CHRISTIAN INTERVIEW 1

CHRISTIAN: Hello!

CULBERT: Hello, George Christian?

CHRISTIAN: Yes, sir.

CULBERT: This is David Culbert calling from Baton Rouge. May I ask you a couple of questions? Now, is this a convenient time? I know that you are leaving the country tomorrow.

CHRISTIAN: Yea, go ahead. . . I'm kind of in a bind, but that is okay.

CULBERT: I'll try and keep these brief. As I talked to your secretary, if there are things that you don't remember anything about, I don't want to waste your time.

CHRISTIAN: Okay.

CULBERT: My first question. . . . Naturally I'm interested in Vietnam and problems of television coverage of Vietnam, but I want to ask a couple of other questions relating to some things I've found in the Library, because I haven't found answers and since you were there you may know something about them. First question concerns the White House Communications Agency. Can you tell me anything about how that functioned and what its connection was with you as press secretary?

CHRISTIAN: It supplied our communication system for the entire White House operation. And also helped the press get lines and that sort of thing. It worked pretty closely with the television company and Western Union.

CULBERT: So, in other words, it primarily served an administrative function that you were in charge of White House communication?

CHRISTIAN: No, I wasn't in charge of the. . . I forget what they called it, WHCA something. It was, I think, under the Signal Corps. I believe

they were military people. And it was just a communications support operation for the White House.

CULBERT: Okay, these questions probably sound mundane. . . .

CHRISTIAN: I think they were under the control of the White House military. It was through most of that period, General Cross, Colonel Cross.

CULBERT: These I'm sure may sound like silly questions, but these are the things you are very rarely going to find in documents. Another question concerns this business of the videotape unit that was set up in the White House. I read that Frank Stanton gave a little bit of advice about it. It was set up in 1966 in July, but I wondered if anybody talked with you or you gave any thought to this White House intervention of the Johnson era of having a machine that would videotape commercial television broadcasts while they were being broadcast?

CHRISTIAN: No, I just listened. I just accepted what they did. I didn't become press secretary until December of that year--1966--and it was already in place by the time that I was there. I know I liked the idea, but I took it as a matter of course. On anything mechanical or that supported what we were doing, I never paid much attention to it. I just took what they had.

CULBERT: For instance did you ever watch anything that they might have taped an evening or a week before when you saw some reference somewhere else for it? Or did you make almost no use of this stuff?

CHRISTIAN: I didn't make much use of it. The President did.

CULBERT: Did he watch this pretty often?

CHRISTIAN: I don't know. I think he watched programs like "Issues and Answers" and "Meet the Press" and news type programs, the Sunday programs a

good bit. . . . When he missed the programs he did it; I know he did that. And I have seen some programs with him that were videotaped. I don't know, I've forgotten how many, but they were [videotaped]. It seemed to me mostly that it was Sunday programing that he might have missed because of church or something else.

CULBERT: Okay, one last question of this sort. There was a White House Naval Photographic Unit, as you know, produced monthly films in color.

CHRISTIAN: Right.

CULBERT: Now I saw some of these at the Library. Was this Lyndon Johnson's idea?

CHRISTIAN: I have no idea.

CULBERT: Do you know whether anybody ever watched these films? Like would the family sit and watch them once a month? They were pretty easy to record?

CHRISTIAN: Yea, some of them were. . . let's see what he would do. Of course, they were historical record films that were designed to go into the record of the administration, but he watched them each month and a lot of his staff did and occasionally he would, when he was on the boat or there at the White House or Camp David or somewhere he would look at those films, when he had time to really do it and along with other films that were done like the USIA did a variety of films that he enjoyed looking at.

CULBERT: He'd get those films just to take a look at them and things they would produce?

CHRISTIAN: Right.

CULBERT: But I assume that you never had any job like picking which ones? He had somebody else do that?

CHRISTIAN: No.

CULBERT: Did he have anybody on his staff who was particularly involved with television? I have read some memos in the LBJ Library, very intelligent memos about television or a particular show and how it was covered, but I didn't know whether this was a typical thing or variation.

CHRISTIAN: Well, different people at different times. Bob Kintner was there for a while and, of course, had been president of two networks, so he was acutely sensitive to it and then Bob Fleming, who was my deputy, was a television person on the ABC staff, so he was a TV adviser. But the President, of course, was close to Frank Stanton and others outside the White House, Guggenheim and others who I would imagine gave advice on it, but there on the White House staff, probably Fleming would be the best. And he still works in Washington. I think he works for a representative, Abraham Kazen.

CULBERT: That is easy enough to check. I'll give them a call just to see if he. . . or write him a letter first to see if he can remember a little bit. Now something that. . . I've gone through your whole history of you, in that interview. . . so a couple of questions are simply outgrowths of what I thought were some very interesting things you said ten years ago. I don't expect that you remember exactly what you said, but one of the things that you talk about in that oral history interview is the fact that Johnson, in effect, became too familiar with the press and he should have been more aloof. . . and people talk about this. Have you given any thought in retrospect to why Lyndon Johnson was so obsessed with what the mass media thought about his policies and what he was up to?

CHRISTIAN: Well, it was just in his nature. He had been a journalist of sorts himself. . . had worked on the school paper and was interested in it and was a good writer and some of his closer acquaintances over the years were journalists, Bill White and Bob Kintner and Drew Pearson and others. And he. . . I often thought was too accessible in some ways. . . "familiarity breeds contempt." Well, he was just always available. And he sometimes sought the press to come and visit with him, sometimes when they hadn't even asked to. . . that sort of thing. And I thought for a president to be that. . . you know this fine line between being accessible and being overexposed. And I thought that he subjected himself to a little too much exposure, which in turn led the press to blame him for a lot of things where blame could have been shifted somewhere else in the government. I mean the more things you try to envelop the more likely you are to catch a lot of flak from the problems associated with such things. He wanted his stamp on everything in the government, virtually, and so when you take credit you are also going to receive some blame. I just thought he should have probably handled that better, but it was his nature. He was gregarious and he liked to be with the press and he liked to talk to reporters and he liked to have private interviews and he just exposed himself too much, I think, and still do.

CULBERT: One of the things that interested me. . . and you talk about this in your interview. . . you mention that with the various papers that were available and you mention which ones you were able to get in Washington, that someone on the staff would make clippings. And you say, "Well, my problem is that I get into work . . . . I didn't have time to sit and read newspapers or clippings. I had a job to do all day." And yet we keep hearing about how

Lyndon Johnson was obsessed with trying to find out stuff and you mentioned that he really knew more about what various people were saying than anybody else did. And my question is whether you ever formed an opinion, or have one now, as to whether Johnson got most of his information from a newspaper or from radio or television or whether he used all of them and just simply the "more the merrier" or what?

CHRISTIAN: It was "more the merrier" and they had to throw in the Congressional Record. He read religiously the Congressional Record every morning and had it brought especially to his room about six o'clock or seven o'clock in the morning and he read all the available daily papers very early in the morning before anybody else even got to stirring and he watched the network morning shows. So all of that combined and then he would turn on the hourly newscasts and then he had, of course, AP and UPI in his office and I had a Reuters' ticker. I mean we had Reuters' ticker available to us too, so we were just constantly being peppered with news. He had more. . . obviously a lot of his staff people, including me. . . I read the papers in the car coming to work or at home before I came to work, but I didn't have access to as many of the news broadcasts and things as he did. You just can't do it. You don't have time to do it. This is something he liked to do at seven o'clock in the morning. He liked to watch the news in bed. Well, at seven o'clock in the morning I was trying to get to work and he always said he had a greater luxury for that kind of thing because he didn't have to get up and go to the office. But he got it from all those sources, not just one. He was amply informed of everything that went on.

CULBERT: I think maybe in retrospect one of the most beloved images of Lyndon is this famous battery of three television sets and everybody that goes

to the LBJ Library. . . the guards told me. . . and I watched myself how much people loved that. Did he really sit and switch channels? I mean like. . . .

CHRISTIAN: Sure. He liked all three. Well, the sets were set on the three networks and he would have the sound. . . and what he would do was move the sound from one to the other depending on what was on the air. And I did the same thing. I had the same thing at home. The Signal Corps put one in my home at his instruction so I could try to see all those morning programs and also in my office I had one so I could watch the evening news broadcasts and try to catch as much of it as I could. So he made sure that the key people also had the ability to see all three network news programs at one time, otherwise you would just miss part of them.

CULBERT: Well, when you mentioned that this reminds me of one other question I wanted to ask you. I had an interview with Harry McPherson and he told me, and he told other people too, that when TET 1968, the Vietnam crisis, came up at that time, that what he saw on television seemed more real than official reports. Now Walt Rostow told me that he didn't think it was his job to watch television and he really claimed that he didn't pay much attention. My question is. . . you've told me something about your own situation. . . do you remember any cabinet officers that sort of like Rostow, that really kind of disliked the whole idea of television and didn't watch it? Or any like McPherson, who seemingly felt that what they were seeing on television was truer almost than what they got elsewhere?

CHRISTIAN: Well, your frame of reference is different, person to person. Harry probably didn't see [as much] television as he thinks now that he saw.

But at the time Harry was quite concerned about us being in Vietnam and he would naturally look at TET in a different light than someone who was knee-deep in the minute-to-minute handling of the situation. Whereas Harry would be appalled at what was happening during TET, someone who was handling cable traffic and military reports and everything else like Rostow would have a different perspective than Harry would. Most of what Harry learned. . . he read the official reports sure, but not in the length and with the intensity that people in the Situation Room and the Security Council did, so his perspective would be somewhat different. I'm sure a lot of what was on television was true, but the TV people were looking at it from the standpoint of the sensational happenings in Vietnam, whereas Rostow and the others were trying to assess how much damage had been done, what was recoverable, what were the long range effects, what was the military outcome of TET? And so you can get two perspectives. It is obvious that TET speeded up the American determination to move on out of Vietnam and certainly had a great impact on public opinion in that direction and on the government, but from the people looking at it from the military standpoint it was not as disastrous. It wasn't a defeat at all. From the standpoint of those trying to handle the war, I think some of them were actually at the time, amazed and delighted that things had held together as well as they did and that the losses inflicted on the Viet Cong and the recovery of Hue and other places rather quickly showed that TET had been a failure as an offensive by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. And they looked at it as a failure, whereas most people in the country, the impact of television and the general coverage was that it was a terrible defeat. Now to someone like me, who honestly was trying to look at it objectively from the

standpoint of how it impacted the public. . . it was pretty obvious to me that the impact on the public of TET was very detrimental to the President's war effort. But the impact on our military in Vietnam was actually considerably the other way. You know, it was quite a victory through their eyes. . . . (Laughs) It is all in the eye of the beholder. To me it appeared that if something like that could happen at that late date in Vietnam. . . that they could mount that type of operation even though they were whipped. . . just the mere fact that they could mount that type of operation was a very negative thing from our standpoint. And that is the way I looked at it and I'm sure that is the way Harry looked at it.

CULBERT: Oh, yea, no doubt about it. Well, when you bring up this, now one of the things that I have wondered about, Rostow is only one of the people who talked about him. They say, well, he thinks in retrospect that he made a mistake somehow not going to the American people and help having Johnson speak more directly on a subject of what really was going on in Vietnam. That somehow, in retrospect, a mistake was made in not making the facts of the situation in those early months known. Is that your feeling or what. . . ?

CHRISTIAN: Yes, a lot of it was before I got there, but I always had the impression that the President really didn't want. . . he didn't want Vietnam to crowd out everything else he was doing and he deliberately pushed Vietnam into a position. Well, he downplayed Vietnam to a large degree, because he had so much else he wanted to do and he had it on his mind and he didn't want a war to mess up his domestic programs and he was determined to go ahead with full-funding of everything that he wanted to do and he just was determined not to let the war disfigure his administration. And I think with that intent in

mind he tended not to. . . at least in those early days. . . not to really try to sell the Vietnam War as something. You know, to him we were going to defend South Vietnam and that was it and it wasn't he didn't try to rally the country or get emotional about it or anything like that. Possibly he could never have. It is conceivable to me that he could have rallied the country, but he didn't. He did not call for sacrifice! He did not impose rationing or whatever else to bring to the attention of the American people that we were really in a war. They really discovered we were in a war from watching guys get killed on television. That is really how they really soaked in that "we are in one hell of a bloody war" because we didn't really treat it that way. We didn't treat it as an all-out war effort and didn't make any move toward mobilizing the country or rallying the American people to a cause and he could have made us some sort of crusade or cause out of it. I think it was the type thing that it would have been very risky not to take at your best, but it was no question it was a deliberate decision on his part and he just. . . he didn't have any desire to lead some sort of crusade in Vietnam. He wanted to do the job and stand by our commitment, but he didn't want it clouding everything else in the country. And in retrospect a lot of people now. . . you hear it all over the place. . . why didn't we go all out and get it out of the way? You know, go ahead and mobilize the country and call up the National Guard and do the things that make the people realize that we are in a war and then get it over with. Either get it over with or not ever go in is what you always hear now. Well, at the time it appeared we could handle the commitment without that sort of all-out effort, so that is the course he took. I know a lot of the less-hawkish advisors that he had in

those days--and that includes Rostow, Rusk, McNamara, all of them who were always the hand of restraint on the military--that sometimes they wake up in the night thinking "Why in the hell didn't we knock them flat and go on about our business instead of this prolonged slow blood letting?" And I think that is perfectly natural. I'm sure people involved in the Korean War think the same thing in retrospect, but at the time it looked like the right thing to do, It is not "drag the American people down the road" in some sort of all-out war effort.

CULBERT: Do you ever remember either thinking in January and February, 1968 that "Gee, I wish that my President would do something to sell sort of his side of what is going on more vigorously." Did you ever talk to Johnson and urge this sort of thing or did. . . ?

CHRISTIAN: No, I didn't, because frankly at that point I didn't think he could sell it. And I was a strong advocate of Johnson not running again. And I thought the country was so divided that he was not doing himself or the country any favors by running for re-election and even if he were elected it would be increasingly difficult to govern the country and the people were ready for a change, some change in direction, and it was too late by then to try to mount some sort of public opinion offensive. I don't think it would have succeeded. No, I never advocated anything like that. No way it would have worked.

CULBERT: One question I was going to ask you to see just what you thought of it. I think it is not very original. It seems to me that now, already this funny way. . . just let a little time elapse and things look very differently, that there is a lot more interest and sympathy for Lyndon Johnson now than

there was in that we have got all kinds of people now that weren't even old enough to know what was going on in 1968. Have you given any thought to why Lyndon Johnson seems more interesting as a figure now than he did ten years ago?

CHRISTIAN: Cause he was a strong president and obviously a national leader of some depth and breadth and all three presidents that we have had since then have not shown the kind of pizzazz that he did. And it's comparing him with other people and recognizing that Johnson confronted problems and tried to do something about it. And had knowledge of dealing with Congress and knew how to get programs passed. He was an interesting person, a personality, and there was "meat on his bones." I've heard journalists, foreign and domestic, say over the past ten years that "blood ran in his veins." He was a tough old hombre. And I think that is now being appreciated that you can have a very active, aggressive president who gets things done. And that is why he looks better and in ten more years he will look even better. He'll have a "Truman rebirth." It is already happening and it will continue to happen. People will overlook all the reasons they had for not liking him and they will start saying, "Well, hell, he is kind of an Andrew Jackson 1960 style." And he will look better and better as time goes on, I think.

CULBERT: All right, let me ask you a question about this Walter Cronkite special. And your secretary told me when I talked to her last week you didn't remember too much so let me just mention this.

CHRISTIAN: About what?

CULBERT: Walter Cronkite went to Vietnam and came back and broadcast an hour special on Vietnam, February 27, 1968. Now William Small in his book, To Kill

A Messenger, as a footnote, where he says that you told him. . . and this would have been around 1969 or 1970, the book came out about 1970. . . that Lyndon Johnson had watched that program and said, in effect, "Well, my goodness, if Walter Cronkite is turning against me" . . . this is where Cronkite came out against the war in Vietnam. . . "I'm in effect losing Middle America." Now do you recall whether. . . ?

CHRISTIAN: I don't recall telling Small that. I told Halberstam that later on. It was used in his recent book. Johnson did talk about Cronkite going to Vietnam and in effect turning against the war and it did worry him immensely that Cronkite had in effect become dovish, because he saw the impact was going to be tremendous on the country. Now whether or not Johnson saw that program at X time and that sort of thing, I don't know. He saw newscasts of other things, I'm sure that Johnson is bound to have seen the program. I remember being with Johnson when he saw a commentary from Cronkite. Now whether it was on the morning news. . . I think it probably was on the CBS Morning News, where it might have been an excerpt out of the program or something. I saw the programs. . . . I either saw them at home and I saw the videotapes. I don't remember. . . I don't know whether he saw them. I'm pretty sure he saw all the programs in some manner although I don't remember precisely. I know we talked about the Cronkite program and he was very concerned about Cronkite coming home from Vietnam and portraying the "cause is lost" in effect, the impact it was going to have. Now when it was and where it was, I don't really have a clear recollection. I understand since then that there wasn't any way he could have. . . he was gone somewhere and could not have seen the original program, so I don't know.

CULBERT: The only reason that I do this is one of the problems sometimes, is that people remember things but sometimes detailed records will not support it. Now in this case I was interested in this one thing, because this is interesting. So I looked into this and LBJ had to give speeches on that night. He was in Austin. . . came back late, but the show was videotaped by that White House unit and there is no reason he couldn't have seen it in the next few days.

CHRISTIAN: No, I'm almost positive he saw it.

CULBERT: And that is fine with me. From my personal perspective I'm delighted, but I'm interested in how television has had some impact on the way policy gets made, but I don't want to make claims you can't support.

CHRISTIAN: No, that is right, but I think it is overstated. You know, everybody has jumped on this. Small did and I guess that is why Halberstam used it too, because it appears that television. . . that Cronkite had such a major role in changing national policy or something. Well, I don't buy that. It didn't quite happen that way.

End of Tape

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SPECIAL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWEE: George Christian, Press Secretary for LBJ

DATE: September 17, 1979

SUBJECT: How Television Has Had Some Impact On The Way Policy Gets Made

INTERVIEWER: David Culbert