Roosevelt who wrote letters from a young age on, he never wrote any letters so there is no correspondence, really, in the Smith -- or very little personal correspondence in the Smith papers in Albany.

That's always discouraging to a historian because it means that you really gotta work very hard to try to put the story together and that you're always guessing at some -- to some extent because you don't have, you know, the internal monologue of the -- you don't have the guy expressing himself directly about his feelings.

So that, you know, that was discouraging, although when I started my research I started bumpin' into people who were working on Smith and including a professor at SUNY Albany, who has not yet published but I think probably will in the not too distant

future what -- a book that he has been working on now for 20 years.

INTERVIEWER: H-m-m. And who's that?

MR. FINAN: Robert Wesser.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I know nothing -- I didn't know --

MR. FINAN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: It's interesting, yeah.

MR. FINAN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: (Inaudible) to follow up with.

MR. FINAN: Yeah, he is, and he's done a lot on the Democratic Party in the progressive era and -- which again was kind of an under study topic and -- but then, you know, as these things go, you know, just a year before my book came out another biography was published. So, you know, we all recognize that, you know, that this was a great, great topic but it took -- it took a while to get it done.

INTERVIEWER: And just so we get it down as part of this interview, just tell us the full title of the book and who it's published by.

MR. FINAN: It's called "Alfred E. Smith, the Happy Warrior" and it's Hill & Wang brought it out in 2002.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Very good. So to begin with then, where did Al Smith come from? What is his background?

MR. FINAN: He was -- he was born -- as we speak here on Fulton Street in Manhattan, he was born a half a mile from here on South Street right where -- right under where the Brooklyn Bridge cuts across the street. He was born in a -- at home in a three-story walk-up that had one of the great views of New York, you know, possible.

He -- his family, they were living in the house on South Street when the Brooklyn Bridge was being built and it was literally built right over the top of them.

INTERVIEWER: H-m-m. And what was his family situation --

MR. FINAN: Well, he actually -- he actually was -- I said, you know, born poor, which is kind of shorthand. He wasn't born poor. His father -- his father drove a wagon

and horses and -- which he owned, so he was in fact middle class. I mean he was an entrepreneur and the family was really very well off in -- you know, compared to some of the other people in what was then New York's Fourth Ward, which was quite a poor neighborhood.

It surrounded, of course, the docks on South Street and it for that reason quickly became home for a lot of the Irish Americans who began to come to this country in the 1840s, the Big Famine crush in the late forties and in the fifties, so he grew up in a largely Irish Catholic neighborhood on the East Side -- on the East Side of Manhattan.

INTERVIEWER: Now you mentioned that his father died when he was quite young?

MR. FINAN: Yeah, when he was twelve. It was -- it was not -- it was a physically very demanding job, you know, because you didn't just drive a truck but you muscled all the cargo and you were out in all weathers and eventually his health broke and he was forced to work as a night watchman and then finally he died when Al was twelve, leaving the family practically

destitute and in real danger of being broken up

by the welfare authorities, who in those days did not allow mothers, widows, to keep their children. Children were institutionalized because the mother had no support and -- and it was really thought to be in the best interest of the children.

But Al Smith's mother went out and got a job the day her husband was buried and worked in a factory and was able to keep the family together until Al was old enough to go to work and begin to make a man's wage.

INTERVIEWER: And so what did he then start to do?

MR. FINAN: Well, he went through a succession of jobs. He started by being a messenger who would be sent out by the -- the truck -- by trucking companies to chase down their trucks and tell them where to go next. He worked as an office boy for a while.

The job that he talked about a lot in his political career was the year that he spent at the Fulton Fish Market learning the fish business, which was a -- another very demanding

job, a 12-hour-a-day job and six days a week,

and -- but he eventually moved on and was carrying pipe in Brooklyn when he finally began to be -- to get political work.

INTERVIEWER: And so how did that come about and what was he doing?

MALE VOICE: Hold on. The door is open.

MR. FINAN: He actually entered politics in -- through his social connections in the neighborhood. He was recognized -- he had no desire originally for a political career. He really was stagestruck and living on the lower East Side he was in -- you know, in short walking distance from the Bowery, which was the major popular entertainment district in New York at that time and theater was a -- frequently an avenue of upward mobility for immigrants who, you know, did all kinds of acts. They sang, they danced, you know, they did knockaround comedy and he grew up in these theaters and in the dime museums and he had a great facility for learning lines.

He had a photographic memory. He had

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a big booming voice that carried to the last row of the biggest -- the biggest theaters, and he

loved to sing and dance even though he did not sound -- he did not sound particularly good because he had this deep throaty voice and -- which later would be described as gravelly, but he became a great favorite in his neighborhood in doing amateur theatrics and -- but this also, these were some of the same talents that appealed to politicians.

It meant that he could stand up and make a speech and be heard over the horse cars, you know, on Broadway and his memory, of course, his photographic memory is the kind of memory that politicians need so that they can greet everybody on a first-name basis and he was taken under the wing of a bachelor in the neighborhood who introduced him to Tom Foley, who was a bar owner, who eventually became the district leader on the lower East Side for the Fourth Ward and it was Foley who sent him to Albany in 1903 as an Assemblyman.

So -- and it -- the difference between a career in theater and a career in politics for

him really hinged on his need to support his mother and his sister. He couldn't risk not

getting paid. You know, he couldn't take a chance that -- because he had his family supporting him or depending on him, and so he entered politics which was a better -- it was a steadier paying job.

INTERVIEWER: So he goes to Albany in 1903. Did he distinguish himself in the State Legislature?

MR. FINAN: It was hard -- it was hard for a Democrat to distinguish himself in the State Legislature. The State Legislature was in both Houses an overwhelmingly Republican show and Smith's first year in the Assembly he said he was so far from the speaker's well that he could barely see what was happening down there and didn't even meet the Speaker until the very end of the session.

Not only was he a Democrat but he was a Democrat from New York City which was even lower than -- it was the lowest you could be and they were powerless and so he didn't even get a committee assignment his first couple of years

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in the Legislature because there was nobody to sponsor him and it was a pretty miserable experience for him.

It was also very hard to follow what was going on. A lot of things -- the procedure was hard to see through and after a couple of years he told Tom Foley that he wanted to give up the whole thing and come home and get a job in the City Administration, maybe in the Building Department and, you know, just make a comfortable living, you know, was all he was -- he was after.

But Foley told him to persevere. That, you know, his talents would eventually distinguish him and that was true and it was also a time of change, a lot of political change. This was the real heart of the progressive era and it shook up Albany very profoundly and led to changes that were ultimately to benefit his career.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me, then, he goes back to the Legislature. He's kind of been putting his nose to the grindstone and working away in obscurity. What changes that?

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MR. FINAN: Well, he gets -- I mean he has -- one of his other talents is that he has a great talent for acquiring friends and one of

the friends that he acquires is the Speaker -- one of the Republican speakers, James Wadsworth, who appoints him to a couple of committees and, you know, allows him to at least begin to do some interesting work up there instead of just being an onlooker.

But it's the -- it is in fact the Democratic victory and, you know, in 1910 that really, you know, propels him to the top and he becomes first in 1910 the Majority Leader and then the next year he becomes Speaker, and he identifies himself with -- even though he is a Tamany man and he is seen as a, you know, a representative of the machine, he identifies himself with the progressive movement.

He makes friends with the reformers. He befriends a reformer named Francis Perkins and knows all the reformers and listens to them. I mean he doesn't just -- he doesn't just pay lip service to reform. He's a thoughtful guy. He -- his mind does not, you know, kind of run

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in the normal -- he was an unusual -- he had an unusual ability to see things in a different way than other people.

And the reformers are, you know,

constantly appealing to him and so when kind of the reform movement peaks or reaches a critical turning point in 1911 when the Triangle fire kind of turns the State upside down, he's in a position of prominence. He's in a position of, you know, familiarity with people, reformers who understand perhaps even better than he does as somebody who was born in the City what's going on in industry and he has this open mind and these things come together, you know, to really help thrust him into the leadership of the progressive movement.

INTERVIEWER: When you talk about the progressive movement and the reformers, can you give us some idea of what was happening that created so many different groups that were dedicated to reform and what kind of scale were we talking about in terms of the types and number of groups?

MR. FINAN: Well, it was -- it was a

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very -- it was a vast movement in the sense that it was very -- it was very broad and surprisingly deep considering, you know, that it didn't have a precipitating incident like the

Depression. I mean the reforms of the New Deal, you know, were propelled by the Depression and -- but the progressive period doesn't really grow out of that same kind of crisis.

There is a crisis which is that the capitalism which has been triumphant, you know, in the United States throughout the 18th Century and has really, you know, had its way without any kind of government check, has finally created so many problems.

Unregulated economic growth has created so many problems that people begin to ask what government can do, you know, to regulate that growth and to preserve the -- the wonderful gain in prosperity that capitalism brings but to try to restrain the exploitation of workers, to the spoiling of the environment; you know, the corruption of politics.

The progressive movement tries to address, you know, all those issues and the way

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it does is to advocate, you know, strengthening government as a buffer between the public and capitalism and so this is, you know, and this is -- to some extent this is an attack on the very machine politics that Smith grows out of.

You know Tamany as the machine that controls New York City is a favorite target of the reformers and -- but it's really much broader than just, you know, just an attack on political machines. It's an effort to really rethink the requirements of democracy in an industrial age. You know, it's an effort to restore democracy, to limit the power of the monopolists and the Rockefellers and to restore, you know, a fair political system.

INTERVIEWER: Now who were some of the significant leaders in New York? You mentioned Francis Perkins earlier, which is a name I think would be familiar to a lot of our -- a lot of our folks. But who were some of the others of that era?

MR. FINAN: Well, in the Smith camp, and certainly Robert Moses, you know, is a well-known -- is a well-known name and Moses really

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emerges as a protege of Smith's. You know, it's during Smith's Administration that Moses, you know, lays the groundwork for the great park system that we enjoy today.

Joseph Proskauer (phonetic), a lawyer,

was one of Smith's major, you know, political advisors. But certainly, you know, they weren't -- we're talking about progressivism. There was progressivism both in the Democratic and the Republican Party, and certainly Theodore Roosevelt was a great advocate of progressivism and -- both as Governor of New York and President.

And there were liberal, kind of these progressive wings of both political parties and so -- and the other -- the other close Smith associate was a woman named Belle Moskowitz who had been very active in progressive causes before she signed on as his -- again, one of his closest political advisors. Very unusual for a woman to be, you know, a close political advisor in those days, but she was one of his key people.

INTERVIEWER: Do you -- you mentioned

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the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory a while ago. I wonder if you would just give us a brief description of what that event was and how that changed the course of Al Smith's career.

MR. FINAN: Well, it was -- you know, I think in some respects it was as searing an

event in New York politics, you know, as the 9/11 attacks were, the destruction of the World Trade Center, even though the loss of life was so much higher in the World Trade Center.

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire involved the deaths of 130 young women, some, you know, barely girls, on a Saturday -- a Saturday morning when the, you know, these -- they made these shirtwaists, these blouses of this very light, muslin kind of material that burned with incredible rapidity.

And due to inadequate fire safety provisions and the fact that fire exits were locked against theft and that this building, which was a modern building, modern fireproof building which you can see today, these two stories, these two floors that the shirtwaist company were on, burned completely and there

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were -- there was no chance to get the people out of there.

The fire -- the ladders on the fire trucks didn't reach high enough to be able to evacuate people from the windows of the building and so many of them jumped and that, I think

also, was just the awfulness of the way they died and the helplessness that everybody felt about it and the terrible guilt that the City felt that people were working in those conditions and could be -- weren't, you know, endangering themselves to such a degree.

Anyway, it kind of -- there were -- a committee of leading citizens went to Albany and met with the Governor and called for a red -- they wanted, you know, a blue ribbon panel of experts to meet and to recommend factory reforms and the Governor said, well, you gotta go see the legislative leaders who, at that time, were Al Smith and Robert Wagner.

And Smith talked to the committee, and Perkins was on this delegation, and so she -- we have her report on what happened when they met with Smith and he -- he discouraged them from

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the idea of a blue ribbon panel and encouraged them to accept a legislative -- a joint legislative committee of Assembly and Senate members, explaining that the Legislature was much more likely to be led by recommendations that came out -- came from their own colleagues than they were from a blue ribbon panel.

And so the Factory Investigating Committee was formed and with Smith as the vice chairman and Wagner as the chairman, and they toured the state and the factories of the state and looked not just at questions of factory safety but also at the issue of whether people were -- hours, whether people were working too long, how much they were being paid, and they produced a series of recommendations that were enacted over the next two years that really gave New York the country's, you know, leading labor law.

And it was a real education for all the members of the committee. You would think that, you know, that Al Smith or Robert Wagner growing up in the City would know something about the conditions of people in factories, but

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they really didn't. And, in fact, there had been -- you know, there hadn't been that much study even by the experts as to what industrial conditions were like, so this was, you know, one of the early and most important industrial fact-finding commissions.

INTERVIEWER: And this was a real

hands-on role that he had in leading this --

MR. FINAN: Oh, they --

INTERVIEWER: -- commission?

MR. FINAN: Yeah. I mean they -- they went and they showed up at factories unannounced, you know, early in the morning and caught the child workers, you know, in their place of employment and they went home with the workers and talked to them about their lives and they really, you know, they gave themselves a very thorough education.

INTERVIEWER: And there was -- as you say, there was kind of a whole range of legislation that came out of this. Can you describe some of the different areas of legislation that evolved out of this commission?

MR. FINAN: Well, the initial -- the

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initial legislation was largely related to safety and factory inspection and could be, you know, as detailed as mandating that the chairs that the workers sat on had backs, you know, and dealt with fire regulations and protecting fire exits from -- providing that fire escapes be adequate, but there was a whole -- there was a whole body of social legislation, really, that

this contributed to, not directly at the time, but later after Smith becomes Governor, involving recommendations for limitations on the number of hours that women would work and children, who were then legally -- at a certain age were legal workers.

Recommending a minimum wage for women and children. Men were thought to be able to protect their own wages through union activity, so there wasn't -- initially the minimum wage push was not -- was confined to women and children and -- but this legislation is more advanced legislation.

And some of it -- some of it passed before Smith left the Legislature. They were able to -- one of the biggest problems was the

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number of hours that women worked in the canneries during the harvest; could be, you know, well in excess of 70 or 80 hours a week. And so, you know, some of the early limitations on hours were passed as a result of the Factory Investigating Commission.

But even beyond the particular pieces of legislation, the Factory Investigating

Committee made the case that government needed to be -- needed to intervene actively to protect the welfare of workers and that -- you know, that became the platform really on which Smith first bid for political -- a political constituency beyond, you know, the people of the lower East Side and beyond, you know, the Tamany Democrats and began to reach out to independent Democrats who in many ways were often very hostile to Tamany, as well as to Republicans and he began to build, you know, the constituency that would, you know, support his Governorship.

(End of Side A, Tape 1.)

INTERVIEWER: Now you mentioned that his partner in this effort was Robert Wagner, which is a name that is very well-known in New

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York State history, but I know in your book you also talk from this period about another emerging friendship that he developed in Albany with a very significant figure and I wonder if you would tell us who that is and what that was all about.

MR. FINAN: Yeah. I am forgetting an important progressive. Franklin -- he meets Franklin Roosevelt in 1911 when Roosevelt's

elected to the -- initially to the Assembly, I believe. No, I'm sorry. He was elected to the Senate from the beginning, but he comes to Smith's attention because he is the leader of an anti-Tamany group of Democrats in the Legislature who oppose the nomination of a -- Tamany tried to select a senatorial candidate that Roosevelt and the Upstate Democrats, who were often opposed to Tamany, opposed and there was a long fight which they actually refused to attend the legislative sessions in an effort to defeat this candidate.

So when Smith who is leading the forces, the organization forces, first meets Roosevelt they're really political opponents.

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You know, they're on opposite sides. He's the City Democrat as opposed to the country Democrat from Dutchess County and -- but, you know, as -- and, in fact, Roosevelt at that point goes into the National Administration under Wilson, so he's not around very long during, you know, in State politics prior to becoming Governor in '28.

He goes and becomes Assistant

Secretary of the Navy and -- but it establishes a long and twisted relationship as they start kind of as rivals and then become friends during Smith's Governorship and then -- and then become rivals again for the Presidency in '32 and finally reconcile, you know, after the outbreak of the war. So it's a fascinating relationship and --

INTERVIEWER: You'll get into it a little more in depth as we --

MR. FINAN: Right.

INTERVIEWER: -- as we continue the discussion but -- so Smith has now established himself as a significant figure in New York State politics. He then runs for the

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Governorship in 1918 --

MR. FINAN: Right.

INTERVIEWER: How did that come about? What was his -- what was his platform?

MR. FINAN: Well, he had the platform, you know, really that he had established -- he had his progressive record as his platform and he is -- he kind of nails that down in the 1915 Constitutional Convention where he is really a leader of -- a leader of the progressive forces

in the convention and -- but nobody really expected he was gonna be elected in 1918.

I mean New York was a Republican state, not only in the Legislature but in the Governor's Office and --

INTERVIEWER: What's particularly significant about the 1918 election in New York State?

MR. FINAN: Well, the war -- you know, the war is still -- has just ended as they go to the polls in November and, frankly, you know, Smith may well not have been elected had it not been for the influenza epidemic which basically confined campaigning. People Upstate were

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afraid to come out and, you know, to gather in crowds so their campaigning Upstate was very limited and there was --

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't there something else that was unprecedented?

MR. FINAN: Which was?

INTERVIEWER: With the -- that women were first able to vote in the 1918 --

MR. FINAN: Oh, right.

INTERVIEWER: -- election in New York?

MR. FINAN: Oh, that's true, and so there's an expansion of the electorate, but -- and they turned out in a big way. You know, the immigrant voters, in particular, immigrant American voters. But he just squeaks through, and in many ways is considered an accidental Governor during his first term and nobody thinks they have to take him very seriously because of that.

INTERVIEWER: And what does he seek to do as Governor?

MR. FINAN: Well, he -- he seems -- he tries to carry his progressive platform into practice, you know, in the face of, you know,

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unrelenting opposition from -- in both Houses of the Legislature.

And so they came up -- they come up with the idea of creating a Reconstruction Commission of some of the state's leading citizens, both Democrats and Republicans, to make a series of recommendations for how -- changes that should be made in the wake of -- in the wake of the war.

There are tremendous problems as those soldiers are coming back and the country goes

through a sharp recession and not enough housing is available. You know, no housing has been built in a couple of years and inflation is tearing through the state and there is a sense that, you know, government really has to step in to deal with these problems.

And so the Reconstruction Commission issues a number of reports that have, you know, wide bipartisan support and comes up with a program that really Smith will be fighting for, you know, for the next ten years because he will -- he's elected in '18 and then re-elected in '22 and serves through 1928.

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INTERVIEWER: He's defeated in 1928.

MR. FINAN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So when he's defeated he continues to pursue the reform movement?

MR. FINAN: Well, he -- the way -- yeah. He's -- first of all, he succeeds in part because of his very engaging personality in, you know, in being quite a popular Governor. You know, he takes his big family up to Albany and they kind of charm the state with -- and so that

even though there isn't a lot to show in concrete terms, it's clear that this is a guy, you know, with a plan and -- but because of the 1920 -- the Harding landslide, the Republican landslide, it kind of sweeps the Democrats from power in Washington and has a spillover effect throughout the country.

Smith loses, although it's one of the remarkable losses in American political history because he runs nearly a million votes ahead of his party. Which means that a million people who voted for the Republican for president voted for him for Governor, so they split their

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tickets and that was -- that was very unusual at the time.

So inevitably he is renominated two years later and elected by a strong majority that will really just grow for every election from then until he runs for President and he -- yet he comes back into office intent on realizing these both social and political goals that have been set forth by the Reconstruction Commission.

INTERVIEWER: Who does he have working with him on the Reconstruction Commission?

MR. FINAN: Well, it's Belle Moskowitz and Robert Moses are -- Moses -- Moskowitz brings Moses in to be the secretary of the Commission and so they're, you know, they're the moving forces behind him.

INTERVIEWER: And what do they seek to do when they get back into office in terms of moving the agenda forward and how do they propose to do it?

MR. FINAN: Well, they realize, you know, and he at this time had been in State government for a long time. I mean, you know,

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by 1922, you know, he'd been up there almost 20 years and he well understood the weaknesses of the State government and on the political side, the Reconstruction Commission made a number of recommendations for strengthening State government.

It proposed, for example, that the structure of the government which had grown kind of willy-nilly be consolidated into, you know, a finite number of executive departments and even though that sounds like it's just kind of maybe shuffling, you know, shuffling paper and moving

people around on paper, in fact it was significant because those departments were to be brought under the direction of the Governor, and all the time Smith is in the Legislature -- it's really the Legislature that runs New York State.

The Governor's a weak figure and the people who have the most power are the two chairmen of the Appropriations Committees and the people who, you know, decide how the money is spent, and as a result of which there is no officer in New York who is a strong voice for all the people of the State. The State is

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really run by a bunch of small-town politicians from Upstate New York.

And because of the very undemocratic apportionment system in New York, you know, they have -- they have the power, so Smith's plan is to centralize the administration of the State, to adopt an executive budget directly taking budgetary authority out of the hands -- direct budgetary authority out of the hands of the Republican legislators and also to lengthen the term of office of the Governor and to have him elected in non-Presidential years, giving him more time to work and not worry about

re-election and freeing him from having to run with the national ticket.

Not all these reforms are achieved and the reforms that are achieved, the consolidation and the executive budget, were bloodily fought and hard-fought battles because the Republicans well understand that this is an attack on their power, but it is a battle that's won and that not only reshapes the structure of New York State but also shifts political power from out of -- from Upstate to Downstate, although it

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probably is more accurate to say it balances the power of Upstate with Downstate.

INTERVIEWER: Consistent with the population --

MR. FINAN: Yeah. Exactly. I mean there's a -- there is an amazing thing that happens in New York in 1894 when the Republicans realize that if the immigrants keep coming into New York at the rate they're coming into and become citizens, that the Democratic vote is essentially going to surpass the Republican vote Upstate which is flat and even falling.

And what they decide is they are gonna

fix the system so that no matter how many votes there are in New York City, the Republicans will stay in control, and it's this amazing debate that takes place in the 1894 Constitutional Convention in which the Democrats -- the Republicans admit to exactly what they're doing.

The Democrats accuse them and yell and scream and stamp their feet but are unable to do anything about it and New York gets stuck with this undemocratic apportionment system that really isn't overthrown until the 1960s when the

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Supreme Court rules that electoral systems must reflect one man, one vote. Until then there's nothing unconstitutional about what they did.

But unfair (laughter), it was clearly unfair and so Smith's government reforms are really aimed as much at democratizing State government as improving the efficiency of the government and making it, you know, operate better. And it's something that he is -- that, you know, will always redound to his credit and it's something that we live with today.

Today New York State still has one of the strongest Governors of all of the Governors in the country, the powers of the Governor, and

the Legislature is still trying to chip away at 'em and it just -- you know, they just had a ballot initiative in an effort to chip away at the Governor's budget authority. That all came, you know, from the Smith reforms.

INTERVIEWER: What did Smith personally do to advocate for the change?

MR. FINAN: Well, he fought -- you know, he fought a long, hard campaign, years of campaigns, years of addresses, years of, you

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know, making common cause -- his principal strategy was to unite the progressives in New York State; that is, to unite the Democrats and the Liberal Republicans in a coalition, you know, to support these reforms, and to bring business -- and to reach out to business as well and to -- because he needed every -- you know, he needed every bit of power that he could -- that he could mobilize in order to blast the Republicans out of their, you know, their control of the State.

And in my book I quote the famous sociologist Max Weber as saying that politics is a slow boring through hard boards. I mean it

was -- it was an excruciating fight and it really covered kind of the way he looked at government and made him skeptical of reforms. It was one of the things that made him skeptical about New Deal reforms.

You know, that -- for example, the Tennessee Valley Authority. You know, that you could simply pick up communities and move them. He didn't understand that because, you know, the experience of reform had been so traumatic in

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New York State and --

INTERVIEWER: You describe in the book him actually going out on the stump and talking about the reasons why he wants to make the changes and, in particular, you talk about him saying that we're going to save a lot of money but it's not simply to save it; it's to spend it on better things for the people of New York State.

MR. FINAN: No -- yeah. I mean he wasn't -- you know, he was -- he wasn't about cutting the size of government, and a lot of times progressive reform is looked at that way, as primarily being, you know, the middle -- it's a middle class reform intended to reign in the

abuses of the machine spending.

He wanted to take the money that was inefficiently spent and to put it in the new facilities, into new hospitals, into, you know, unemployment insurance, into things that really met human needs. And not coincidentally, you know, needs that were felt by people in the City that were not being met.

And he would say during these

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speeches, we're not promising you your taxes are gonna go down. Although he was fortunate as a politician in being Governor during the 1920s when tax receipts were going up, so he didn't -- he was able -- he really was able to give people both bread and -- certainly he gave them tax cuts and improved services which helped a lot, but he was clear that government needed to provide more services.

INTERVIEWER: And the descriptions of some of the circumstances that he talks about suggests that he was very familiar with what many of the public employees were actually experiencing on those front lines. I know that the descriptions you have in the book, he's

talking about the work that's being done by different individuals and what kind of resources or lack of resources they have to get the job done.

MR. FINAN: Yeah. He -- like all good politicians, he knew how, you know, the value of a story, you know, that was very concrete in detail and he would talk about, for example, you know, the nursing staffs in mental institutions

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being so overwhelmed, you know, that lone employees, female employees, were, you know, often taking care of violent -- patients who were violent and, you know, he had employees show him the marks, you know, that they -- they had suffered in trying to subdue people.

And, you know, he would talk about that, you know, as a graphic way of getting a point across that we had to build better hospitals and that we had to staff 'em better because things were really done on the cheap.

I mean these, you know, these -- the Upstate Republicans were very opposed to, you know, State spending and the prisons were in bad shape and, you know, the -- you know, they -- there simply was not a -- there was a very rural

approach to what government should do and he came with a much more -- a much broader view of the needs of society because he was from a bigger place.

INTERVIEWER: The -- but was he able to get the pressure on the Legislature to enact this by these public appearances? I mean did he really use the Court of Public Opinion to

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pressure for the change?

MR. FINAN: Oh, he battered the Legislature. I mean he -- he just -- they were -- and they didn't deserve any better because they early on took a posture toward him that they were gonna oppose anything that he favored. Well, that put them, you know, in the position of opposing some of the most common sense and humanitarian changes that were possible.

And so he made -- he made fun of them ultimately, you know, knowing that the only way he was gonna -- he could not sweet talk the Legislature. He just battered them and so he was -- he was actually -- an example of that is he came to -- he was in the City going to the

circus and the Legislature had just adjourned and so one of the reporters asked him, you know, compare the circus and the Legislature. And he said, oh, there's no comparison. The animals are intelligent.

(Laughter.)

MR. FINAN: And, you know, he learned how to use radio. He knew how to -- you know,

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he -- at one point, in fact, the Legislature was opposing a tax cut just because he had advocated it and he went on the radio and told the people to write their legislator, call their legislator, and they were simply inundated with mail.

So he was -- he used every tool in his disposal and he was -- he was a great stump speaker. He was a great, you know, a great ad libber and, you know, when he would be in a debate and the Legislature offered State reforms, for example, government reforms and the Legislature -- the common argument with the Legislature was all these reforms were just intended to make the Governor, you know, a king. You know, they were -- Smith was trying to build up his own power.

And at one point he stood up during the course of the debate and he was from Oliver Street. He lived on Oliver Street in the Fourth Ward in a very modest three-story brick building and he said, king? Behold the king of Oliver Street, you know. It was ridiculous to argue, he said, that, you know, that these reforms were

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somehow for his glory. You know, Al Smith was not a -- there was nothing kingly about him. These were -- you know, these were practical reforms that would help, you know, the population at large.

INTERVIEWER: Now, in 1928 he then decides to run for President.

MR. FINAN: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And he actually has Franklin Roosevelt nominate him. How does that come about?

MR. FINAN: Well, actually he runs for the first time in 1924.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MR. FINAN: And it leads to this famous Democratic Convention that deadlocks for a hundred ballots, more than a hundred ballots,

and he doesn't win the campaign at that point but it's clear, you know, that he's the front runner four years on and he actually asks -- and he and Roosevelt have developed at least a -- well, they've become acquaintances, and he asks Roosevelt to nominate him in '24 because it's good politics to have an Upstate Democrat

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nominating, and a Protestant, nominating a Catholic from New York.

So -- and Roosevelt initially isn't sure he wants to do it. He is -- he has been out of the public eye because of his polio, his bout with polio. He hasn't made any public appearances, so -- but he -- and he doesn't want to appear on stage to be disabled because he knows that will be the kiss of death for his political prospects.

So he practices getting up on the podium on the -- in Madison Square Garden which at that time is actually Madison Square -- and with his son he -- he's leaning on -- he puts aside his crutches and with a cane and leaning on his son he walks to the podium and gives this great nominating speech for Smith which not only helps Smith but also revivifies his own

political career.

So then he does -- he renominates him four years later in Houston at the Democratic Convention and Smith persuades Roosevelt again pretty much against his wishes to run for Governor of New York because it's felt that that

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will help, you know, strengthen the ticket among Protestants and help bring New York into the Democratic column in '28. It doesn't work out. Roosevelt's elected but Smith loses New York.

INTERVIEWER: But then Roosevelt as Governor becomes the beneficiary of many of the things that Smith had put into place in terms of changing the government and projects that he had set in motion such as you indicated earlier, the development of the park system and many other expansions of good public works.

MR. FINAN: Right. Well, yeah, he -- Roosevelt says, you know, I'm gonna be just the kind of Governor Al Smith was and, you know, his program's gonna be my program and, you know, he pretty much -- it pretty much was.

INTERVIEWER: In 1932 when Roosevelt becomes the President of the United States, he

gets help from Smith to get elected but then largely he abandons him when he becomes President.

MR. FINAN: Yeah. Well, I mean, Smith does support Roosevelt in '32 but it's only after his own -- it's only after he -- his own

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bid for the office fails. It's a very, you know, it's a very kind of twisty story but basically Smith after -- Smith is defeated in 1928 in a terrible landslide. Terrible not just because of the numbers but because of the amount of anti-Catholic bigotry that's exposed in the nation at the prospect of a Catholic possibly becoming President is so shocking to everybody and the depth of the bigotry is.

And certainly Smith was no innocent and he knew that even in Upstate New York there were areas that were strongly anti-Catholic, but the depth of the bigotry is terribly shocking to him and to many others and pretty much persuades him that he doesn't -- that his political career is over and he then goes into -- becomes the president of the Empire State -- the corporation building the Empire State Building that opens in 1931.

And Roosevelt is gunning for the Presidency and Smith and Roosevelt work fairly closely together during Roosevelt's Governorship and Smith expects to support Roosevelt for the Presidency and is just waiting to be asked, but

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Roosevelt believed that, you know, the mistake of the Smith campaign had been to alienate the South, you know, five states of which had broken from the Democratic Party since the Civil War and he decides he can't afford to have Smith's endorsement so he doesn't ask for it.

And as a result, and that's deeply painful to Smith, and he is -- becomes very angry with Roosevelt and ultimately becomes convinced that he, especially as the Depression begins to come on, that he has a real chance to get -- to capture the nomination after all; that, in fact, anybody could beat Hoover.

(End of Side B of Tape 1.)

And so he makes a late stab at the nomination and so there's a lot of bad feeling between Roosevelt and Smith, you know, after Roosevelt becomes President and it ultimately, even though Smith supports the New Deal, the

early New Deal, he ultimately breaks with Roosevelt in '36 and supports Alf Landon, a Republican, for President, which is just a shattering kind of experience for a lot of Democrats. I mean that --

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INTERVIEWER: Changes a lot of perceptions about Smith?

MR. FINAN: Yeah. It saddened a lot of people and convinced them that, you know, convinced some that -- and a lot of Democratic supporters of Roosevelt kind of tried to portray Smith as somebody who's gone high hat, you know, somebody who now has a big salary and has forgotten the little people and really destroys his reputation with a lot of -- with a lot of his former supporters.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you about -- to kind of wrap up, about Smith's legacy let me ask you specifically about another building that Al Smith is involved with beyond the Empire State Building which I think everybody knows, certainly many CSEA members are very familiar with the Alfred E. Smith Building in Albany.

Can you tell us about that project and what hand he had in that?

MR. FINAN: Well, I think that, you know, the building is really a symbol of, you know, the growth of the government. Obviously the government took on new responsibilities

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during Smith's Administration and the size of the State payroll grew as people were hired on to undertake these jobs and it was decided that they needed their own administration building in New York, in Albany, and they -- so this building was started and -- but for Smith, Smith was -- always cited the office building as an example because it took so long to build, and I can't remember exactly how long, but it was years, years and years.

And he always cited it as an example of the limit of government; you know, that government could do and must do many things that private industry couldn't do, but there were some things clearly that private industry did better than government and that the red tape involved in any government project inevitably detracted from its efficiency and that -- and he kind of proved it. You know, while they were still building the Alfred Smith -- what would be

called the Alfred E. Smith Building in Albany,
he built the Empire State Building in 15 months.
I mean that's 15 months from when they put the
first steel in till they opened the door. You

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know, that's a pretty incredible example of
private industry but it was -- it was something
that he talked about a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Well, as we wrap up,
what do you think that New Yorkers really ought
to know about Al Smith that may unfortunately
have been forgotten in the decades?

MR. FINAN: Well, you know, I think
that Smith, even though he left -- politics
after '36 for him were a very painful experience
and that, you know, he kind of experienced the
best and the worst of politics and -- but he
never lost his optimism about democracy or about
the importance of government and the important
functions that it fulfilled, and he never lost
his love for the people.

I mean he was never embittered in that
sense and he always tremendously valued his
years in government service and I think, you
know was -- you know, was tremendously grateful
for the opportunity that he had to be Governor.

You know, he said toward the end of his years that he was just sorry that, you know, that he had tremendously enjoyed being the Minority

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Leader.

You know, he loved the battle and I think that, you know, we all tend to get a little cynical about politics from time to time but I think his life shows how much politics can accomplish, you know? I mean he -- granted he, you know, made the most of the opportunities he had and they were pretty dramatic opportunities, but the State, you know, in 2006, you know, as opposed to 1906 is just such an enormously different place as a result of government and as a result of the political -- you know, the political process.

And he has a tremendous responsibility for, you know, the shape of things today and, you know, he's worthy of the attention that I think's finally being paid to him and that you're paying to him today. So thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much. We greatly appreciate your -- the time and insight. It's really been a fascinating conversation.

MR. FINAN: Thanks.

(Conclusion of interview of
Christopher Finan.)