

Interview Date: 7/18/06

Subject: Joseph L. Persico; Writer and Researcher for New York Governor, W. Averill Harriman, 1956-1959; Foreign Service Officer for the United States Information Agency (USIA), 1959-1963; Executive Assistant to New York State Health Commissioner, Hollis Ingraham, 1963-1966; Chief Speechwriter for New York Governor, Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1966-1973; Chief Speechwriter for United States Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1974-1977; Award-winning, full-time author, 1977-present.

Joseph L. Persico shared insights about the late Nelson A. Rockefeller and the numerous accomplishments he made for the state of New York throughout his Governorship. Persico spoke of Rockefeller's energetic leadership style whose vision for the country offered many new ideas ahead of the Federal Government. These ideas included environmental and transportation issues, promotion of the Urban Development Corporation, support of the arts, and along with being out front on discrimination, Rockefeller was the first to promote an all-volunteer Army.

In his interview, Persico discussed how Rockefeller was "too liberal" for most Republicans and mentioned Rockefeller's Lieutenant Governor, Malcolm Wilson's, ability to "mend fences" with Republicans due to Rockefeller's liberal viewpoints. Persico recalled that Rockefeller was very close with unions, which was also unusual for Republicans. Persico mentioned Rockefeller's clever ways of providing raises to State workers, his intervention in the New York City Garbage Strike, where he took over union negotiations to end the strike, and Rockefeller's discussions on developing a collective bargaining law, which turned into Taylor Law.

Persico listed a number of Rockefeller's accomplishments for the State of New York, which included the construction and operation of Rockefeller Center in New York City, the transformation of the city of Albany and construction of the Empire State Plaza, and Rockefeller's crowning achievement, the development of the SUNY system.

Persico also spoke of Rockefeller's relationships with prominent New York legislators and politicians and mentioned how Rockefeller responded to the "chaotic problems" that arose throughout the 1960's. He addressed the Rockefeller Drug Laws and what led to the establishment of their harsh penalties and also discussed the Attica Riots, which Persico stated were the worst thing that happened while Rockefeller was in office.

Key Words

Aid in Development Corporation

All-volunteer Army

Argentina

Attica Riots

Collective Bargaining

Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs in WWII

Department of Corrections

Dutch Royalty

Latin America

League of Women Voters

Mayoral Abrogation Bond

Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza

No-fault Auto Insurance Plan

New York State College for Teachers

Pure Waters Bond Issue

Rockefeller Center

Rockefeller Drug Laws

Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC)

State University System (SUNY)

SUNY Albany

Taylor Law

Transportation Bond Issue

Union Negotiations

Universal Health Insurance

Urban Development Corporation (UDC)

Vietnam

1968 Garbage Strike in New York City

Key People

Harry Albright

Erastus Corning

Thomas Dewey

Robert Douglas

Meade Esposito

Governor W. Averill Harriman

Ronald Harris

Jacob Javits

John F. Kennedy Jr.

Robert Kennedy

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

John Lindsay

Al Marshall

Edward Mode

T. Monanhard??

Richard Nixon

Russ Oswald

Nelson A. Rockefeller

William J. Roman

Franklin Roosevelt

Alfred E. Smith

Malcolm Smith

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JOSEPH L. PERSICO INTERVIEW

July 18, 2006

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Today is Tuesday, July the 18th, 2006. We are in Guilderland at the home of Joseph Persico, who is an award-winning author and he is the author of "The Imperial Rockefeller" and he worked with Governor Rockefeller as a speech writer for many years.

Mr. Persico, first off I wonder if you would begin by telling us a little bit about how you came to work for Nelson Rockefeller.

MR. PERSICO: 1966. I was the speech writer for the Commissioner of Health, New York State. The Rockefeller Administration that year was promoting a billion dollar bond issue to clear up water pollution in New York State. I got a call from the Governor's Communications Director Emaul (phonetic) asking if I could provide some information so that they could prepare a speech promoting the Pure Waters Bond Issue.

I said I heard opportunity knocking and instead of getting simply information, I wrote a speech and I put a great deal of effort into it and I probably neglected my boss, the

Health Commissioner (inaudible) while I was doing this.

I sent the speech down to the Governor's Office. It was delivered and shortly thereafter I was asked to come aboard on the Governor's team as his speech writer.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the projects that you worked on when you first came on board?

MR. PERSICO: Well, as I said, water pollution was a major issue and subsequently there was his election campaigns. That year of 1966 he was running for his third term as Governor and I was deeply involved in my first campaign. There were other bond issues, the Transportation Bond Issue, which was another megamillion dollar program.

He also was promoting initiatives in the State that were far ahead of the federal government. For example, we were promoting government support of the arts, we were promoting -- at the time the inner cities were rotting in this country. We were promoting the Urban Development Corporation so in this area

Nelson Rockefeller was pretty much out in front of the country.

INTERVIEWER: Why don't you talk a little bit about that. What kind of vision did Rockefeller bring to governing in a state like New York?

MR. PERSICO: Nelson Rockefeller always had his eye on the prize, which was the presidency, which meant that he had to be seen as a shaker and a mover, so consequently we were always involved in what I thought was a new crusade. One year it was the program to end the old system of automobile insurance and have a no-fault automobile insurance plan.

On another occasion he was even ahead of what the country is doing now and that was he added universal health insurance, so I would say that the hallmark of the Rockefeller leadership style was new ideas and the very energetic perceiving these ideas.

INTERVIEWER: And how did that play out in terms of the dynamics with the State work force? Was it kind of a -- I would imagine that it was something that would be very warmly

received because it would be more jobs.

MR. PERSICO: Well, I think that Governor Rockefeller was quite popular among the public service employees, the State employees, particularly because he was not averse to convening organization negotiations, collective bargaining, all of these ideas that we associate with the (inaudible) in the United States. He had come to the Governorship with a background in having dealt with unions in (inaudible) and he was closely involved and he was a reasonable guy, and so consequently he brought those attitudes into State government.

He also did things that were really extraordinary for a Republican. He would line up in the four campaigns that he was involved in, dozens of labor organizations, and this is something usually in the bag for Democratic candidates, but he managed to work with these people and was fairly generous in his approach to their aims so that he enjoyed marvelous support from the State work force.

INTERVIEWER: Talk a little bit more about his role in building Rockefeller Center,

because you mentioned that he worked closely with the unions to make that project happen and that it then shaped much of what came afterwards.

MR. PERSICO: Well, he -- he was running Rockefeller Center as a rather unique man. First he was involved in the construction of it and his father, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., essentially handed the baton to Nelson Rockefeller when he was in his mid-twenties to run this massive enterprise, so it was terrific training for him in business administration and just leadership skills generously, and these he brought into his appointments in federal government and then he served under President Eisenhower and he served under President Roosevelt, even before that, so he honed his skills, I think, to some extent in leading the construction and operation (inaudible) of Rockefeller Center.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Now, the Rockefeller name was not always so well revered by working people and unions. How did that affect how he approached his relationship with

working people?

MR. PERSICO: Well, I think that the Governor -- he is the first Rockefeller Republican and by (inaudible) a moderate Republican and he was receptive to the needs of the public at large; that is as I mentioned already, nobody in the country was pushing for universal health care and he was doing it way back in the sixties and seventies, and he was out front on discrimination, whether against Blacks, whether against (inaudible), so these were approaches and initiatives that would have appealed to a broad public and no business area (inaudible) which is a bind that many Republican candidates and leaders would get themselves into.

INTERVIEWER: How did he personally cultivate those relationships?

MR. PERSICO: The Governor was terrific at meeting allies. I'm almost tempted to say seducing people, people particularly of the opposition. For example, when he was in office the State Senate was Republican controlled but the Assembly, as it still is, was

Democrat controlled, so he would bring in the Democratic leaders from the Legislature and very simply and honestly, but he would cut deals. He would bring them on board. He knew if they had needs and they had objectives that would please their constituency, so he would play to these.

He also did the same thing, as I mentioned, with labor leaders who might not have been naturally inclined to support him, but he had a way of embracing people, not only those who were in his party but people who were outside of it, either through blandishments, inducements, cajoling, but he got things done.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever witness any of these sessions?

MR. PERSICO: One of the most unforgettable situations that I remember was there was a Democrat leader, and his name is (inaudible) Esposito and I think he had been a leader from Brooklyn but I'm not sure, but he's a power in State Democratic politics. And Nelson had him over to his mansion on Fifth Avenue to discuss matters that at one point Esposito looked at one of Rockefeller's

paintings; as you all know, he was a great art collector, and Esposito had admired one of these paintings and the Governor said, "Well, take it." Well, that's kind of irresistible.

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: Pretty amazing. Now, for you as a young speech writer, I would imagine when you're dealing with an individual who really is larger than life like Nelson Rockefeller, that must be somewhat intimidating. How did you adjust to working with him?

MR. PERSICO: Well, working with a powerful family member like a Nelson Rockefeller could have been a little bit intimidating; probably in my early days it was. But there are things that humanize every people and because my timing of them and seeing him in a human way, for example, in my case I'm here talking to you and I'm not having much trouble speaking, and if I had to read from this book in front of you it would not be a problem, but Nelson Rockefeller suffered from dyslexia which made an interesting challenge for a speech writer.

That is, with dyslexia he would

transpose words. If he meant "conservation" he would say "conversation." If he meant "1986" he might say "1968," so this was quite a challenge for a speech writer, but it also -- it showed me that everybody has their burdens to bear and that he is rich and is powerful. He had his limitations that aroused my sympathy.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Now how did you cultivate your working relationship with him?

MR. PERSICO: Well, it was not -- it was not easy because the Governor would prefer to just get up and speak because he had difficulty reading. He was a stumbling reader, so I would work with him trying to produce the simplest possible language, not too complicated. I mean speech writers often will go off in vague flights of fancy (inaudible) such as Franklin Roosevelt stormed the country with in 1933 or John F. Kennedy in 1961.

Nelson Rockefeller liked meat and potatoes (inaudible) so that's what I was trying to say for the most part. He would sometimes depart in ways from the text that could be quite

interesting. On one occasion he was going to be speaking before the League of Women Voters promoting no-fault insurance. There was a mess before, there was an automobile accident. This side wanted to prove that they (inaudible) and the other side was saying, no, we are innocent and he is guilty. It was a terrible situation, so he is promoting no-fault insurance and was speaking, as I say, before the League of Women Voters.

And he had a part of the speech which went along something like this, that I had furnished him. Imagine that you were in an accident, imagine that you were injured, imagine that you were then out of work, imagine that you couldn't pay your bills.

And so I gave him the text and then went to hear him deliver the speech before the League of Women Voters and somehow in the course of delivering the speech he decided he didn't want to put the burden on his audience, so he turned it around and said: Supposing I was in an accident, supposing I was injured, suppose I couldn't go to work, suppose I couldn't pay my

bills. Well, the laughter was clocked at about seven minutes nonstop.

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: That's very good. Tell me a little bit about how the dynamics worked among the senior staff in his office. What were the relationships between some of the -- tell us about who some of the key players were --

MR. PERSICO: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- and something of the relationships there.

MR. PERSICO: Well, I don't want to make it sound like Pollyanna because when you're working at that level with a man as powerful as Nelson Rockefeller, the people he attracts have strong egos and so they would clash occasionally, but on the whole I would say that it was a pretty happy ship. I think there was mutual respect among most of the people.

The person I worked with most closely under the Governor was Al Marshal, Secretary to the Governor, just a massively, massively able man who himself could have stepped into the Governor's shoes. Extraordinary guy. He had a

capacity to make people want to be (inaudible) which is a great leadership quality.

He had been in a Marine (inaudible) in World War II and I was always happy I had not served under him because if he said, "Take that hill," I probably would have gone and tried to take that hill with disastrous consequences.

Another major figure at the time was his Counsel, Robert (inaudible), Bobby Douglas who was indefatigable. I never -- he was a combination of great personal charm, very attractive guy, who could have gotten by on the (inaudible) but would work himself to exhaustion as a member of the staff and I admired him particularly because there was a (inaudible) side of the Governor's staff. He had a real appreciation for language and I as the -- in a sense the staff writer had a meaningful relationship with him in that he took pleasure in going over speeches with me, which other people seemed to regard as a chore.

The Governor's Chief Financial Advisor was T. Monanhurd (phonetic), simply another legend in State government. He'd served the

same purpose under Governor Dewey. (Inaudible) precise man, a wonderful human being. I have an unforgettable recollection of having sent a speech to Monahanurd once and waiting for his reaction. It came back and he said that he thought it was beautifully punctuated, which wasn't quite what I was looking for.

(Laughter.)

On the whole, I was amused at Rockefeller's capacity to draw top people into State government. He would do it sometimes with inducements outside of the State payrolls. He would supplement them. When he was being considered for Vice President, when he was picked by President Jerry Ford, the Governor got into some trouble. Some of his payments were considered irregular and inappropriate.

For example, one of his first and foremost allies was William J. Roman, a union public administrator in this country, and the Governor had loaned fair amounts of money to Roman and it became an issue but not a fatal objective because in the end Rockefeller was approved, but one of his techniques was

providing inducements, extra to State salary, which were always rather modest, and he had this way to be in the person he wanted and he got them.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. Now one of the things that, as I've talked to other people about the Rockefeller era, is that he always wanted everything to be done first rate, you know, so that for example when the State was considering a collective bargaining law which eventually became known as the Taylor Law, he went out and tried to find the very best people in this field who could come together with the ideas to develop a law for New York.

I wonder if you would talk about that dynamic.

MR. PERSICO: One of the observations that I made of Governor Rockefeller which I tried to illustrate when I wrote my book, "The Imperial Rockefeller," is that he had the power to summon. Some public figures lacking his stature, lacking his background, lacking his family prestige, would not be able to get everybody to answer their call, but mostly when

Rockefeller called somebody or summoned somebody they came. He had what I call the power to summon.

And this led to him being able to achieve his objective which was to surround himself with the ablest people. He carried this attitude into just about everything he did. I remember him this one time revealing one of his management impulses which is: If you're trying to achieve 100 percent of something, the first 95 percent is not difficult. The last 5 percent marks the difference between a slipshod, half-baked job and something approaching perfection. And he did that in every approach to his State government initiatives including going the extra mile to recruit the ablest people.

INTERVIEWER: How did that play out with regard to the State work force? What was his thinking in terms of wanting to have the best people working for the State of New York beyond just the higher levels?

MR. PERSICO: Well, the Governor realized that if he was going to be an able leader as you would need in any field, business,

government, whatever, that your success is going to depend on the quality of people that you attract. (Inaudible) to try to skimp on the State budget by holding the State work force down at low levels of compensation, so he was very good, very good, at putting through raises for people.

Also he was very clever in that he knew that he tended to get a bad news bounce out of a raise for public service employees, so he would do it kind of through the back door. He would ease the pension contributions or in other ways provide greater take-home pay for the State worker that would not immediately translate as to another raise.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember much about the inception of the Taylor Law and how that came about?

MR. PERSICO: Well, the Taylor Law was not really my bailiwick except to write speeches explaining the merits of it, the undesirable conditions it would correct. But I do remember this: That the people negotiating with the Governor on let's say the labor side were coming

on pretty tough, pretty strong, and he was no marshmallow in negotiating himself, but I think what they sensed was this is not an anti-union government leader, and so as a result reasonable compromises were made that involved a strong union base to this day.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Absolutely. Do you recall interactions between Governor Rockefeller and people in the State work force at different junctures?

MR. PERSICO: No.

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: Okay. That's good. You know, you mentioned earlier that there was always this driving ambition to achieve the Presidency. How did that affect the way he governed New York?

MR. PERSICO: Well, the way he handled that ambition to become President, in a way was admirable but unfortunate. Nelson Rockefeller looked upon the quest for the Presidency a little bit as a merit system. If I do a better job as Governor and other Governors, my merit will be recognized, it will push me to the

forefront of those under consideration for my party's nomination for the Presidency.

Consequently, taking that merit system approach, he to some extent neglected the political road; that he was out pushing no-fault insurance and universal health care. He had people like Richard Nixon who were attending all of the Republican rubber chicken circuit winners and cultivating a base in today's terms and he didn't do particularly an impressive job of cultivating his base, so that when he would go to a Republican convention he did not have the fans sewn up that candidates who were working that other level had succeeded in having.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I wonder if you would maybe tell us, right behind you you have Franklin Roosevelt, a photo of Franklin Roosevelt up on the wall. Obviously throughout the 20th Century the Governors of New York have aspired to the Presidency and with Roosevelt, Al Smith and Tom Dewey and Nelson Rockefeller, it's a very formidable group of people.

I wonder if you might talk a little bit about the dynamic that drives the Governor

of New York to want to be the President and maybe some of the differences between those individuals.

MR. PERSICO: Well, New York is the Empire State. That was in all of my growing up the most populous state, so consequently Governors of New York were automatic contenders for the Presidency. Obviously not so true any more since we've lost population, lost clout in Congress, but Nelson Rockefeller certainly hoped that his native state would be a steppingstone to the Presidency.

But I talk a little bit about the liberality of his policies and his ability to court medium to low voters and even get a plurality of Democratic votes for his fall victories. And I remember (inaudible) very interesting.

He was making a good will trip to Latin America on behalf of President Nixon. This was in 1969. He was going to a lot of Latin American countries. He was in Argentina and the Governor held a press conference and immediately Argentine journalists at the

conference said: Seeing Rockefeller is such a powerful man, he's such an able man, why did you never become President of your country?

And he said something I don't think he would have ever said anywhere near the continent of the United States, he said: I was in the wrong party.

INTERVIEWER: Very, very interesting.

I'm -- can you tell us a little bit about his style compared to some of those other aspirants?

MR. PERSICO: Well, I think the Governor was very different from his immediate predecessor who was Averill Harriman, who was a Navy man, an admirable man, but he had no political fingertip feel. He didn't really know how to deal with people in an engaging way as Rockefeller did. He was different from Governor Dewey in that Governor Dewey was a very tough, able Governor, again not particularly lovable.

I think that a lot of what Nelson Rockefeller understood, he had learned from his service under President Franklin Roosevelt. He had served as Coordinator of Inter-American

Affairs in World War II. That is, his job was to keep the Latin American countries in our column, supporting the United States in its war effort.

And what he learned from Roosevelt was that he didn't go by the book. He improvised. If you had a State Department that is not doing the job the way you want them to do it, create a parallel organization; in this instance, the (inaudible) Affairs.

Rockefeller learned from Roosevelt not to be afraid to shake up the organization chart and he would do that when he was Governor. For example, he had interstate agencies that were involved, let's say, in housing. He was not happy with the riots in the sixties in the inner cities, with the pace of change of that existing agency. He creates a whole new parallel agency, the Aid in Development Corporation, so I think that his tutelage under Franklin Roosevelt was formative in his leadership.

INTERVIEWER: Now in the 1960s when he was primarily governing New York State, that was a time of great upheaval in this country. What

kind of a -- I mean and obviously he was trying to change a lot about the way New York operated and had, as you've mentioned, this vision from where he wanted to take our government.

How do you think the events of the sixties affected him and how did he respond to it?

MR. PERSICO: There were some shocking occurrences in the sixties. We had assassinations, President Kennedy and subsequently his brother, Martin Luther King, et cetera, and there were times when the country seemed on the edge of chaos.

And one thing that this brought out in Governor Rockefeller was an irrepressible optimism. No matter how bad the news was, he refused to interpret it as some kind of a malaise that went deep into the American character. You heard a lot of that during that period and he just kind of felt that, no, this is not the way to go. We've got to have a positive outlook, so he was not emotionally defeated by the disasters that the country was undergoing.

I've already spoken about his response to the riots in inner cities, creating the Urban Development Corporation. During the Viet Nam controversy, which was running red hot in the sixties, (inaudible) looked at rehabilitating, the casualties were mounting, and he took a position which did succeed in terms of military administration. He was practically the first one out of the box promoting an all-volunteer Army, which we now have, and it's a great Army, and he was out front in (inaudible).

So he would respond to the problems that came through the chaotic turmoil of the sixties.

INTERVIEWER: Certainly he put his imprint on the City of Albany beyond -- you know, in addition to what he did throughout New York State, but certainly he transformed the City of Albany, particularly through the building of the South Mall.

I wonder if you would talk about that project and what you remember of his role in making that happen.

MR. PERSICO: I have a very personal

sense of Nelson Rockefeller's transformation of the State Capital. I came to Albany as a student at what was then known as New York State College for Teachers, a little tiny campus, and I remember vividly the South End of Albany which was acres upon acres of tenements and brothels and gin mills, a piece of sorry state.

So many years later I find myself working for Governor Rockefeller in a speech-writing capacity and he does transform the city. What had been a little State Teachers College becomes a massive University -- today the State University of New York at Albany, 15,000 students, ultramodern campus on the edge of the city, all of the decrepit tenements, shabby housing that I referred to earlier was gone and created certain social maladjustments that had to be corrected, but that's been replaced now by this rather extraordinary office complex that we call the Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza, so the city looks different as a result of his having been Governor.

INTERVIEWER: And how did that project come about? How did he actually make that

happen? Why did he want to build that complex?

MR. PERSICO: (Inaudible) that in the late fifties Governor Rockefeller was visited by a person of Dutch royalty, it may have been Princess Beatrix or Queen Julianna. I'm fuzzy on that point. But it was a Dutch royal was visiting Albany because Albany had a sister relationship with a city in Holland.

So at the end of the visit the Governor was in a limousine with this person and they were headed back to the Albany Airport and he was embarrassed. There were all these tumble-down shabby tenements and winos in the streets and he felt really like this (inaudible) stink of the Capital of the Empire State and at that point he acknowledged that this had to be transformed. We had to have a capital that marks the stature of the state and that was really the impetus for what we now call the Empire State Plaza.

INTERVIEWER: And how did he go about getting this project accomplished?

MR. PERSICO: He got the financing of the project accomplished by financial finessing.

He was very creative and worked with the mayor of Albany, Erastus Corning (inaudible) but he worked out a deal to obtain the rather considerable financing to build this huge office complex by a rental arrangement with the City of Albany which used to own the ground underneath, by floating a new kind of bond which was called the Mayoral Abrogation Bond which didn't require the State having to prove it was going to have the revenues to support this construction.

Anyway there was this financial black magic that he came up with which was a Rockefeller hallmark. It isn't that you can't do something; you just have to find a way to do it.

INTERVIEWER: Did somebody -- so you think that the South Mall came to symbolize the Rockefeller Administration in some positive and some negative ways?

MR. PERSICO: Well, the vision called the South Mall and now the Empire State Plaza, it always (inaudible) the Rockefeller style. First of all, it is totally incongruous with every building around it. It resembles Brazilia

in Upstate New York.

(Laughter.)

MR. PERSICO: So that's very much Nelson Rockefeller. This is what I want and so this is how it was carried out with Ronnie Harris involved and indeed other architects who were close friends of his and you go into the building and there is his taste in art, these huge oil murals which to the (inaudible) are incomprehensible but they were his style of art and that's what we see there.

However, the objective which was to draw the Capital back into the Capital City, that is the business of government back into the city, which was becoming scattered all along the Albany area, that was successful and I think it's been a little shot in the arm to the Capital, not in terms of government leadership but in terms of cultural access development and it's been a plus on balance.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. And certainly it was a project that took a long time to accomplish, wasn't even completed while he was in office. How did that play out in the

public's reception of it?

MR. PERSICO: Well, at the time that the project was being constructed, it looked like it would never be completed. It looked like the costs would never stop hemorrhaging.

Nelson Rockefeller had built Rockefeller Center so he'd gone through all these kinds of complaints before. I don't think he was at all upset by any of this very deeply. I remember very vividly coming to his office with a speech one day and his office windows fronted the construction site, and the largest tower at that point was half constructed and the workmen had taken yellow paint and in ten-foot letters they had written on the core of that building "Rocky's Pyramid," and the Governor was looking out at that and he just nodded his head and he smiled, not at all offended.

INTERVIEWER: Very, very interesting.

You mentioned something a little earlier about going to the Albany Teachers College and I think many people looking at the Rockefeller years look at his development of the State University system as being one of his

crowning achievements and I wonder if you might talk about what you saw of his attempt to advance that project.

MR. PERSICO: Well, the Governor was very concerned about aiding students, aiding New York State studying elsewhere. At the time the system of public education was academically acceptable but it was just a tiny sliver of higher education in the state. It was a chain of maybe about ten little teachers' colleges devoted almost exclusively to preparing people for the New York State junior high schools, grade schools and high schools.

The Governor felt that we had to have a new magnet to keep students here and so he launched the State University of New York construction program which today has something like 65 campuses, major, major centers in Binghamton, SUNY Albany, et cetera. These are big serious institutions of higher education and it was then (inaudible) to keep students from feeling they couldn't be educated outside the state but he could do it at home.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you remember

of his personally advocating for that and carrying it forward across the state?

MR. PERSICO: Well, again he used his financial legerdemain to figure out you built these huge, very extensive campuses, and again he used a great deal of imagination, courting people who knew how these things could be done within the State budget limitations and the result was just extraordinary.

My belief is that today the SUNY system in terms of total enrollment may be the largest in the country.

INTERVIEWER: M-m-m. Very, very interesting. Do you remember him going out to the groundbreaking? Do you remember him out trying to make sure that this would actually come to fruition?

MR. PERSICO: Well, yes. He very often was present when the University was laying a cornerstone or when it was being dedicated and in related things we were talking a moment ago about the Empire State Plaza. He made sure just before he left office in 1974 that though it was incomplete a ceremony was held, a dedication

ceremony was held, in which he was the prominent figure to imprint on the public memory that this was the man who built the Empire State Plaza.

INTERVIEWER: What was the Governor's relationship like with some of the other important political figures in New York State at that time? You mentioned earlier the assassination of Robert Kennedy and, of course, he was the Senator from New York at the time. I wonder if you would talk about the dynamics of their relationship.

MR. PERSICO: Well, the dynamic undeniably between Robert F. Kennedy, in a sense came to the state as a successful carpetbagger, got elected to the Senate, and Nelson Rockefeller was two men looking down the road at the same office and while there was not any nasty overt behavior between the two, there was that (inaudible) of potential rivals that was very clear.

INTERVIEWER: How about Jacob Javits, who was the senior Senator from New York at the time and also a Republican?

MR. PERSICO: Jack Javits and Nelson

Rockefeller in the same party got along rather well because Javits was, let me use this expression, a Rockefeller Republican. He was a very liberal Republican and so he and Nelson Rockefeller would not cross swords on any substantive issues.

But there was another Republican in the state, the mayor of New York City, John Lindsay, who just stuck in Nelson Rockefeller's craw. He found Lindsay to be overly idealistic and impractical. There was a 1968 horrendous garbage strike in New York and it was awful. The stuff was piling up maybe 20 feet on the sidewalks of New York and Rockefeller, seeing this, essentially went in and brushed Lindsay aside, took over the union negotiations and ended the strike.

INTERVIEWER: And what did that do in terms of the relationship with the mayor?

MR. PERSICO: It (inaudible) the relationship further which it already was off to a poor start between the mayor and the Governor.

INTERVIEWER: How did something like that affect the perception of Rockefeller with

the public? Were people pleased that he stepped in and did that? Was it maybe a little bit of a sense that he had overstepped the bounds?

MR. PERSICO: I think any time that you have a public crisis and you see strong leadership that moves in and solves the problem, the net result can't be anything but favorable and I think people were very impressed how the Governor got the garbage off the streets of New York and got the sanitation men back to work.

Actually in the media camp there was a great deal of complaint, criticism, State government stepping into what was a local issue, but (inaudible).

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. I would imagine and think that if you look at the dynamics of how the Executive/Legislative relations have evolved but with the figure of Nelson Rockefeller's stature, that -- I would imagine that in those days the Legislature was very much a second fiddle in Albany. I wonder if you would talk a little bit about the relationship between him and the legislative leaders at that time.

MR. PERSICO: Well, again, you realize that the way the State government was organized, that no matter how desirable a world he set forth, a program that he wanted, he knew he's got to have the State Assembly approve it and you've got to have the State Senate, so he was very, very (inaudible) legislative leaders. If they were the Republican side he would see this as a very quid pro quo.

I remember one instance when the Governor wanted to create the Saratoga Performing Arts Center that the western end of the state which was not gonna get much benefit from an art center in the eastern end of the state said that an Art Park was approved and built in the Buffalo area, so he usually could play the game of give and take, whether he was dealing with legislators, the Republicans or Democrats.

A measurement of his success is the Rockefeller record which is really quite extraordinary.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell us a little bit about Malcolm Wilson and the relationship

between him and Governor Rockefeller?

MR. PERSICO: The Governor was certainly never threatened by his Lieutenant Governor. Malcolm Wilson was extremely loyal, a very fine man. I became very close to him personally, very amusing companion within government, but he did not (inaudible) to the broad public but the Governor always listened to his viewpoint.

Any meeting I ever attended, he never neglected to ask what the Lieutenant Governor thought, which was wise because Rockefeller, as you said, was a very liberal political figure for a Republican and Malcolm Wilson represented a more conservative element.

So when Rockefeller touched that base, he didn't necessarily veto anything because Wilson opposed it, and that he did take his position into account and did a great favor for Malcolm Wilson. Wilson had served the State for 30 years as a legislator and then as Lieutenant Governor and had ambitions to be Governor himself and when Rockefeller decided that he had enough of Albany and wanted to pursue national

ambitions in 1973, I believe, possibly '74, he left...

(End of Side A.)

MR. PERSICO: ...before the end of his fourth term, which gave Malcolm Wilson a tremendous leg up because as Lieutenant Governor, the Governor leaves he becomes Governor. It did not save Malcolm in the general election subsequently, but it certainly gave him a head start.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of role did he play in the activities of the administration? Did he do the rubber chicken circuit? Did he have any kind of policy role?

MR. PERSICO: You're talking about Malcolm Wilson?

INTERVIEWER: Malcolm Wilson, yes.

MR. PERSICO: Malcolm Wilson did -- you might say he nurtured and nourished the right. He had friends all over the state. He was out there always mending fences. My sense of it is that while Nelson Rockefeller would take a particularly liberal stand on an issue, health insurance, whatever, Nelson

Rock...Malcolm Wilson would be mending fences for him making it clear to the conservative wing of the party; running along on this is good for the state, he knows what he's doing, we can trust Nelson Rockefeller.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say Rockefeller would look upon as his greatest achievements as Governor of New York?

MR. PERSICO: I think very clearly the Governor would point to the State University System, which as we mentioned before was just a very small operation with the narrow focus of teacher preparation and now it's a massive, massive institution or a conglomeration of institutions for higher education. And he stated -- I remember very vividly on his last day in office as Governor, he had resigned and was making his farewell speech.

In his madcap operation going in my office and some of the other offices, the press office, to give to the reporters the Rockefeller record which ran something like 10 or 12 single-spaced pages of what he had accomplished, and at the very top was "creation of the State

University of New York."

INTERVIEWER: What was probably not in the release would have been what some of his regrets might have been. What might you think you would --

MR. PERSICO: Well, probably the one black mark that will never be entirely erased is what happened at Attica. That, for the younger generation, was a prison riot that took place in the State prison of that name where there was a substantial loss of life both among the rioting prisoners and among the guards who were taken hostage. It was -- it is a bungled job.

At first Rockefeller tried to handle it through the attitudes of modern penology. He had a State prison head, head of the State Department of Corrections, who was of a modern penal philosophy, and they tried at first to let the prisoners express themselves and it got out of hand and the pendulum swung the other direction and massive force was taken to suppress the prison riot and restore order.

The subject has been one that the enemies of Nelson Rockefeller never fail to

bring up and I look upon it as not any kind of a deliberate attempt but I look upon it as a bungled handling of a very incendiary issue.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think Attica happened?

MR. PERSICO: My understanding is that Attica was a hotbed of unrest for a couple of reasons. First of all, it was vastly overcrowded. In any overcrowded prison it means that the sanitation facilities are not what they should be, the feed is not what it should be. The sense of any privacy whatsoever is destroyed because the cells are overcrowded and it is just a cauldron of discontent.

On top of that this was going on at a period in the seventies when there were a lot of political tensions and a lot of political turmoil and so Attica had a lot of prisoners who were politically astute in the sense of how you organize unrest and how you commandeer people and aim them towards a particular objective, in this case, prison conditions.

So between the fact that they had justified complaints in the prison and people

who knew how to exploit them, you had Attica.

INTERVIEWER: But certainly there was a lot that happened with Attica that seemed to go against the grain of what Nelson Rockefeller was all about and what he had built his career on as a progressive politician. How did he so badly miscalculate there?

MR. PERSICO: Well, as I said a moment ago, he had placed the prisons under the leadership of a modern penologist which he thought would take care of part of that problem, and incidentally, the name of that head of the Corrections Department was Russ Oswald, a very fine man and his intentions were pure.

But we were also in a period when crime was burgeoning in the state, mostly because of drug super lords and drug (inaudible), so the prisons became very, very overcrowded and consequently this stirred up the discontent as I described the reasons why overcrowded prisons are bad prisons.

Now, let me get to another very horribly, hotly controversial part of the Rockefeller record and that was the Rockefeller

drug laws which have certainly done nothing to reduce prison populations. Very harsh.

It was a (inaudible) all of the more progressive policies to curb drug addiction, education, promoting the use of methadone, establishing clinics. Nothing seemed to work. The problem just kept expanding and you had men lashing out in frustration and the result were these very, very harsh laws, which we're still living with today and which, in my judgment, they certainly ought to be liberalized.

INTERVIEWER: Was Governor Rockefeller out at Attica when the crisis took place?

MR. PERSICO: One of the issues during the course of the uprising was that the Governor did not go. He had, obviously, his representatives there but he did not go to Attica. His judgment was that it would do nothing but make the situation more incendiary by having him as the focus and so he did not go. Was that a good decision or bad decision? We can't read the future if it didn't happen.

INTERVIEWER: Did he go out after in the aftermath?

MR. PERSICO: No, he did not.

INTERVIEWER: And you think that was a mistake or not?

MR. PERSICO: It's hard to judge how a visit to Attica could have had any late effect on the ugliness that had been stirred up by that again. He was solicitous in his speeches of the loss of life by members of the prison staff, prison guards who were killed there.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. Let me ask you this. I mentioned a name to you earlier, Harry Albright, and I know that you did do some work with him in the administration. I wonder if you might tell us some of your recollections of Harry.

MR. PERSICO: Well, Harry had come to us as a lawyer who had been involved in labor work and he was an idea guy. Harry was driven by issues and became very serious about the Governor's programs. A high energy level, very active and subsequently went off into a little bit different arena and what is called in the crudest terms, patronage officer of the State; that is determining who gets jobs where, but he

did a good job of being Nelson Rockefeller's man in the field in drawing top people.

For example, there was in Massachusetts a wonderful urban developer doing a great job in Massachusetts called Ed Mode (phonetic) and Nelson Rockefeller wanted him in New York and Harry Albright would be one of the people who would be involved in seducing Ed Mode to leave a very happy situation in Massachusetts and come to Albany.

INTERVIEWER: I know both of you worked with Nelson Rockefeller when he was Vice President. How did that develop? No. Okay.

MR. PERSICO: No. Are you going to edit your tape after?

INTERVIEWER: (Inaudible.)

MR. PERSICO: I don't remember Harry being involved in the Washington operation.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. No problem.

MR. PERSICO: Yeah. I didn't know if you were just going to run the whole damn thing and not edit it.

INTERVIEWER: Not at all.

MR. PERSICO: I hope you're gonna edit

it.

INTERVIEWER: Well --

MR. PERSICO: Phone calls. It never occurred to me, Steve, you're just gonna print the damn thing.

INTERVIEWER: Not a problem. Tape is easy. That's why we tape it.

Let me ask you this, just in closing. I wonder if you have any recollections of the CSEA, when you might have actually first heard of the organization and what some of your impressions might have been.

MR. PERSICO: Well, I had an experience with the State that well preceded my involvement with Governor Rockefeller. As a matter of fact, my first job upon coming out of the military and coming out of the graduate program at Columbia University was in the Governor's Office in New York State under Governor Averill Harriman.

I subsequently was speech writer for the Commissioner of Health, so I had been on the State payroll before and I had always had a warm feeling for the CSEA. I came out of a family

background. My father was a member of a union, my mother was a member of a union and I was always delighted that the CSEA was going after benefits that would help State employees generally and me specifically, so my feelings for the CSEA have always been very warm.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. I mean do you remember any kind of contact when you came into the workplace with solicitation for the insurance program or contact with representatives?

MR. PERSICO: What I do remember is that when I first went to work for the State, I was sat down by the personnel officer who told me the retirement program, the health benefits program. I remember my reaction was these are very generous. New York State looks like a good employer.

What I realized later was that this didn't just fall from the heavens. It was worked for by the proponents and representatives of the workers in the State and through the CSEA.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Do you

remember any dynamics between the CSEA and Governor Rockefeller and the specific instances?

MR. PERSICO: I can't go beyond the generalized necessity for the CSEA and the Governor to sit down particularly and make up the Taylor Law.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Great. Well, I think this will conclude.

MR. PERSICO: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

(Conclusion of interview of Joseph L. Persico.)

