

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

The Reminiscences of

Robert Low

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Low conducted by Interviewers Dorothy Miner and Anthony C. Wood on July 16, 2002. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive's Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

As a city council member, Robert Low was one of the three co-sponsors of the Landmarks Law when it was introduced in 1964. In this 2002 interview, Low, NYPAP president Anthony C. Wood, and former Landmarks Preservation Commission counsel Dorothy Miner discuss the political environment that colored the law's passage. The interview sheds light on the concerns that gave the law momentum, including threats to historic landmarks that united council members from politically diverse neighborhoods around the issue and press coverage of high-profile demolitions. Low also discusses the role of Mayor Robert Wagner's staff in shepherding the legislation.

Robert Low was New York lawyer, politician and supporter of preservation. Low began his political career when he became a New York City Councilman in 1961. As a city councilman, he headed the Committee on Buildings, and did a great deal of work in the housing field. He also served as Chairman of a special committee responsible for investigating air pollution. Low's district covered the Upper East Side of Manhattan and included East Harlem, a part of Central Harlem, and the eastern half of Yorkville down to 59th Street.

Transcriptionist:

Session: 1

Interviewee: Robert Low

Location: Manhattan, NY

Interviewer: Dorothy Miner (Q1) and

Date: July 16, 2002

Anthony C. Wood (Q2)

Q1: Let me introduce myself. I'm Dorothy Miner, and from 1975 until 1994—November of '94—I was lawyer for the [New York City] Landmarks Preservation Commission. But I started even before that. I was at the Environmental Defense Fund [EDF], but I was doing volunteer work for the commission. So I was involved from the appeal and Grand Central [Terminal] on, working closely with the [New York City] Law Department.

Low: When you say the commission—

Q1: The Landmarks Commission. That's the commission in my mind *[laughs]*.

Low: Okay. I understand. I think we probably met each other in those days.

Q1: Right. We did. And when there was a centennial—obviously not a centennial—an anniversary for the law, somebody got the old archives out, and they even pulled a letter from my father to your committee. My father was a history professor at Columbia [University], and there was my father urging the passage of the [New York City] Landmarks Law to you.

Low: Well, you did a good job getting your father *[unclear]*. I think I showed up for that anniversary down there.

Q2: It was probably the fifteenth anniversary.

Low: Whatever.

Q1: I made the fifteenth, the twentieth, the twenty-fifth, the thirtieth.

Q2: I remember the fifteenth. It was 1980. I was working for Kent Barwick, who was then chair of the Landmarks Commission. Kent Barwick?

Q1: Of the Municipal Arts Society, then and later?

Q2: Yes. He's floated around.

Low: Didn't he go upstate?

Q2: For a while he was running the New York [State] Historical Association, out at Cooperstown. He's always had family roots in Cooperstown.

Low: Is he up there now?

Q2: No. He did that for a few years, then came back, and is now again running the Municipal Art Society.

Low: He is?

Q2: Yes. At another level.

Low: Because I had told him I had that—

Q2: Your certificate from the Society. Right.

Low: At the time I couldn't find it. I don't know. He seemed to be interested in it at the time. But I didn't even remember his name. So I made a copy, and I sent the original over to the archives, at the La Guardia [and] Wagner Archives, at LaGuardia Community College. Are you familiar with that?

Q2: I've heard of them but I'm not sure what all is there. Would you happen to know— one of the things I'm interested in trying to track down is some kind of a legislative history of the Landmarks Law. Do you think anything from that period, from the [New York City] Council, might have ended up in that collection?

Low: I'll tell you—you'll have to call Dr. [Richard K.] Lieberman. I have his phone number, but not here, in the other office. So I can give it to you.

Q2: Thanks a lot. Because I've heard that there are some interesting—

Low: He's starting up the collection. I don't know how far they've gotten. Do you know the name of [Julius C.C.] Edelstein? He was [Robert F.] Wagner's executive assistant.

Q2: No. That is not a name I'm familiar with.

Low: Julius Edelstein.

Q1: Oh, yes. I'm familiar with that one. And wasn't Robert [W.] Sweet there, too, at the time? As one of his other assistants?

Low: I think he was. Then he became a judge?

Q1: Yes. He's a federal judge now. Right. Then, also, there was Chris Nieber [*phonetic*]. He was a staff person to them. He started law school with me but never finished and he went into business. He was there. Did you ever come across Chris at all?

Low: No. But I remember him. I can visualize him, now. But you'll have to check.

Q2: We will check and see what he has there. Just for purposes I forgot at the beginning—

Low: He may want what you've got.

Q2: Well, hopefully, we'll have a lot of shared interest. Just for the purpose of the tape, I'm going to indicate that this is our interview with Bob [Robert] Low, on July 16, 2002, and it's Tony [Anthony C.] Wood with Dorothy Miner. The voices will be distinguishable to whomever has to transcribe this, at some point.

Well, thanks so much for meeting with us. Let me explain, briefly, what we're up to, then zero in on the area you might be able to shed some light on for us.

Both Dorothy and I have been very interested in capturing the history of the preservation movement in New York City, and we've both looked at different pieces of that story, but we're both particularly interested in the law, obviously, because that's where it all comes together. Dorothy and I are on the board of a group called the New York Preservation Archive Project, which is a new non-profit whose purpose is trying to tell that story, and capture the papers and memories of people before they're lost, and also celebrating that history—doing public programs, and educating people as to how the Landmarks Law came into being. Then also continuing a sense of the history of preservation after the law, and helping organizations document their own history, with the idea that somebody's going to care, in twenty or thirty years, how certain preservation things happened.

Low: Would that include the environmental impact statements?

Q2: Our particular focus at the moment, just because of limited time and energy, is primarily the Landmarks Preservation Law and the commission. As we focus on certain preservation battles, if you will, over particular buildings or sites, I think that will also bring us into some environmental issues, because those issues always—not always but many times became part of the larger debate. So, some of the environmental laws created opportunities to have projects reviewed.

Q1: Also, since it's so important that the definition of the environment in New York City and New York State includes historic resources—which isn't necessarily what everybody expects it to include—it has been important.

I just want to clarify that the project doesn't necessarily hold the archives that they try to track down themselves. They want to make sure they're preserved, they don't want to make sure they hold them. So that's why seeing where they are is what the important thing is.

Low: Have you checked in, also, with the two resources at the city? There is an archive.

Q2: The [New York City Department of Record's] Municipal Archive is a place where I, myself, have not yet gone, for my research.

Low: Then there's a library. I think it's called the library, which used to be in the [Manhattan] Municipal Building. They have a collection of stuff there, but I'm not sure which. In connection with getting rid of my prints and certificates and all that, I was calling around a little, and it turned out there are two units down there. They may even have that in the other room, there.

Q2: And would that be like the New York City Municipal Library?

Low: Yes. That's exactly the name of it.

Q2: Okay. It's so logical I stumbled on it.

Low: You have those two. I don't know what they're doing. There used to be a man, when I was active—and Dorothy, you were down there—who was a heck of a good man. He was running the Municipal Library. I don't remember his name, off-hand. I'm sure he's long out of it.

Q2: Well, what we wanted to try to take you back to was the time around the Landmarks Law, but to kind of set the stage. In the fall of 1964, you were a member of the New York City Council. I was curious what district you represented, and what party affiliation you had—just to kind of help us understand your role on the council.

Low: Well, I was elected in 1962. If you will remember—I'm not trying to be snide—but Wagner ran against himself in that election. In other words, he had been supported by the five district county leaders, but in '61, he ran with the support of the so-called [Democratic] Reform Movement, which was headed up by Mrs. [Anna Eleanor] Roosevelt, Tom [Thomas K.] Finletter, who had been, I think, the secretary of the air force, and a third person, whose name I don't remember quickly, but I could pull it out.

I had been working as an assistant in Wagner's office, and I came from his local district and had been in his local Tammany Club. I ended up taking on Wagner's own political leader in the district, with his acquiescence, if not more. Because I think he had his picture taken with me when I ran in the primary, etc. So that's an unusual election that occurred. As a matter of fact, I think it was Wagner, in that election, '61, who beat Arthur Leavitt's father, who was the candidate of Carmine de Sapio and the old organization. I hope you got the pronunciation there.

I was elected in the district that included Yorkville, East Harlem, and part of Central Harlem, actually. I beat a long-time councilman by the name of John Merley [*phonetic*], who was the organization candidate, and came out of one of the old Italian clubs in East Harlem—116th Street had been an Italian center in the city. I got elected sort of on the coattails of this Wagner movement, and became a councilman in '62. As I told someone in my oral history, when I was elected Mayor Wagner called me into his office and he said, "I want you to be chairman of the Buildings Department." I said, "Well, Mr. Mayor—" I was always respectful of him. I never called him Wag, or Bob, even though

I'd known him pretty well. He said, "Well, you know, John Jones—" who was from the Bronx. He wasn't too reliable. Actually, there were allegations that he had his hand in the till, or at least in return for legislation, there were some shenanigans. He says, "Bob, I know I can count on you. Later on, we'll find something else for you." Which indicates how much power Wagner had over the council, at this time. He was determining who the committee chairmen were going to be.

So that's an interesting sidelight. I became chairman of the Buildings Committee, and eight years later I was still chairman of the Buildings Committee, because Wagner didn't run again in '65. [John V.] Lindsay was elected. So I was always chairman of the Buildings Committee.

Q2: Now did that explain why you were one of the three co-sponsors of the landmarks legislation, or is there another reason you ended up in that role?

Low: I think, really, I sort of volunteered getting in on it, in this way—that since I represented, at least in part, a rather sophisticated area of the city, it was the kind of thing that appealed to me and my constituents. If I had represented some distant borough, or a district in an outer borough, I might not have been as interested. But it was the kind of thing that I wanted to get involved with.

Q2: How far south of Yorkville did your district go? Do you remember, offhand?

Low: At that point I didn't go much below—I'm guessing now—about Seventieth Street. When I was re-elected, I think I went all the way down to Fifty-Seventh or Fifty-Ninth Street, and Central Harlem was cut out of the district.

Q2: That sounds right. I actually used to work for a councilwoman who, I think, ended up representing the reincarnation of your district—Jane Trichter. Then it was District Seven, and at that time it kind of went more like to Ninety-Sixth Street, then down into the fifties, on the East Side.

Low: I always had East Harlem.

Q2: Yes. Maybe that's when they made the change.

Low: So I had a varied district.

Q1: There was David Todd, Bill [William] Ginsberg—do those names mean anything to you? They were some kind of a reformed Democrat group, over there on the East Side.

Low: I remember Bill Ginsberg pretty well. He became a professor out at Hofstra College, and was very interested in the environmental aspects. I think he got involved in the impact statement, etc.

Q2: That would make sense.

Low: But I don't remember what part he may have played in this.

Q1: You don't remember whether he was active in '61, when you were running? I just know there was some kind of program—

Low: You know we had these political clubs in those days. You had the regular clubs and the reform clubs, and I think he was active in the Lexington Club, which was sort of the elite club in the whole city, because it represented Park Avenue and so on. They had a pretty powerful place. I think he was involved there, if my recollection—

Q2: Does the name Alice Saks mean anything?

Low: Oh, sure.

Q2: I know she was involved well—I only know her for the last twenty years, but I know she was involved way back.

Low: Oh, yes. Well, she was the powerhouse there for many years. While the male district leader changed a few times, I think she held right in there. She was a maiden lady, and she gave her life to this. She was a powerful woman.

Q2: The bill was actually introduced—the Landmarks Law—was actually introduced on October Sixth of 1964, and it was sponsored by yourself, Seymour Boyers and Richard [S.] Aldrich. Any insight you can give us on how they got involved? Why they were also co-introducers?

Low: I can't tell you about Boyers, but I'd say he's the key, here. You have to talk to him. Does he claim he's too busy, or what?

Q2: No, no. We had one conversation with him and we're probably going to have another one.

Low: Yes. He probably remembers it. This may have been the high point of his time in the council. In my case, it was important, but as I told you on the phone, the air pollution thing was the thing that I—

Q2: —that really capped your career, yes.

Low: —spent months on. It was about as innovative, at that time, as landmarks preservation. Most people don't remember that the word environment didn't mean a hell of a lot in 1965 or '66.

Q2: It's interesting that both these things happened in that time frame—the landmarks, the built environment in '65—then the environmental bill you were talking about, in '66. Is it just the moment, or just a coincidence? Any thoughts on that?

Low: Well, I don't know what got Wagner going on this. He knew Jack [James] Felt. Jim [Irving M.] Felt was the man who owned the building that went up on Penn Station.

Q2: That was Jack's brother, right?

Low: That was Jack's brother. And I think Jack was the chairman of the [New York] City Planning Committee.

Q2: City Planning.

Low: I don't know what might have gotten him interested. But Wagner did adopt a number of, you might say, forward-looking actions that he went with. He wasn't out there waving his arms; he backed them up. I remember the fight over fluoridation of the water. Leona Baumgartner was the health commissioner, and she was really appointed totally on merit. She had no political connections. He took the heat, and it was heat! I mean we who supported fluoridation were called Communists and every other thing you can imagine. I mean the heat in that was very hot. So Wagner would go along with these things that were forward-looking. I don't know who brought it to him. I'm sure he didn't sit down and dictate a bill.

Q2: Well, you're right. Felt was certainly quite involved in the process.

Low: Was it Jack Felt?

Q2: Well, Felt seems to have been the person within the administration who helped move it around.

Low: That's an interesting fact that I hadn't reflected on. But he and his brother? Were they on the outs [*laughs*]?

Q2: Let's speculate on that, just for a minute. Because when you look at all of this, the effort to create the Landmarks Law was always just a few steps behind what was going on with Pennsylvania Station. At one point I did have a chance, I think, to ask Geoffrey Platt, it was either Geoffrey Platt or Harmon Goldstone, if they felt—the two Felts, on opposite sides of this—whichever one I spoke to about it—I've got it in a printed interview—made it very clear that they felt that James Felt was such a man of integrity that they couldn't even fathom that anything that had gone on between him and his brother—

Low: Oh, no. The fact that it came later—no, I would doubt that. But he was in the real estate business himself.

Q2: Right. Prior to becoming—I think he became the head of City Planning in January of 1956, is when Felt was appointed planning commissioner, then launched that whole zoning reform.

Low: You say '56?

Q2: Nineteen-fifty-six. I'm pretty comfortable with that. I think I read it just this afternoon [*laughter*]. Otherwise, I wouldn't trust my memory.

Q1: Well, '61 is when the new zoning goes in, and it took several years to do the study, at City Planning.

Low: After this?

Q1: No, before. So that's why he would have had to have been there in the middle '50s—to get the study launched.

Q2: The new zoning came in place first. In fact, that had to—

Low: That's '61?

Q1: Sixty-one is the new zoning.

Q2: Right. That had to be done first, in a sense, before they could focus on the preservation. That was the politics.

Low: Well, it may have been Jack Felt that was behind this thing, then. I don't know about the rest of the country—whether there were efforts that antedated this. I don't know if this was a pioneering effort. You probably do know that.

Q2: Well, Dorothy actually teaches a course that goes into that in great detail. But it was, certainly, cutting edge at that time.

Low: Was it, really?

Q1: Well, part of it was. The part of it that was cutting edge is, since—I don't know if, when you were dealing with this law, people talked about other parts of the country having it. Did that come up at all? Did people say, "Well, they have it in New Orleans, and Savannah, or Charleston, and we can have it"?

Low: I don't remember that there was any such thing. But even in my mind there was a question of taking. The word taking. You're taking somebody's property without compensation, and I'm sure that's been a battle. I guess, constitutionally, these things have all been held up.

Q1: That's the Penn Central [*Penn Central Transportation Co v. City of New York*] case.

Low: It is? Okay. You see, as a lawyer, I did think of that. You're telling a guy what he can do with his property that he paid for—

Q2: It would be interesting to see what type of debate ensued, just to set the stage. If my research is correct, it was December 3, 1965, when the council actually held its public hearing.

Q1: Sixty-four.

Q2: I'm sorry. Sixty-four. I'm losing my mind, here. It was December of '64 that the council held the public hearing on the law. I think just a little background, if you might have a thought on this—according to the research I've done, the mayor—the draft of the Landmarks Law, which was being prepared by the mayor's Landmarks Commission [Committee for the Preservations of Structures of Historic and Esthetic Importance] at that time, was given to the mayor—

Low: Wait a minute. The Landmarks Commission existed before—?

Q1: There was a temporary one.

Q2: There was one created by mayoral order, without any legislative authority, and it was really given two assignments in that early period. One was to draft the law, and the other was—

Q1: —working with the Law Department.

Q2: And the other was to begin to do basic survey work, to begin to identify what we might care about, if we had a law—

Low: I think Jack Felt, then, must have had a big part to play in this.

Q2: Oh, absolutely. There's no doubt.

Q1: Does Whitney North Seymour Sr. mean anything—

Low: Oh, sure.

Q1: —Sr. Not Mike [Whitney North Seymour, Jr.] who was later—

Low: State Senator.

Q1: —and U.S. Attorney. But the father was very active on that committee. Yet, he was very distinguished in international bar associations and so on, and—

Low: You asked about this [*unclear*] before. You see, Aldrich, who was sort of from that milieu, he might have gotten interested through some of those people. Of course, he was running—I don't remember whether he was councilman at large. In order to get Republican representation, there was a time when we had one Republican at large and one Democrat at large, in each borough. I think he may have been the Republican at large. You could check that out. And, you know, he represented the Silk-Stocking District, if you will, where this kind of thing would appeal.

Q2: Well, hold that thought for a minute, just to follow up on this. So this committee—the mayor's Landmarks Commission, prior to the law—presented to the mayor a draft in May of 1964. Then it sat with the mayor until the hearing in December, when—well, it was given to the council obviously, sometime in the fall. Then there was a hearing in December. I don't know if you have any memories of the hearing, but from the research I've done, according to the records, apparently there were eighty-four people who testified, which is apparently quite a number—eighty-five testified in support, and five in opposition.

Low: Really? Didn't the Real Estate Board [of New York] oppose this?

Q2: Apparently there was token opposition. I think they had been approached.

Q1: I think there was something in the law, and maybe Felt's role—at the point that you received it—you remember being concerned about takings. Do you remember feeling it was controversial?

Low: Well, I thought so. This impacts on the real estate business. In other words, here, recently—you gave the date. What is it? The sixteenth, today? The sixteenth of July, 2002, and we're sitting in the Fuller Building. A new owner took over this place recently, and your listeners, or readers, will know that the Fuller Building is a magnificent art deco building. It's almost one-of-a-kind in New York. He wanted to redo the whole lobby. He said he couldn't rent in this building, because he had to modernize the lobby. Well, there was a big battle over that, and they finally withdrew the application to redo the lobby. The new owners had heavy hitters working on this, including Mr. [Samuel H.] Lindenbaum, whose father I knew well—Bunny [Abraham Lindenbaum]. So the battle continues.

Q1: But at least in the context of a public hearing, because it's an individual landmark, and an interior landmark, for the lobby.

Low: Well, it is a different situation.

Q1: Yes. So the battle continues, but the fight is now in a public forum. And because it was so public, I think that's why he pulled back.

Low: Well, our mutual friend came through this building on a Saturday, going to the galleries.

Q2: Penelope. Penelope Barrowwright [*phonetic*].

Low: She got, I think, three different gallery owners to come down to the hearing, which was pretty good stuff, because she went in cold, and these gallery owners—many of them are here because of the character of the building. I ran into Lindenbaum in the lobby a few weeks ago. I said, "Do you represent the owner?" He said yes. I said, "You know, I don't think the new owner understands the character of the building, nor its tenants." His reply was, "Well, you know, that ceiling wasn't the original ceiling." Which is like answering an allegation that isn't being made. Which the present administration in Washington [D.C.] is very adept at doing.

Q2: It's a political trait. Well, speaking of preservation battles, this is an interesting one, because representing the area you represented, at that time there were several key preservation struggles that collectively set the stage, I think, for moving the law along. In the fall of that year, of '64, the Brokaw Mansions—which I think might have been in your district—

Q1: No, that's on Fifth Avenue.

Q2: Did you go over to Fifth or not?

Q1: No. He was further east.

Low: Never went to Fifth.

Q2: Okay. Because the Brokaw battle was in the fall of '64. They announced they were going to demolish it, and that actually led to protests on the Upper East Side. That's why I asked about Alice Saks. I think she was at one of those, if not help lead it.

Low: I remember that name, but I cannot visualize it exactly.

Q1: Picture Seventy-Ninth Street, on the corner of Fifth Avenue. On the south side and the north side were very ornate, real townhouses—mansions—and the south side one still exists. It's the Ukrainian Institute [of America]. On the north side was a comparable, very ornate, highly gothic type of mansion, and is now a large apartment building.

Low: But on the south—that's where the new museum is.

Q1: No, that's Eighty-Sixth Street.

Low: The Austrian Museum [Neue Gallery New York].

Q2: That's on Eighty-Sixth Street.

Q1: You're on Eighty-Sixth. Move down to Seventy-Ninth. That was also a fight, later, when we heard that for designation.

Q2: Because it was apparently the threat to the Brokaw mansion in the fall that helped the Mayor move the draft legislation to the City Council. Then, after the City Council hearing, in December, the hearing we were just asking about—in December there was a threat to the Percy [R.] Pyne mansions on Park Avenues—I don't know if those ring any bells for you. They're across from Hunter College.

Low: What you tell me, now, you see, as an ex- political animal, I can see a little bit more Wagner's interest in this. You see his executive assistant was Julius Edelstein, who came out of this reform movement. He had been Herbert [H.] Lehman—Senator Lehman's executive assistant, in Washington.

[INTERRUPTION]

Low: Wagner would see that some of the key constituencies here, that came from that reform movement that put him in, were behind this. Maybe Alice Saks and some of those people actually had a meeting with him, and said, "Hey, Mr. Mayor, blah, blah, blah." So that's an important facet; that these local political people in the Silk-Stocking District were—

Q2: And these particular battles were receiving lots of press, in *The New York Times*—they weren't quiet little struggles, they were pretty public at that point.

Low: You can't cut a political man—the mayor of New York—off from political interests and pressures.

Q2: I believe, at that time, the president of the City Council was a guy named [David] Ross.

Low: He was the majority leader.

Q2: I'm sorry. That's what I was reaching for. The majority leader of the City Council. Do you have any memories of his involvement with the bill, if any? Whether he was—

Low: Well, as I think I pointed out, the council did what the mayor and the leaders told him to do. Ross came out of the old guard organization in the Bronx, and he ran a tight ship. If a councilman wanted to get something done, he'd better stay in line with other things that maybe didn't directly concern him. So Ross would carry the ball. If this was the mayor's bill, he would say, "Let's get this done." But I don't think he had a particularly personal interest.

Dave Ross passed away two or three years ago. You can't get to him anymore. There's not too many of us left.

Q2: Well, that's one reason we want to take opportunities to meet, whenever we can.

Low: You'd better hurry up *[laughs]*.

Q2: I think you'll be around for quite a while, which will be great, because we'll be sending you a transcript of this to proof, anyway.

Well, the law—after that hearing in December—there were, as I say, a couple other big controversies. Over Christmas there was this fight over these buildings on Park Avenue, the Percy Pyne mansions, and then the Brokaw mansions—

Q1: —which, by the way, in terms of the base, it was one of the Rockefeller heiresses, one of the women, who helped bail that out.

Q2: Yes. The Marquesa de Cuevas [Margaret Rockefeller Strong].

Q1: Yes. So once again it was the moneyed East Side coming in, and taking a pro-preservation, public stance.

Q2: That controversy happened over Christmas and New Year's. Then, a couple months later, the Brokaw Mansions, which had sparked this debate in the fall. They hadn't

demolished them in the fall, they just announced they were going to. But I think it was, I don't have the date here—it was in February, early February, they actually demolished—

Low: Sixty-five.

Q2: Now sixty-five, right. They actually demolished the Brokaw Mansions, over a weekend, and there were all sorts of flurries in the press. That seems to have provided the impetus to then move the bill, actually, to be taken to a vote at the council, which happened in April.

Low: Well, now Lindsay's mayor. Sixty-five. Right?

Q1: Sixty-five. Right.

Low: Oh. No. Not until the fall.

Q2: In the fall. So we've still got Wagner.

Q1: Wagner signed, too.

Q2: Yes. Wagner signed. On April Sixth of '65 is actually when the council voted on it, and thirty-three of the members—two members abstained, I guess, but thirty-three voted for it. So once again that sounds like that would have been Mr. Ross, potentially

delivering the council, and also, with the public flurry over it, there was clearly a climate at that time. Does any of this trigger—do you have any memory of those events?

Low: I wish I could tell you yes.

Q2: I can't remember what happened three weeks ago, so these are mostly unfair questions. But we ask them anyway.

Low: I can't remember what I did last weekend. It's tough. Sometimes people remind me of things. I met recently with Richard Lane, who had been the district leader in that Lenox Hill plot, and he reminded me things I didn't remember at all. His memory was just a lot better. But I don't remember—I think I did attend a lot of the committee hearings. You say there were about three?

Q2: Well, there was one that I know of, the one in December, and I haven't identified others. I can't imagine that there weren't others. There must have been committee meetings.

Q1: There may have been meetings rather than hearings.

Low: You can get that stuff either from the municipal library, or the archives, because they also published a little book that was a transcript of what happened. As a matter of

fact, I have a copy of that type of thing, which would tell you what was going on, in a very formalistic way. It's a little bit like the congressional record.

Q2: Would that have been kind of announcing the hearings in advance, or actually kind of a write-up of what actually transpired?

Low: It would tell you what bills went in, and it would reproduce the bills, it would reproduce the results and so on. I think you can find that stuff. I'm not sure they have it out at Long Island City, yet. La Guardia—

Q1: When you would put your name on a bill, you obviously read it, but would you have expected to really go over it? Or, because you were chair of the Building Committee, part of your role would just be to move the bills that were appropriate for your committee?

Low: Well, this bill didn't come before our committee that I remember. I think Boyers was chairman of the Government Operations—

Q2: Yes, it was. It was Government Ops.

Q1: But your name was, nonetheless, on it.

Low: Yes. Well, I could get on it by making enough noise, or talking to Dave Ross, or whatever. Then I'd get on the bill. But I don't remember the exact circumstances.

Let me say this—because we're talking very frankly about this situation—and I'm an ex-political animal. This kind of a bill appealed more to the people in Manhattan than it did to the people on Staten Island, let's say. The protests and all for demolition were here, they weren't out in Jamaica Bay, or someplace. So that it would be more important for a political figure, a councilman in Manhattan, to get into the act and to identify with this type of a bill, than it would be for some guy like, well, even Moyers [*phonetic*] out in Queens, but he happened to be chairman of the committee.

Q2: Would that probably explain why he was co-sponsor because it was his committee?

[INTERRUPTION]

Low: Yes. Anyway, the bill probably went there because Ross either didn't want to give me any more work or any more notoriety, and thought he'd be safer with Boyers. That's possible. Now that's supposition, that's guess.

Q2: That's interesting.

Q1: But Government Operations. Wasn't that the logical committee to send it to? Or wasn't it so logical, then, necessarily?

Low: Well, I think he might have had a choice. I don't know for sure.

Q1: Well, you were, meanwhile, already interested in your air-pollution bill, at this point?

Low: Well, let's see. I could give you those dates—I don't have them in my head, but I think all through '64 and '65—and the bill was finally signed by Lindsay in '66—so I think we started up in June of '64 or thereabouts, and that thing, frankly—we generated so much publicity—a little bit like what happened here. But we had scare headlines about what happened in Donnemara [*phonetic*] Pennsylvania, what happened in London, and then there was a big story out of Toronto, and one thing or another. So that when the bill actually got introduced, we had a banner headline across the front page of the [*New York*] *World-Telegram* that the council would hold hearings. Dave Ross, and the president of the council, Paul [R.] Screvane, got their names on the bill—which was very unusual—but they wanted to get aboard the issue.

Q2: Now that was a bill that the council, under your leadership, actually generated, as opposed to the administration. Did you have a heavy fight, in terms of getting the council leadership to support it? Did that happen after the headlines? Was it an uphill battle?

Low: Well, that headline thing was so overwhelming—

Q2: That just did it.

Low: —that they had to get aboard. The leadership had to get aboard. Also, I might point this out. I don't know if this would apply to the bill we're talking about, the Landmarks

Preservation—but, you see, when Wagner announced he wasn't running again, or made it clear, then there was a window of opportunity to do things that might sound as if they were critical of the Wagner administration. I think I've called it a window of opportunity.

Q2: Do you happen to remember when the word got out, or he announced, or that people understood he wasn't running again?

Low: Well, it must have been during '65. I don't remember the date. All of this would be in the newspapers.

Q1: One of the things I'm interested in—Tony mentioned the timing of the Landmarks, and then the following year, the air one. In Washington, the famous federal legislation—the key is '66, and the environmental, in terms of water and air, is '69. So there's a linkage, but preservation definitely got there a few years earlier. But, when the Supreme Court opinion comes down, that [William J.] Brennan [Jr.] writes, in *Penn Central's* case, he talks about the quality of life, and he obviously sees both the preservation laws and the environmental laws as quality of life issues and quality of life laws. Was there any of that feeling, do you think, back in '66, when you had the Landmarks Law, then you get the air pollution the following year? Were they seen at all as relating to each other, in terms of the quality of life in New York City, as a whole? Because air pollution was obviously a citywide one, and less Manhattan oriented.

Low: Well, it might have been, but, as with many things, I think it was a small group of activists. Now I say that for this reason. The very strong air pollution activists were all in favor of putting bridge tolls on the East River bridges. The plazas for the tolls would be in Brooklyn and in Queens, which would then have the pollution from the cars. Well, I don't think those people thought about that too much. You see, it was Manhattan pushing this stuff, and Manhattan's counterparts elsewhere. So there well may have been that quality of life issue that came together here. This is neither here nor there, but I recently saw a poll that came out in 1999 on the question of bilingual education, in New York City. All the boroughs supported it heavily, which meant that minority students—Spanish-speaking students—their parents supported it as well as everybody else. But in Manhattan, the approval rate was way down. It was better than fifty percent. You see what I'm saying? Because you have *The New York Times* editorial writers and their followers espousing things like this, but it didn't necessarily impact in Queens or the Bronx. I hope I'm not giving too much of a political—[crosstalk].

Q1: No, no. Well, that was the role you were playing in the '60s.

Q2: No, this is very helpful. We're also trying to understand these events through as many different lenses as we can. So having a political climate is extremely helpful.

Low: I don't mean to be too cynical about the thing, but I'm trying to give you some feeling of what kind of pressures would get this thing moving.

Q2: Well, you mentioned *The New York Times*, in the last example, and *The New York Times*, certainly, was very strongly supporting the whole push for the Landmarks Law, and, I think, also—were they equally supportive of the air pollution?

Low: We had editorials. I was the man in the news. We had front-page stories.

Q2: Was that John [B.] Oakes, at *The New York Times*?

Low: I assume it was.

Q2: That's also been the assumption on the preservation piece.

Low: Yes. And I once wrote him a note about it, and he didn't reply. Because I knew him and his wife. But I have to assume he was behind this. He was a very strong advocate of these environmental factors, and, as you say, of the preservation. But, somehow, in our case—that is, the air pollution—we got editorial supports in the [*New York*] *Post*, in the [*New York*] *Journal-American*, the [*New York*] *Herald Tribune*—all these papers, some of them, are defunct—but it was broad, so, in that case, everything went. Now I don't know whether you had support in those other papers for landmarks. I don't remember. You'd have to look at the papers.

Q2: I don't think there was. My sense is there was no voice stronger than *The New York Times*, but I also remember seeing major feature articles in some of the other newspapers

about these landmark battles, like the whole Brokaw thing. So there certainly was coverage in the others.

Low: It was broader than just Manhattan.

Q2: I honestly can't say that I, myself, have seen editorials from the other side.

Q1: I haven't. Brooklyn Heights was very strong for the preservation law, too.

Low: Yes, I can see that. That would be important.

Q2: Yes. Actually, you mean, your Manhattan issue—you're right. A strong Manhattan voice, and within Manhattan, I think, the Upper East Side—because they were losing these buildings—but Greenwich Village was also an extremely strong voice, for many, many years, as was Brooklyn Heights. I don't know, from a political perspective, what that adds into the equation.

Low: Well, it was important, because, you see, down there, [Edward I.] Koch was elected and beat de Sapio down there, for the leadership. He was generating issues that would appeal to the people who lived in Greenwich Village, and de Sapio was passé, you might say, on that type of thing.

Q2: And I don't know, in terms of the politics, how Brooklyn Heights—

Low: Oh, well, I'm sure they got behind this, too.

Q2: Oh, we know the Heights was getting behind it, but I don't know, from a political perspective, if those council members would add much to the power structure or not.

Q1: Who was the councilperson?

Low: I don't really remember, but I'm sure Brooklyn Heights representative was involved. And Mr. [Angelo J.] Arculeo who was the minority leader—he might have been the only Republican—he might have been for it, too, though I don't know for sure.

Q2: I just had one other name I wanted to run by you, who's come up in some of the research, who was someone who worked for the mayor—a guy named Bill Lutsky. Does that—?

Low: Oh, sure.

Q2: What role was he playing, just generally, for the mayor?

Low: Jack Lutsky. Jacob, actually.

Q2: Thanks.

Low: He was a very key man. He knew the charter inside out. He knew the statutes inside out. He knew who everybody was and what they could and could not do.

Q2: Did he have an official title?

Low: He had a title—whether it was counsel to the mayor, or whatever.

Q2: He was a lawyer?

Low: He was a lawyer, but he was a brilliant man on this type of municipal structure.

Q2: I think Geoffrey Platt referred to him as the Mayor's get-it-all-done man.

Low: Yes. Well, if the mayor didn't show up at a meeting, and this mayor—Wagner—went to meetings, [New York City] Board of Estimate meetings, where things happened. If he had to step out, or he wasn't there for some reason, Jack Lutsky would sit in his chair, and he could determine what the mayor wanted. So he was a very powerful person. But, I mean, he reflected the mayor. He didn't go off on his own.

Q2: Right. So his involvement would show the mayor's level of commitment, in terms of carrying—

Low: I'm sure he had something to do with the legislation. He probably reviewed it, maybe argued with Jack Felt or whatever. He was a hell of a guy. He never had to have a book, or anything. He just knew this stuff.

Q1: The name was Golusky or Lutsky?

Q2: Lutsky. L-U-T-S-K-Y.

Low: Jacob Lutsky. He was a very significant factor in those days. You have to remember that the staff at city hall, in those days, was a lot smaller than it is today. There were only two deputy mayors—I think one for finance and one for operations. Then there were four or five assistants, each of whom had responsibilities, for certain areas of city government. We had one man whose sole job was education. Then the rest of us had sort of packages of city agencies that were our responsibility.

Q1: Well, before you went on the City Council, were you working in city hall, for the mayor?

Low: Yes.

Q1: So your particular responsibility was what? At City Hall In those days?

Low: Well, to the best of my recollection, I had the [New York City] Department of Health, known then as Welfare, and hospitals, the [New York City] Commission on Human Rights—which was the forerunner of the sort of affirmative action business.

Q1: Coming out of an Eleanor Roosevelt concern, too, again, I guess.

Low: We were more or less the social service agencies, as distinguished from sanitation, or general services, or—

Q1: Had you gone to law school already, by then? You had gone to law school. Where did you go?

Low: George Washington [University].

Q1: In Washington.

Low: I worked as an assistant to Senator Lehman, and after that I worked briefly for a congressman from the State of Washington, who became my buddy and political mentor, whose name was Henry M. Jackson, who then became a senator. I worked for Jackson for about four months, then I went to the [United States] State Department.

How did we get into this? Oh. Law school. I went to law school at night, while I was in the State Department.

Q1: What area of the State Department were you in?

Low: I worked for the legal advisor. I was not a lawyer at the time. But the legal advisor, at that time, was a very key player in the [Harry S.] Truman administration, because [Dean G.] Acheson was the secretary of state, and he had great confidence in Adrian [S.] Fisher, who was the legal advisor. Adrian Fisher used to go with Acheson, over to the White House, and discuss matters with Truman. So we had all the hot potatoes to deal with in his office, like the firing of General [Douglas] MacArthur.

Q1: So this is the early '50s, then—'51, '52?

Low: Yes. [Joseph R.] McCarthy's attacks on personnel in the State Department; the confirmation hearings of Philip [C.] Jessup, who was a Columbia law professor. These are names that may be inundate your—

Q1: Well, I certainly knew of Jessup. My father taught at Columbia. I lived up there. I know he was a very distinguished man. When I went to Columbia Law School—I never had him as a professor, but he was certainly well known.

Q2: Are you a New Yorker by native, or did you—

Low: I'm really a New Yorker by native, although I was born in Scarsdale, which—

Q1: Then you're not a New Yorker by—

Q2: The greater metropolitan area.

Low: I'm told that, in those days, it was really more or less country, farms and such. But I've been here most of my life. I went to prep school in the city, I went to college on the West Coast, and was in the Navy almost five years. Then I came back here, but I spent four years in Washington. Since then I've been here.

Q1: Where'd you go to college?

Low: Stanford University.

Q1: That's how you got to the Bay area.

Low: Yes.

Q1: So, the decision to leave Washington and come to New York to work for Wagner—

Low: Well, there was a certain unpleasantness in the fall of 1952, when General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was elected president. I saw the writing on the wall, and I resigned from the State Department. Then I went to law school full time for a year or so, so I could

finish up, then I came up here. I practiced law, and I worked on Wagner's campaign, I think.

Q2: I know you live on the Upper East Side now. Did you live there since the beginning?

Low: Since 1954, I think. I've been forty-eight years in the same apartment.

Q1: And you're going to give it up?

Low: We've got a week to get out.

Q2: Well, you've been so generous with your time. I want to be conscious of your time.

Q1: I have a couple more questions.

Low: I've enjoyed this, but I'm not contributing a hell of a lot.

Low: No, this is actually quite helpful to me, but Dorothy has some questions.

Q1: I have some questions. I'd like to go back. You said something about it being cutting-edge, you know, the takings issue. A landmarks law, or historic preservation law, as such, by '65, was not, in and of itself, cutting edge. We'd had about thirty-five years of historic preservation legislation around the country. What was cutting edge in New York was that

the decision was made to not just do historic districts, but to also do individual landmarks. Schenectady had already passed a law in '59 that did that, and there were a few other places. But that was what was really cutting edge—to not just go to with districts. That's where the takings issue comes up much more is the individual landmark, and that's the Supreme Court case, and *Penn Central*. Do you remember in any way thinking of that distinction between whether something was an individual landmark, or a district, when you were dealing with the legislation? Your reaction to the takings issue shows that, looking at the law in general, you sort of—I don't know—maybe you were almost amazed that we got it through?

Low: No, no. Well it's like this law now—the financial reform law—in Washington. I'm all for it. But I'm still not sure how the Supreme Court—

Q1: On the First Amendment issue? Yes.

Low: —first-amendment issues. That didn't lessen my support. Then the same thing with respect to the Landmarks Preservation.

But an aside—a friend of mine was mayor of Schenectady at the time—Sam [Samuel S.] Stratton—and I wondered whether he had some role to play. He later became a congressman, and died prematurely. He'd been in [United States] Congress for, I don't know, four or five terms. But he was sort of a reform mayor in Schenectady.

Q1: And how did you happen to know him?

Low: I don't know how I got to know Sam, or his wife, Joan [Harris Stratton], who was a beautiful, Scottish lady. But we were very close, social friends.

Q2: Speaking of the Supreme Court—let me just mention another name and see if it triggers any memories for you. One thing that happened the advocacy efforts behind the law, in the mid-'50s, was the *Berman v. Parker* decision by the Supreme Court. That decision—

SIDE TWO

Q2:—legislation. To allow cities in New York State to have landmark laws.

Low: That was vital. That had to come first.

Q2: Absolutely. It was a key step. But I mention that only to see if it triggered any memories during the debate at the City Council about the law—if anyone did reference that kind of legislative, legal foundation.

Low: It must have been, because we couldn't have gone forward without state legislation.

Q1: It's very general. It's amazingly general.

Low: You have that home rule business, and nobody understands it—except Jack Lutsky *[laughs]*.

Q1: But also, Schenectady, you see, in '59—Fifty-nine is Schenectady. I wonder if your friend was mayor in '59.

Q2: We'll have to do a little research in the municipal library in Schenectady.

Q1: Then it starts, this whole effort, to get one through in New York.

Low: I think he was mayor, but I don't know if he had anything to do with this.

Q1: Well, he must have. Obviously, you wouldn't have it in Schenectady, when it was so unusual, without support—

Q2: Dorothy, have you stumbled on anything that suggests that the Schenectady example was used in New York?

Q1: No. That's why I'm curious. This is the first link I've met. They're all socializing at the country club while—*[laughs]*. No, I don't know. Somehow, it was reassuring to have a friend as mayor, who had done something comparable in their town.

Low: Well, Sam was a heck of a guy, and he never went further, statewide, because, as a young man, he had traveled in Germany. He had said something good about the Nazis, or what was going on there, and, of course, that killed him. He never could run statewide, or anything. But he was one hell of a guy. Those things happen.

Q1: It sounds like, if I understand it, that the real debate, in other words, on the provisions of the law and the different decisions that were made about individual designation, or whether it should be separate from city planning, or whether there should be a hardship procedure in the law over at the Board of Standards and Appeals—all that was really done offstage, it really wasn't done—you all were handed a bill that had been drafted and vetted offstage. Is that the way it worked?

Low: If you talk to Boyers, he brags about the fact that we amended the bill. You have to get the specifics. I think I told you.

Q2: You did mention that over the phone, briefly, and that's—

Low: I had a discussion with him once, and he said, "Well, we amended the bill." Now in what respects, he must know.

Q1: The person who drafted it at the time was named Bernie [Bernard] Friedlander, who was actually in the Law Department, and corporate counsel. Do you remember him?

Low: Yes.

Q1: Do you remember him in connection with this bill, or do you remember him in general, in connection with other things?

Low: I haven't heard the name in I don't know how many years, but I certainly can see him, as if he were sitting here. I don't know if he's still around.

Q1: Well, when I left—I was a [Rudolph] Giuliani reject, so I left shortly after Mr. Giuliani—

Low: Well, you'd been there a long time, then.

Q1: I was there twenty years.

Low: Oh, my.

Q1: Right. Then Mr. Giuliani came in. I'd been there under [Abraham D.] Beame, all of Koch, all of [David] Dinkins, but apparently there was a campaign commitment that I would go. That somebody asked it from Mr. Giuliani, who didn't know me from a hole in the wall, so I didn't take it personally. Anyway, when the new chair came, under the Giuliani administration, the first thing she did—

Low: Who was that? [Joseph B.] Rose?

Q1: [Jennifer] Raab.

Q2: Rose was City Planning.

Q1: Jennifer Raab was Landmarks, and Joe Rose was City Planning. So the first thing she had to do was get rid of me. So she did. So I've been gone since then.

Low: Well, that's too bad.

Q1: Well, I don't think we would have rubbed well together. They didn't need a campaign commitment, once—

Q2: You might not have lasted anyway.

Q1: That's right. They should have just let it play its natural course, and it wouldn't have caused as much hoopla. The way it happened there was a lot of—

Low: Was there hoopla?

Q1: There was.

Q2: It's fair to say there was hoopla.

Q1: There was even a little something in the Real Estate section, because I was very well respected, and I had a very good record.

Q2: The reason Dorothy was asked to leave was a testimony to how effective she was, administering the law.

Q1: But I treated everybody the same. I think that was the real problem. It wasn't just that we were winning. I think there was one particular person who wasn't used to being treated the same as everybody else, and as far as I was concerned, everybody was the same. So there was not special treatment.

Low: Well, the guy was pretty ruthless, let's put it that way, the way he got rid of the Board of Education chancellor. That's pretty crude. You know, you hang out somebody, and make it so unpleasant.

Q1: I don't know if you get this, but if you go around—literally—the rest of the world, everybody says, "Oh, Mayor Giuliani, wasn't he wonderful?" and I say, "Yes, for those few days after September 11 [attacks], to have a bully in charge was the right thing." But it didn't mean that's what the city needed, normally.

Low: Well, as I go around, out West and so on, I feel the same way. There were a lot of negatives about Giuliani, no question about it. But he got away with this heroic posture—

Q2: Well, 9/11 saved him, saved his reputation. It saved him and made him.

Low: But you notice, the Republican party is not doing much for him, and I think the reason probably is his matrimonial problems. That wouldn't go over too well with—

Q2: —most of America.

Low: —the Republican party.

Q2: I think your political instincts are very much on point there.

Q1: Also, he's not really a sharer.

Low: No. He's got to be in charge, or else. No, I have my misgivings about him. On the other hand, I felt that Dinkins really—and he was a friend of mine. I knew him since he was city clerk, which meant he was running around the council—wasn't very effective. I thought we needed a change, something stronger, and I have to admit—I haven't pulled the Republican lever, or the Independent lever, more than three or four times in my life, but the second time around I pulled it for him. I had my misgivings later, or even when I did that.

Q2: You just mentioned the council again, and I wanted to jump back to something that triggered a thought about a comment Dorothy had made. With a piece of legislation—back in that moment in time, with Wagner in charge—when the administration came forward with a bill, it sounds like they would have hammered out all the big issues offstage, before they actually even introduced it to the council. The council hearing, primarily, would have been more or less—

Low: —perfunctory.

Q2: —perfunctory, except, as you point out, with Boyers, they did tweak it, in some aspect.

Low: I don't know how much tweaking, but there was much more substantial—please talk to him. He's got to talk to you. He's not that important. He should talk to you. He's been with Koch most of his life.

Q2: The problem is not with him. We had one conversation with him, and—

Q1: —I wasn't there. We're going to do another one.

Q2: Yes, we need to follow it up.

Low: Did he remember much?

Q2: I'll be honest with you—he did not. He was not a fount of information. He wasn't being uncooperative, just—

Low: If you meet him again, say you understand that the council adopted certain amendments to the legislation that was presented by the Wagner administration. Can you remember—?

Q2: We'll set it up that way. There is one clue, and maybe this will trigger a memory—Geoffrey Platt made the point that in some version, an early draft of the law or some discussion about the law, there was a provision where the commission was going to have a regulatory influence, I think within four hundred feet of the buildings they designated, and Platt's memory was that that was kind of in there, as a bone to throw the opposition to take it away; that that was, indeed, removed from the discussion. So I'm wondering if that may have been the element that the council changed.

Low: I don't know. Also when you say offstage—I don't know if they had any discussions with Boyers ahead of time, because when it was delivered, and you had the committee's chairman's name on the bill, that meant, this is kosher, get it passed, and that was his mandate. Probably before any amendments were adopted, he probably checked Jack Lutsky, or Abe Ross [*phonetic*]. I don't know.

Q1: You mentioned Julius Edelstein earlier, but he wouldn't have played a role in this particular matter. This wouldn't have been his area?

Low: No, but he's around, and he's ninety.

Q1: You remember Bernie Friedlander. What would have been the context in which you would have met him? Did he come to meet with your committee?

Low: Well, I think he was there longer than that, wasn't he?

Q1: Bernie only left the Law Department around the time I left the commission. So he left in '94.

Low: Yes, you see, after I left the council—

Q1: I was going to ask you—when did you leave the council?

Low: In '69. Then in '73 I was appointed administrator of the [New York City] Environmental Protection Administration, which Lindsay had created. Then that was cut back, and became the Environment Protection Commission. Not the—

Q1: The [New York City] Department of Environmental Protection.

Low: Exactly.

Q1: They used to be these big administrations, under Lindsay.

Low: Right. They cut Sanitation out. They wanted to be on parallel with the other uniformed forces—the police and the fire—which made sense. Because what I inherited was the tail wagging the dog. It was very difficult.

Q1: That's where I know you from. I've been trying to think where it was. I knew it wasn't the '60s. I was at the Environmental Defense Fund in '74, '75, but I'd been following environmental issues. I went to planning school in the late '60s, after I got my law degree. That was where I remember more—

Low: The Environmental Defense Fund. Was that the one Bill Rubin [*phonetic*] headed up?

Q1: As opposed to NRDC [Natural Resources Defense Council]. When I was there, unfortunately, we were in an inter-regnum, but it's all those guys who were out at Brookhaven, who discovered how DDT [dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane] was affecting the birds, etc. So it very much started on a scientific base. I'm sure I got my job because my grandfather wrote a field guide to seashores; they knew my name, and they were impressed. They kept saying, "You really should rewrite it," and I'd say, "I'm a lawyer. I know nothing about this." But I'm trying to think who headed it originally, who

was the staff person. It's still going. It's one of the two—Jim [James T.B.] Tripp is the current—

Q2: They renamed it.

Q1: They dropped the "Fund"—it's just Environmental Defense.

Low: Who's John [H.] Adams with?

Q1: He's NRDC.

Q2: Natural Resources Defense Council. They're the two kind of big, environmental advocacy shops.

Q1: In loyalty to EDF, I suppose I should speak up for them more, but, actually, I think I'm more sympathetic to NRDC, because I think they've really tried to make the regulations work and the laws work. It's been a philosophy of theirs. Whereas EDF has had the philosophy that there are economic issues involved, and if you play the economics right, you'll get the right environmental issue coming out—which I think is maybe true sometimes, but not always.

Q2: Now you say you were the head of that agency, as it went from the largest to the four. And after that, where did your career take you?

Low: Well, I became the regional representative of the Secretary of Energy, in New York. You got your seatbelts fastened? New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

Q1: Sure, but that's the district. That's where the Federal Court of Appeals is.

Q2: In that case, you were back working in the federal administration, for the national government.

Low: Yes.

Q1: That's the second circuit.

Low: Well, yes.

Q2: I hope you had lots of travel—to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Low: I'll tell you, on hindsight, I think the Republicans wanted to eliminate the job, and it wouldn't have made much difference if they had, frankly. I became a spokesman during the fuel crisis, in the mid-'70s, so I was making speeches about this, that and the other thing, all around, but I didn't really have a lot of operational authority. As a matter of fact, the coupons—the rations and all that—was out of my hands, so it was a little

embarrassing at times. People thought I was Mr. Big, but I didn't have anything to do with the main event.

Q2: Dorothy, do you have any other questions?

Q1: From there what happened? When you left that, what did you do?

Low: Well, then there was an unpleasantness again, in 1980. [Ronald] Reagan went in, I stayed in for six or eight months, then I got out. So I've been involved as—now I'm out of everything, and I haven't been in these aspects of life. But I would say one thing. I think I told this to Tony. I'm not sure. After being involved in the environmental business—particularly air pollution—I felt a little bit the way some of the leaders of the French Revolution must have felt, on the way to the guillotine. Because after we passed this bill, there was a primary that fall, with Lindsay, Bill Ryan and I don't know who else, and they all competed, one with the other, in reducing the amount of sulfur permitted in fuel, oil or coal. It became sort of a ratcheted-down thing, not based on much except for politics.

Then, thereafter, in many cases, I really thought they were going off the deep end. Because I thought you had to respect the world we live in. For example, putting tolls on the East River bridges—I didn't get any kudos from the environmental groups for this, and I didn't think it was a very good idea, politically or otherwise. So I never joined any of the new environmental groups. I was the founder of Citizens for Clean Air, and I got a

nice plaque from John Wharton, thanking me and all that, but I noticed, in the paper a year or so back, that a young woman who was busy working in all this, in good faith, is now working for the other side. So she took credit for founding this organization
[laughter].

But, anyway, I haven't been on the cutting edge, you know? I know you need this cutting edge to get anything done. On the other hand, some of it is hard for me to take. For example, they outlawed eating swordfish. Why? Somebody got sick from mercury poisoning in swordfish. Well, that person was in the hospital, I found out, on Long Island, and had a prescribed diet of swordfish. Nobody was permitted to eat swordfish for I don't know how many years. That kind of thing got me a little off the track.

Same thing with the Hudson River. Some of the fish, they tell you you can't eat them—striped bass. Well, if you ate the fat in a striped bass three or four times a week, I'm sure it would be a dangerous matter. But if you eat the fish once or twice a month, I don't see that there's anything wrong with it. That's what I mean.

Q1: Well, do you think, looking back, that, inevitably, one of the patterns and obviously, the French Revolution is the extreme—I know there are probably people involved in our field, in historic preservation, who are now amazed at some of the things that were designated. Yet, for people who care, there are people out there who care that this kind of thing is preserved. So it gets broadened as a field. The same with the environmental efforts.

Is this inevitable? That whenever anybody comes up with a cutting-edge bill, the next generation is going to seem like they went further than one meant. Do you think, politically, that that's inevitable?

Low: Probably. I'm glad you asked the question, because I've always been told that a lot of the ideas of Norman [M.] Thomas were later acquired by the Democratic administration, under Franklin Roosevelt. Now we see that, in the present administration, in Washington—this isn't necessarily cutting edge, but they've adopted a lot of the things that seemed far out, as their own, now. So I think you need the extremes to get anything done.

Q2: Well, it keeps moving.

Low: Well, some of the particulars, I think. I shouldn't have gotten involved in the particulars, but I couldn't lose sight of them sometimes.

Q2: That's understandable.

Low: I don't know about the landmarks. I haven't really followed it, but I think it's fantastic, what you've been able to do, in the movement. It's just a wonderful thing.

Q2: That's nice to hear. We don't want to feel it's gone too much off the track.

Low: I have a friend in San Francisco who's a prominent name, which you would know. His name is Warburg. He's an architect, and he's the grandfather of the man who had the palace on Fifth Avenue—

Q1: Grandson. You said grandfather.

Low: Ha! Grandson, of the Warburg mansion, which is now the Jewish Museum. He's made a career of identifying the synagogues in downtown urban areas that have now been abandoned, because the Jewish population has become more affluent, they've moved out into the suburbs, and so on. That's a heck of a big undertaking, too. There's one in San Francisco that's in bad shape.

Q2: I would say that's one of the cutting-edge areas, still, for preservation—the challenge of what would be historic religious buildings, whether synagogues or—with population shifts or—

Low: Well, the one I'm talking about finally was taken over by some Japanese something, and they're going to use it.

DM: Will they use it for religion, or as a center?

Low: Just as a center.

Q1: An issue in San Francisco that interests me you were there—at the Municipal Art Society this past spring they had a panel on “Why the Place Matters” efforts, and somebody from San Francisco was speaking on the same panel I was speaking on. He identified some of the things coming up that they were looking at. One that I sympathized with very much was the place where the Japanese Americans were required to go, to sign up to be sent off to the camps, during World War II. Because to me one of the things that's important in preservation is that we not just have the glory things, but also get reminded of when we did it wrong—let people down, under our own constitution.

Low: I don't even know where that place is.

Q1: I don't either. He showed us a picture of it, and he said this was one of the places being talked about. But I was pleased that that kind of issue was at least being talked about in California. The reason I know southern California, is because my mother was from there, and I fear that my California relatives certainly did not think it was wrong at all, at the time, that these Americans were being sent off to camps. I look at the cases involved, and the situations, and realize that it's hard, when you're not in the war that people are in. But I think that kind of thing should be remembered.

Low: Well, I think you're right. I'm in that middle ground myself, because I was recently commissioned in the [United States] Navy, before we were in the war, and I was assigned to the intelligence branch. I had been in Washington for three months. I obviously needed

some more intelligence, and they tried to give it to me in three months. But I was assigned to San Luis Obispo, California—do you know the place?

Q1: Sure. Yes.

Low: It's halfway down the—

Q1: My mother grew up on a citrus and lima bean ranch in Oxnard, California, but in Ventura County, outside the town. So this is just north of there.

Low: While I was there, shortly after Pearl Harbor—within three weeks—a Japanese submarine actually shelled the fuel tank farm there, and there was such chaos on the West Coast, but this was really never publicized, because after Pearl Harbor—maybe irrationally—but people on the West Coast thought they would invade the West Coast. This wasn't a laughing matter, and if you lived through the period it's easier to understand why this was done—even though, in hindsight, it's a terrible thing. It's like a war thing.

Q2: Well, I think we're reliving part of it now, with the whole terrorism thing.

Low: Keeping people jailed without access to a lawyer—

Q1: That's why I think it's good to remember. Because most of those Japanese Americans were very loyal Americans, and it's good for us to remember, as we go through the current, what we did then.

Low: Absolutely.

Q1: Actually, I remember, as a small child, my mother talk about the things being found on the beaches, because Point Hueneme is right there, near Ventura. You obviously didn't get to go beyond Luis Obispo. If you go farther south, that's where Point Hueneme and Point Mugu are, and there were things washing up on the beach that were thought to be associated with the Japanese. I was a very small child, but I can remember overhearing the adults talk about it, and clearly perceiving the anxiety, at the time.

Low: Well, this particular case—by chance, I was sort of set down in the middle of what is now the discussion room, but I don't remember any discussion at the time, because I was shipped out to sea shortly after.

Q1: You went to the Pacific?

Low: Yes.

Q2: Well, I think this does point out one reason historic preservation and the Landmarks Law is such an important legacy. It makes things like this get discussed, and keeps those memories alive.

Q1: Because I'm very concerned about the situation now.

Low: I am, too. To call this thing a war—I mean, when is the war over?

Q1: Well, obviously, as a lawyer the idea that you can listen in on somebody's conversations with their lawyers; that you don't bring charges; that you deny access—

Low: The whole thing—I don't get it at all. In other words, the people at Guantanamo, according to the administration, will be held there, without access, until the war is over. What war is over?

Q1: Also, our Secretary of Defense was quoted as saying that even those who aren't convicted still shouldn't be let go, because they're still guilty of something.

Low: But they haven't even been charged, though. But anyway, I agree with that totally. I don't know how I would have my mind changed today. I guess if I were working for [John D.] Ashcroft I might see it differently, but I can't see it differently. It's wrong to keep people without access to a lawyer, without access to—

Q2: Well, our whole system is based on access to a lawyer.

Low: It's being perverted, terribly. As I ask my friends, tongue in cheek, I say, "What have you done for the war effort lately?" Nobody's done anything for the war effort except the people who are in the National Guard and got sent away, and taken out of their jobs. Nobody's done anything for the war effort. What the heck are we doing for the war effort?

Q1: When you're out in San Francisco, do you feel that the reactions are the same as here in New York? As the people you know here in New York?

Low: Well, I don't know. I travel in a circle of people who probably agree with me.

Q1: We self-select our friends, I know. How did you come to switch totally to the West Coast?

Low: Well, I have two sons. They both live in San Francisco. I have six grandchildren, and while they're not all there right now, they're based there. My wife has two nieces out there.

Q2: Those are compelling reasons to move to the West Coast.

Low: We got an apartment there in 1996. So we've been back and forth a lot, and it's not a big, emotional wrench for me, right now, even know we're moving out of a place we've been in for forty-eight years. In fact, presumably, I'll be voting in California this fall, and I don't know for whom I'm voting or anything yet.

Q1: Maybe you'll run for office in California. The environment is very important in California, more than preservation of buildings.

Q2: That's true.

Low: I'm just wondering whether—where did I get this idea? Well, that's neither here nor there. Oh—that maybe the Republicans had written off California, because I noticed in the list of people released by the IRS [Internal Revenue Service], who had made use of these offshore tax havens, was the name of William [E.] Simons, Jr. He's the Republican candidate for governor—

Q1: —against Davis?

Low: —against Davis. Now, as I've said a few time—being an ex-political animal—I don't think that kind of thing would have been done without some okay up top.

Q2: Yes. When they want to connect the dots on that one.

Well, thanks so much for being so generous with your time—particularly if you're supposed to be home packing. Your wife will never forgive me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]