

Gary Ackerman (D/NY) September 27-29, 1996

Book #1

- Alan Gershuny, Stevie _____, Jerry Scharfman, Joe Quinn (Smithtown), Arthur Flug (office AA), Gila (scheduler in office), Jedd Moscovitz (contact in DC), Arthur Leavitt (LF student)
- I flew down in the late morning Friday, called GA's office (across street from my Ramada Hotel) and went over. They put me on phone to Jedd Moskovitz in DC, whose message was that it was not clear when or if Congress would adjourn today. I had hoped that I'd catch up with GA this evening. I started going through news clips and all day Gila, the scheduler, kept talking to DC and would he or won't he becoming home that night. It became clear, gradually, that he wouldn't. Arthur Flug, his AA, gave me a desk and otherwise was totally non-communicative. When Gila offered me a yellow pad, it was a gesture of warmth beyond all measure! It's a hard talking ("shut up, you schmuck!") and busy office. Lots of talk about Jewish mothers (but I told them how to spell Hanukkah!) mostly about building a "sukka" or something like that for some obscure holiday. (An open topped enclosure with boughs on top to eat and live in.) Any way, it reminded me of Ben R's brusqueness, hard shell and lack of outer warmth. No one offered to get me some lunch; no one asked me what I was doing. One guy, who paid no attention to me, turned out to be a guy I spent most of the next day with!
- It does not mean they aren't kind and warm when they get to know you. But they extend themselves to the barest minimum on first acquaintance. It's just New York! Gila did ask me when I was going to eat and gave me a brochure for a Chinese Restaurant. ^{dinner}
- Arthur tells me to call him in the morning, when I leave at 6:00 that evening. But he doesn't say when, just that "I'll be working out of another office tomorrow--the campaign office." I don't know when to call. But I'm in the depressing Ramada Hotel room and I decide to call him at 8:45. I call, he's not there. "Who is this?," I ask. "Alan Gershuny," he says. "Arthur's not here." I recall seeing Alan's name in the clips. He says, "I just dropped in to pick up some stuff and I'm in a hurry." I say, "Is there a chance you can take me with you, wherever you're going. I don't want to spend the rest of the day in the hotel room." He hesitates and says, "I'm going to Northport for the day, my car's loaded, and I have to be there till late in the night." I say, "But I can't stand staying in this hotel room. I don't care when I get back."

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- He says, "Why don't you go to a movie or something, go into the City." I say, "I came down here to see some politics and it looks like Gary may not make it." He finally says to a friend, "Stevie, can we move that stuff in the back and make some room for someone?" "Are you ready to go?" "Yes." (Then) "OK, be in front of the Ramada Inn in five minutes." I say, "You're a great man."
- The luck of the trip was that I happened, by sheer luck, to catch Alan when he was stopping by the office to collect some campaign stuff. Ten minutes later, I'd have been stuck and Saturday would have been as miserable a day as I've ever had. As it was, we had a great time, became buddies and at one point later, Alan says, "I can't imagine why you didn't want to stay in the Ramada Inn all day." When I left Sunday, "You've been a delight. I've found someone who also believes government should go slow." "And," I said, "your taste in music is impeccable." We did hit it off! Several high five's during the day. Every trip has a lucky break in it--and, usually a bad break. But--given that I had a basic bad break--that GA never showed up on Friday or Saturday, the lucky break turned a disaster into a long run plus. I got to know his campaign manager and assorted friends in a way I wouldn't have otherwise been able to do.
- The days events went like this--drove with Stevie in front and we packed in back among shopping bags!! (A huge package of them, a 'first out of the box' coincidence! Just like Ben and Home Style!!) to Northport VA Hospital for appearance of Parris Island Marine Corps Band, "the President's band" they call themselves; waiting around in the glen of tall oak trees where they set up the stage, mikes, sound, etc and Alan's tapes play 30's and 40's tunes (we make immediate bond as we sing the tunes (which he knows by heart--all 400 of them). He puts \$2.00 on the table if I can name the singer, etc., etc., then we listen to the band and head over to Northport to get ready for the evening concert. Walk around with Jerry Scharfman (Nassau County Coordinator and HS teacher), his former student Fiorella (Peruvian) and Arthur Leavitt (Assistant town counsel in Huntington) who was Linda Fowler's student at Syracuse and who thinks more and more as the day wears on that he read "Homestead" in his class!
- We got to eat dinner with the Marine band at the Legion Hall (Arthur and I eat with a table of Suffolk County Sheriff's deputies). Then to the concert, back to the Legion Hall and then home. On way back, we stop at the Huntington headquarters and the Great Neck headquarters and home to Ramada Inn. Not much, but Alan took his girlfriend there one night for R&R.
- The second day, Jerry picked me up and took me to Gary's

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house. We got in Gary's car (cadillac, 5, NYS) and followed Arthur to the airport to pick up Gary. He comes off plane with Schumer and Rangel. We take Schumer to his parking lot. Then we go to meeting of pharmaceutical group. They can't find Marriott. (It's same one we stayed in when we went to Edie's for Thanksgiving). Then we go to Northport for the parade and festival. We stayed there from 12-3. I handed out shopping bags, listened to Marine band and walked around. I followed Gary some as he worked the crowd from the street side of the barricades. A kind of captive audience. Then we went to a fund-raiser for Carolyn McCarthy (a woman whose husband was killed by the gunman on the Long Island Railroad) who's running vs. Republican incumbent (Frisa) for Congress. Gary talked a little there. Then we drove Gary home and Fiorella, Jerry and I went to "Millies" in Great Neck for dinner.

- In general, the trip was a big disappointment. I didn't get the insights I had hoped to get. And since I didn't get to see GA but for one day, I can't tell whether coming back would help any. When we were in the car, and he talked with Jerry, who was driving, and I couldn't hear in the back seat what he was saying. Jerry had this college freshmen with us from Northport, and that relived Gary of the obligation of talking to me, since Fiorella and I were in the back seat. He was very tired and kept saying so from Northpoint on. So the afternoon was a bust, pretty much. We never got to talk about Ben or about the contours of the district or of Gary's career. I told them I'd be back; they all said fine. But I can't be sure whether it's worth it or not.
- When he got in the car at the airport, he yelled out, "Hooray, we're home," and as we drove out of the airport, he looked at some people beside the road and said to them (through the closed window), "We're back!" He's feisty. Schumer mentioned his "bubbleness" and fact that people in Congress respect and like him, called him "popular."
- When I asked him later what he thought of the 104th Congress, "I was in the minority in the state legislature, and I never saw anything like this juggernaut."
- I asked him who he worked with among L.I. Republicans. He said, "King and Lazio." "Neither of them are freshmen. When they were freshmen, we were in the majority. And as head of the delegation, I brought them in when L.I. matters came up. So when they took over, we continued to work a lot together." He does not like Frisa (hinted that he drinks) and Forbes--too conservative. He often spoke of the Republican freshmen in most derogatory manner.
- There was no indication that he didn't want me there. He just didn't invite a lot of questions. He did ask Jerry to tell me

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to tag along with him when he was working the crowd along the parade route. He introduced me to people along the way (the Mayor and couple of others in front of "our" booth and at McCarthy's fund-raiser). He asked if we wanted to come into his house when we dropped him off. Asked if I wanted to go in and look around when he went to visit his mother in the senior citizens home. And when he got off the plane, he made a beeline for me.

- But he never asked me what I was doing--so I had no natural way to bring up Ben Rosenthal. And he never invited questions. And he kept saying how tired he was. My instinct is to hold back and not to crowd the people I'm with. That slow, non-intrusive style may have worked against me in this case because first, I only had one day and not a lot of that and second, I'm in NY, and people expect you to keep pushing if you want attention. There is some clash of cultures here? Still, if he had talked to me a lot in the car, we could have covered a lot of territory.
- Re Northport. "When I first came here I couldn't even get arrested. It was biblical: in the beginning, there was nothing."
- On his stamp collecting: He asked in the car, "Is there a collector's meeting anywhere today?" And then "It's Walter Mitty in reverse. I'm a type A personality in a type A business and yet I dream of being all alone in some quiet place playing with these little stamps."
- When we got to an area with some farms, "This isn't exactly the city. What is a boy from Queens doing out here? 'Dorothy' should be here. It's Kansas."
- A little later, he mused "I'm getting to be like that Woody Allen movie where he gets to become like the person he talks with. When he talks to a Chinese man, he begins to look Chinese, when he talks to a Mexican, he starts looking Mexican. That's me."
- So he's adapting, but still sees the strangeness of it all. They used the map a lot. When he couldn't find the Marriott and before he finally stopped and asked, he said, "We came out here before and got lost. We finally found the place by accident. If we keep this up, we'll find it by accident again."
- After the Marine band had played in the park and Gary got his photo op with the band, I left him alone. But he came back to the booth and said, "Where were you when all those people thanked me for something I'd done. I had no idea what it was, but I kept bowing and taking the credit."

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- This harked back to a conversation we had on the way out. "Alan is a dinosaur. For him, campaigning is still block by block, voter by voter. He isn't interested in the other part of the campaign. I have to be interested in both. With 581,000 people in this district, you have to use the mass media. So I have to pay attention to the consultants. Alan doesn't."
- "In the end, its the personal touch that makes all the difference. When I help someone get a social security check, that person tells four or five others and each one of them tells four or five others. There's a multiple that works when you do something good. I don't know how large it is. But I do know that if you do something bad, the multiple is much, much bigger."
- His speech for Carolyn McCarthy was very emotional and well articulated. Faced greatest of all life's calamities, didn't retreat, became bigger than ever, is doing it "not for herself, but for us," we all have "a cause," it's "a matter of right and wrong," must get rid of Gingrich as Speaker.
- Afterward, I said I thought she came across as "a very nice person." He agreed, said she was and then asked "but is it enough?" Then he spoke very disparagingly of Frisa--never comes around, takes loads of PAC money, "has created a media image," is "on the sauce." Jerry said, "but is that enough?" And they left it there. But the McCarthy seat is one they think they can win and Dems are putting money on it.
- I talked to a National Journal reporter who said the same thing. He's looking at the McCarthy race and at the Ackerman race, with emphasis on the suburbs, and the chances of the Democrats taking back the suburbs.
- He's very good and ~~looking~~ at working the crowds. And he's good with the reporter. "I don't know much about you." "If you did you might vote for me." "That's the first politician I ever met who didn't lie." Or, "I don't live in your district." "Well it's a big district, where do you live?" "Denmark." "You're right." When challenged on the housing, he tried to explain. "I brought the parties to the table and I'll continue to do that now."
- In Northport, he stood out--because he didn't look like anyone else there. He's about five feet, seven, with a big stomach, curly thinning gray hair, loose fitting suit, and he waddles instead of walking. He looks Jewish, and very much a city boy. Northport was all (I mean all) white, with lots of athletic-looking young people. You can tell Gary eats too much and exercises too little. Jerry told me that when he first came to Great Neck, people told Jerry, "He doesn't look

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like a congressman! You can't let him walk down the street here in those polyester clothes." He doesn't look like a congressman in Northport--or on Long Island for that matter. When the politicians lined up to speak for McCarthy, they all towered above him--Schumer, the County Chairman, etc. He's the little fat man in the line up.

- But he seems jovial, relentless, and bright. Like Ben, he loves repartee and appreciates argument. He twitted Jerry all the way home about the unfairness of property taxes as basis for school funding. The rich get better schools that way. He says Sup.Ct will declare that unconstitutional, since poor kids deserve just as good an education as rich kids. The idea was that Great Neck would have to give up its advantage and what was Jerry going to do about it. "A huge social shake up" is coming, says GA. Jerry agreed, at dinner, that Gary likes to tease him as the "effecte snob" and Great Neck as insular and elitist. But Great Neck is a bastion of GA's strength in Nassau. They are, as Alan says, "wealthy Jewish liberals, who have done well and still have a social conscience."
- Arthur Flug was a school principal before coming to work with Gary. Jerry is a school teacher--teaches five classes a day of Spanish at a Great Neck high school. Ann McShane was a school teacher before working for Tim Downey. The woman, who was with Ann at the booth, had been a teacher. Joe Quinn was a retired principal. Mary and Joe were part-time at the Suffolk office. So he's got a lot of professional teachers on his staff and no doubt is a staunch NEA liberal. (Donna Shalala was due in next week for McCarthy.)
- The two longest tales he told were their efforts to stop Lally's forces from forcing them into a primary on the Democratic Independence (Reform) and Liberal line, and the controversy over low income housing in East Northport. (Alan talked about both of them at length, too.) Jerry spent most of dinner on the procedural fight. I'm not sure what the import for me is regarding the electoral procedure fight. But I heard the bitterness, on the parade route over the housing fuss, which Gary tried to mediate and ended up holding the bag when the community leaders (Republicans) backed out.
- "It will cost us 1,000 votes." (Alan)
- To me, it was akin to Ben R's 69 home owners problem. I asked Gary about it in terms of what his job was. "For those of us who represent the government, who are on the front lines, it is our responsibility to help the people we represent when they have a problem. When they ask for help, what kind of a response is it to say that it's not a federal problem? They have a right to expect a better answer. When we do, we help them with their citizenry. It may not have been the

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politically smart thing to do. Alan didn't want me to do it. He said it would be a big loss politically, and he was probably right. But I feel a responsibility. The community came to me and asked me to bring the two sides together. I did and we had a blue ribbon public event, a perfect media event for everyone when we announced the agreement. I stepped aside and let the community leaders--all Republicans--take the credit. And they did. Then a few days later, they backed away. But I'm going to stay with it till we get an agreement. I'm going to bring them all back to the table. I have no intention of giving up."

- I said I understood the responsibility argument, but wasn't there a philosophical side to his stance, too. He agreed. "I believe very strongly that people should have a choice in where they want to live. When you add up all the arguments about "them" and the affect "they" will have on the town, what you have is prejudice. I don't like prejudice. Besides which 400 people expressed interest in low-equity housing there, most of them were from the area and looked very much like all the rest of the people--except they couldn't afford to buy a house at full equity prices. If my constituents don't like my views, they can get rid of me. It's their right."
- Earlier in the day, he had rehearsed some of the controversy and he had said that at one point, "I told them that I had been born and raised in low income housing projects and that now I had a half-million dollar house in one of the pricey districts in the city. So, I know which is better. But I had a choice and I believe everyone deserves a choice as to where they will live."
- So, thinking back to his own childhood-rooted passion on the subject, I pushed him on his explanation of why he was willing to intervene in the first place. I asked him if it had been another issue, whether he would have been willing to step in. And he said, "No, if had been a transportation issue, I would not have been as interested or gotten involved. Housing is an issue I care about, deeply. It is what I am."
- Jerry, too, said at dinner, "He comes from 'the projects.' That's something he feels very strongly about."
- And the example of his liberalism. As we stood in front of the 'the booth,' a man and his wife came up to Gary. "I just want to thank you for what you did. I have a daughter who is gay. I have a daughter and three sons. My sons can get married; my daughter can't. We want you to know how much we appreciate your vote." His wife nodded. Gary said something to the effect that gays "ought to have every right to do what they want to do on the matter and society should not punish or ostracize people who are different. (I cannot replicate the

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words.) But it was brief; showed a desire not to punish. And when he stopped, he said, "Let's have a hug on that." And he gave the man a big hug. Then he turned to me and said, "I can't tell you how many people have come up to me since that vote and said to me, 'I want to thank you for what you did on that vote!' I know what they mean when they say 'that vote.' I'll bet a hundred people have come up like that man just did--most of them looking just as 'straight' as he did. I was one of 60 who voted against the ban on same-sex-marriage. It was a symbolic vote. But there's a community out there that is watching and listening."

- On the matter of the election procedure, the Lally people trumped up three candidacies to force GA into primaries in the Democratic, Independent and Lib. parties. Their intent was to involve him in primaries and, thus, acc. to new law (or House provisions) make it illegal to use the frank so close to a primary. It took the Ackerman people two weeks of effort to get the petitions sufficiently invalidated to knock all three bogus candidates off the ballet. But it is a long and complex story. Says Jerry, "They won. They stopped Gary from sending out his last mailing to his constituents. That's about 65,000 letters. But they lost, in the terrible beating they took in the press. We fed the press morsel-by-morsel until finally their lawyer called and agreed to give up their suits if we would stop the bad press."
- Gary said, "The whole thing was a distraction and a pain. But it energized our supporters and gave us a lot of momentum for the campaign."
- When I told Gary that I'd been told his first houseboat sank in the Potomac, he said, "Yes and worse than that, I didn't have any insurance on it. My friends couldn't understand it--a Jew who didn't understand insurance. They were ready to disown me."
- On the way to pharmacy meeting: "There will be 30 people here. Only five will live in my district. Three of them will be Republicans and two will be Democrats--including one who was running against me. They'll all be against me. But I want to show them I'm not ducking."
- After he said a few words, (Your business is in a bind; you need help and I'll do my best.) he looked at the crowd and said, "50% of the people in that room are politicians. I can't do any good here. Let's go."
- "Did it feel strange when you first went out to Suffolk County," I asked. "Strange for me or for them? For them, I was what they had just gotten away from. I was the city chasing them. I was the plague they had escaped from. I was

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typhoid Mary."

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- When we got to Northport, we drove into town near the back of the gathering parade and we threaded our way, with the help of the cops, to the front and then on into town past the huge crowds that had gathered on both sides of the street. As we drove along, he saw the local politicians gathered in one place waiting for the parade to begin. They were to march up front. He recalled the first time he went to the parade. He was a sitting congressman in the 7th District, but was running for election in the Northport district.
- "I went to the place where the elected officials were gathering to march. They said, "You can't walk in the parade, you're not an elected official!" I said, "I am a United States Congressman. I'm an elected official." They said, "You're not an elected official from this district!" I said, "I will be!" They said, "You can't march in the parade." So I went downtown where all the people had gathered and shook hands for an hour while the elected officials stood there talking to each other, waiting for the parade to start. I shook hands and Binder (opponent) walked behind the tuba player."
- That's what he did this time. He shook hands while he had a waiting, captive crowd on the sidewalks. Then, when the parade and the public officials came down the street, he jumped in and walked the last 100 yards to the reviewing stand. The parade lasted a good hour. It was the longest parade, relative to the size of the town, that I had ever seen. And I didn't see most of it. "Every kid in the Northport schools was in the parade," says Gary afterward. "On the stand, the smells of food came floating over--first the hamburgs, then the hot dogs." He loves to eat.
- I spent the first day with Alan Gershuny. He's a very savvy operative in an organizational and street-wise sense--great antenna--great sense for the system and for the country. "My sons are all patriotic. I'm most proud of that." He was a flaming liberal, but has "calmed down a little."
- "I campaigned for Ben Rosenthal when I was 16 years old. I went to him and asked him one question. 'How do you stand on the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities?' 'I want to abolish it,' he said. That's all I wanted to know. I'll work for you." A good litmus test for that district. Very liberal--especially civil liberties.
- Gary's father was a taxi driver and so was Alan's father. Alan drove a cab for a while, too. I don't know exactly what

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he does for a living now.

- Alan on Northport: "Politics is a personal business. It's all personal out here. When we first came out here, no one, not one person, knew who he was. Now, even people like the police chief love Gary. I think we can win Northport. It's an artsy community. It's also the place I would most like to live if I lost my apartment. It's a pet project of mine. We'll win it one day."
- Re police chief: when we drove up to him looking for a place to park when all spots were taken for several miles, he looked in the window to Gary, laughing. 'Who are you? You're a fucking Democrat. I don't let Democrats park here. Fred, show the Congressman where to park, over there, right next to the sheriff's car."
- Great story about Gary when he went incognito into the homeless shelter to see how they lived (shades of Halpern at Creedmoor--which we passed). He wanted to look homeless. So he pulled a coat out of the closet and poured ketchup and mustard on it and then stomped on it to grind it in so it would look authentic. After making it look real grungy, he picked it up to put it on--and it was his wife's coat!!
- This is the klutzy side of GA--this and the houseboat sinking were told at same time by his staff. *Same with Ben - "look at him over there by himself, I love + put him to tease so he won't get too big for his britches. The kid is probably 11 or 12 D. pretty sure. Kne. he's much younger. respect him."*
- Alan: "Ours is a volunteer-intensive campaign. Last week, we got out 100,000 pieces of literature in just four days--folded, stuffed and boxed by zip code for the post office. That's unheard of, but we did it with our volunteers. We didn't plan it that way, but the volunteers came pouring in asking to help. It was like the Sorcerer's Apprentice with the brooms bringing in the pails of water. We had to tell the volunteers in our Huntington headquarters not to come in. We lied to them, telling them that the material hadn't come in. We couldn't keep up. This is grassroots politics--the best kind of politics. I know you have to have media, but I have no use for them and I don't pay any attention to what they do, except that I reserve the right to check every ad and make changes when I think it's necessary."
- He savors the triumph over Doug Schoen, the pollster in 1983.
- Alan talks about how they forced Scheuer out of the race in 1992. "We did it with smoke and mirrors. We would nail down

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one key person in an election district or an assembly district and claim support from the whole party in that district. Gary made dozens of phone calls to nail people down. By the time the conventions met, Scheuer had withdrawn." They had nominating conventions in Suffolk and Nassau parts of the district. *Couldnt do this with strong party organization.*

- Gary's first race was for councilman-at-large in Queens County (no longer such a position). Was beaten by Gary Masiopiere(?) But when state senate opportunity popped up, Gary was ready to go. In the speech he made after election to the state senate, Gary commented on how lucky he was to have been beaten in his first race. When I recalled this, Alan said, "He's a good congressman--he really is--and a very funny guy. But he's also the luckiest man on the face of the earth."
- He says often that Gary is "growing up" or "getting better" by which he means less knee jerk. (Alan has followed that route already and so he sees Gary in those terms.)
- "For both philosophical and political reasons, Gary is growing up. Mostly, its for political reasons. The new district has taught him that there are other views. He voted for the welfare bill.(?)That was a political change and he got a lot of criticism from his liberal friends."
- When Alan thinks of the electoral statistics, he sees them in terms of counties. "In 1992, we came out of Suffolk 14,000 votes down, we came out of Nassau only 4,000 down. We picked up 25,000 in Queens and won by 20,000. In 1994, we came out of Suffolk down by 9,000, we came out of Nassau up by 1,000. We picked up 25,000 in Queens and won by 26,000 votes. The significance of the 1994 election was that we cut our losses in Suffolk County--and we did it in a big Republican year. We'll never win Suffolk, but our goal is to continue to cut our losses there."
- "Our best county in percentage terms is Nassau, then Queens and then Suffolk. The most interesting is Queens, because the part Gary has now is the most conservative part of Queens. They elect a Republican state senator, a Republican assemblyman, and a Republican councilman. They will always vote for a Jew. Their finger would fall off if they voted for someone other than a Jew. We're safe there for this election. Our benchmark poll showed that 87% of Jewish voters are for Gary."
- Of the 1992 redistricting, Alan said, "Gary drove me crazy drawing up all sorts of districts for him to run in. And we went up to Albany to talk about it. But in the end, we had no influence. They tried to help McGrath and Lent in Nassau and they tried to help Downey and Hockbreakner in Suffolk. Gary

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got what was left. As he says, he has to swim to get from one point to the other and when he talks about it." He says Gary was left out, 'gurgle, gurgle.' The thinking was that Scheuer would run in this district, because he had a presence here. Gary even thought of running against Nita Lowery, but decided to run against Scheuer. Alan now wants to trade with Lazio. Smithtown (Rep.) for black areas of Huntington (Dem.) Smithtown is most Republican--hopeless!

- Jerry spoke of how hard they worked lining up delegates to the nominating convention and spoke of how he decided to back Gary. He comes to dinner at Jerry's home with a lot of local leaders. Somebody (here or later, I'm not sure) gets up, talks about going to Israel and how ~~to~~ "I turned my back to the Jordanians." Gary gets up and says, "In my book, anyone who turns his back on the enemy is a schmuck." Jerry says, "That sold me. We quizzed him on a lot of issues--for four hours. But he had my support after his first sentence. He spoke of how they gave Gary lists of key people in Nassau and delegates to convention. He called them all and asked for their support. Scheuer did not."
- One idea that emerges from this is to pay a little more attention to the building of the "team." That is, every congressional effort is a team effort--legislation and campaigning. How is that team built--with what in mind. This is a staff of school teachers. Why? Who does congressman choose personally and why? Who is essential? He or she does both? "Ties that bind" is not "the team," though it's related. What's the Alan-Gary connection? What's the Arthur-Gary connection? What's the Jed-Gary connection?

Alan said
Ben R. after
similar
line-drawing.

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