LBJ RETROSPECTIVE

DATE: April 1, 1996

INTERVIEWEES: Harry Middleton and George Christian and LBJ School Students

PLACE: LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas

M: Max Sherman [dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs] says that he is not going to say anything and it is just up to us to start out. So let me introduce myself: I am Harry Middleton, director of the LBJ Library. This is George Christian. We both worked for President Johnson in the White House. George was far more important than I; he was press secretary, and I was a speech writer and there wasn't anything much lower than a speech writer.

(Laughter)

But I have come on to much more exalted planes.

Now, in this library there are some forty some million papers and they are very--I think Mr. [Robert "Bob"] Dallek who is beginning his second book on LBJ would agree--they [are] important historical documents. But the person who is most difficult to find in these papers is Lyndon Johnson. He was a man who did not compose letters; he did not keep a diary. He didn't even make jots on his calendar. He was--so he is very difficult to find. His secretary of state, his secretary of defense, all of his cabinet officers are easy to find. George Christian is easy to find; even Harry Middleton, on occasion, is easy to find. But Lyndon Johnson is difficult.

He does exist in the memory of those who knew him. And perhaps the most significant group right at first are those that knew him when he was exercising his power

in the Senate. When he was catapulted into the presidency he wrote later that the most--if any sense was to be made out of the senseless tragedy that brought to him to the White House it would be to use the--because he was able to use the skills he had learned as a legislator and there were those who fortunately for history have recorded for us what those skills were. And we are going to play a brief tape that will give you some idea of that.

These are voices of people who were with him at the time.

" . . . political system is one that requires enormous skills of knitting together, mobilizing, organizing, winding your way through a complex set of human and political interactions that he had mastered."

"He knew what was happening in most of the committees everyday. He knew what progress was being made. He kept track of them and if you were chairman of the committee and the bill that he felt was necessary to get out wasn't getting out he's knocking on your door wanting to know why it was delayed, and why we didn't get it out, and what the chances were of getting it out, and who was against it, and who was for it." (telephone ringing and voices in the background)

"Johnson was constantly working the floor, working the cloak room, keeping in touch with the interests, the desires, the weakness of the other fellow. Johnson's method of persuasion is sort of legendary really because he was just enormously capable and cajoling, wheedling, scaring--it's not true that he blackmailed anybody, but he would throw in a fairly stiff reminder that you may want a bill next week, you may want this next week, and so on."

(telephone ringing and voices in the background)

"He kept a good book on some of these because he would make it a point to study everyone's background and know what sort of thing turned them on and sort of thing turned them off."

(telephone ringing and voices in the background)

"Johnson in close contact was one of the most persuasive people there ever was. Just absolutely almost irresistible."

[Hubert Humphrey:] "Johnson got votes by whispering in ears, and pulling lapels, and nose to nose--you just almost got to see the man. He'd get right up on you, he'd just lean right in on you. Even if he wasn't asking you to vote for something he would be talking about the bill in such a way that you knew what he had in mind."

(pounding of a gavel)

"The leader said that the only power he had was the power to persuade. God Almighty, that's like saying the only wind we have is the hurricane."

(Laughter)

M: The power to persuade took a good many forms and Johnson took them all with him from Capital Hill to the White House. In the very early days of his presidency he called the man in the Senate who had been his mentor, the venerable, Richard Russell. And we have a recording of a little part of that conversation that will give you an idea about it.

JOHNSON: Dick.

RUSSELL: Yes?

JOHNSON: I hate to bother you again--

RUSSELL: That's alright, Mr. President.

JOHNSON: --but I wanted you to know that I made an announcement.

RUSSELL: An announcement of what?

JOHNSON: Of this special commission.

RUSSELL: Oh, you have already?

JOHNSON: Yes. And I've got--may I read it to you?

RUSSELL: Yes.

JOHNSON: The President announced that he is appointing a special commission to study and report upon on all the facts and circumstances relating to the assassination of the late President John F. Kennedy and the subsequent violent death of the man charged with the assassination. The members of the special commission are: Chief Justice Earl Warren, chairman; Senator Richard Russell, Georgia; Senator John Cooper, Kentucky; Representative Hal Boggs, Louisiana; Representative Gerald Ford, Michigan; Honorable Allen Dulles, Washington; Honorable John Day [J.] McCloy, New York.

RUSSELL: Well, now Mr. President, I know I don't have to tell you my devotion to you. But I just can't serve on that commission. I'm highly honored that you'd think about me in connection with it but I couldn't serve there with Chief Justice Warren. I don't like that man.

(Laughter)

I don't have any confidence in him.

JOHNSON: You never turned you country down?

RUSSELL: I would if I could.

JOHNSON: Well, this is not me; this is your country. But you're my man on that commission and you're going to do it. And don't tell me what you can do and what you can't because I can't arrest you and I'm not going to put the FBI on you but you're goddamn sure going to serve, I'll tell you that.

(Laughter)

M: That was the virtually, the first in a new body of materials that are going to be open in the Library in which Johnson does become very much alive. And these are the recordings he made of telephone conversations. We don't know why but we do know that he was a man uniquely of the telephone. This president who did not compose memorandum or write letters, or compose letters used the telephone, as one of his aides once said, "as if it were an extension of his arm." And fortunately for history a good many of those conversations at least in the early years were recorded. We are just now beginning to tackle the subject of--the task of reviewing them and opening them. And it will be several years before they are all available. But when they are it will give perhaps the most--give historians a much fuller picture of Lyndon Johnson than has been possible before. But there you got a smattering of what the real man was like.

He is alive, as I said, in the memories of those of who knew him. And George and I knew him because we worked for him. And we have our own memories of him. And this is an opportunity for us to share with you some of the things that we knew about the man whose name adorns the building in which you are getting your education. George, do you have anything you'd like to say?

C: Well first, I hope you will ask questions and I'm not talking a long time. I would like to

talk about what you want to talk about. On that tape a minute ago the person who said that Johnson grabbed lapels was Hubert Humphrey. And the first time I saw President Johnson in action was actually in the Senate in 1956 when I was working for another Senator. And I loved to go down on the floor. And I watched President Johnson--then the Senate, by then Majority Leader, I guess--corner then Senator Humphrey from Minnesota to try to persuade him to do something that Johnson wanted him to do. And Humphrey was backed against a desk and Johnson got right in his face and Humphrey kept bending further and further back like that and Johnson kept bending further and further forward. And he had Humphrey by the lapels and Humphrey did vote with him. (Laughter)

So Humphrey knew a little bit about the strong arm that then Senator Johnson did.

But I knew President Johnson mostly after he became President. I covered him for a short time when he was early in his Senate days when I was a reporter. And then, as I say, I worked in the Senate for a while for the Junior Senator from Texas when Johnson was Majority Leader. But I really didn't know him until I got to the White House. And I don't know why he recruited me. He didn't know me all that well. He knew my father when he was a child with President Johnson growing up in Johnson City, liked to go to the court house when the District Attorney was in town trying the bootleggers and other assorted felons of the day. And the District Attorney was my father. So he had that recollection of me and that was about it. Used to say that, used to tell people in cabinet meetings, national security meetings, everywhere else he'd just pop out with some strange comments sometimes. And once he said everybody in Johnson City was frightened of

George Christian, and of course everybody thought it was me he was talking about. (Laughter)

Wondering why in the world was everybody in the world in Johnson City afraid of me.

I got to know him rather intimately, I think, during the time I was with him about three years. He was a task master. He worked hard; he expected his folks to work hard. I must say it was a delightful relationship. Even in his toughest days he had qualities that made you sympathize with him, want to help him, want to serve him. At least in my case he was rarely petty, generally generous, not always thoughtful of people around him. Not always mindful of the hands on the clock and what time it was in the early mornings when he started making phone calls. But I would say, all in all [he] had those qualities of leadership which we all wish we had ourselves and can't quite aspire to. And had his flaws, among which was hard time explaining himself to a large audience. Difficult time dealing with television. A tendency sometimes to overstate the case, heck of a salesman, and like a lot of salesman sometimes sold a little too hard. He loved to bring people in the late evening, people that I dealt with, namely the press, visiting editors, foreign writers, whoever they happened to be, bring them into his office, one on one, late in the day and put on the most incredible sales job you can imagine on these people trying to persuade him to his point of view.

Some of the most intriguing were his conversations with foreign editors and foreign reporters who never really had any contact with a chief of state. In their countries I'm sure that the accessibility factor was just not there. And Johnson loved to bring them in, charm them, reach over and grab them by the knee--we are talking about males

too--grab them by the knee, look them right in the eye, and tell them what he wanted them to hear. And he would expect that they were going to write to their countries exactly what he wanted them to write. And of course when they got out of the office and realized that they'd been getting about a one hour sales job they began to temper what they actually put in print or on the air.

But his style was persuasion and he was a legislator, first, last and always. I know he was the only man in Washington who read the *Congressional Record.*

(Laughter)

He had an assistant, who every morning, his main job, maybe his only job, I never saw him anywhere except in the early morning, but was to pick up the *Congressional Record* when it was hot off the presses, read it hurriedly, mark it with a yellow marking pencil, put paper clips on certain pages, and drop it by the President's bedroom about six or so. The President was already up reading the newspapers waiting on his *Congressional Record.* He would go through that *Congressional Record* every morning to see what was being said on the Hill. And one thing he wanted to make sure of, which I didn't discover until later, he wanted to be sure that his staff was furnishing members of Congress with plenty of statements. Because one of his great techniques of getting his views on the record was to give friendly Congressman comments, even brief speeches to insert in the record praising Johnson's program.

(Laughter)

All perfectly legitimate. I don't know whether the other presidents do it or not. But that was his forté and sometimes he read the record to be sure his own staff was doing its job

in getting those nice statements down to the Hill for these guys to say, "God, what a wonderful man Lyndon Johnson is."

(Laughter)

But it was a way to get support for his program which was almost--that was always foremost in his mind: how do I get the votes; how do I get it passed; how do I minimize changes; how do I win in all the compromise talks; how do I get one more vote than the other guy has to get this program enacted. Never easy. It's been said that he was a master at getting through his program, particularly after the election in 1964. But very little of what he did was easy. A lot of this was revolutionary stuff and he had to put a coalition together almost always if it was the least bit controversial. Sometimes he had the Southern Democrats; sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he had to pick off enough Republicans to get a program passed. Sometimes he had to make deals with Everett Dirksen or Gerald Ford to get enough votes to get it going. And he would do that. He had no hesitancy in giving an appointment of some kind to Everett Dirksen, somebody that Everett Dirksen just had to have appointed to something. He'd trade that, he thought that was a minor thing to exchange for Dirksen's good will.

He wheeled and dealed in the Congress, and he--as that tape indicated--he knew almost everybody in positions of leadership in the House and Senate, knew them intimately, Republicans and Democrats. Knew who they were married to, knew about their districts, knew what they were interested in. It wasn't a matter of blackmail; it was a matter of familiarity and seeking out strengths and weaknesses and trying to get his votes. And that's what he did, and that's why no president in history can match what he did in

the Congress; nobody had the background or the innate legislative ability, who served as president, to bring that about in the Congress. And I've always identified him as far more of a legislator than an executive.

He did delegate; he was good at giving people responsibilities. He practiced what we always described as the bear pit technique. He expected his staff people to assume whatever authority they thought they could handle. And if they had to step on somebody else's toes it didn't bother him as long as the job was done. He frequently assigned two or three different people the same task without telling the others that they were doing it. And you know you would find that you were just working your heart out on something that someone else on the White House staff was basically doing the same thing. And he--it was his way of getting the best product he could get.

In the speech writing area that Harry dealt with--I don't know whether he ever did it to you but I know he did it to others where he had more than one person working on a speech and if he didn't like the speech that was done he would get yet another person and frequently go outside the White House to get something done. On important addresses, one kind or another, he would leap frog his own people to get someone else that he thought was--that could maybe give it the right touch. He had a stable of people outside the White House and it flattered people to write things for him. John Kenneth Galbraith wrote most of the Great Society speech, I think, didn't he?

M: Umhm.

C: Clark Clifford contributed greatly. Abe Forrest [Fortas?] contributed a lot to what he was saying. He always, when he made a speech, if it was a reasonably important speech he

always wanted to propose something. "I want to take advantage of this speaking engagement to propose something important and explain why and use it as a launching pad for something I want to do." And put a big burden on the White House. You couldn't give him half-baked material. It had to be researched; it had to be dealt with as a major undertaking. If it--as I say, if the setting was appropriate for it, and it frequently was.

But my area was the press. He had sometimes rocky press relations but most of the time they were good. Most of the time he was extremely accessible, probably the most accessible president in history. He had frequent news conferences in his office, informal.

He did not--he had four press secretaries and four different men served as press secretary over the five years he was in office. He wore three of them out. I happened to still be there when he left or I guess I would have been worn out too. But he kept us on a tight rein. The important matters he wanted to discuss himself, and he wanted to have news conferences, and make the big announcements himself. He wanted you to fill in the gaps and try to keep him happy, and try to keep them funneled into his office for one on one conversations.

I think at the time he was there the working press generally respected him, didn't necessarily like him. As time wore on he wore out his welcome, somewhat, with a lot of the news media around the country. Didn't bother him all that much; he expected it. One of the strange things about Lyndon Johnson--not strange, it's really one of his strengths--was, he almost always knew what he was doing; he almost always kept people

off balance as to what he was doing so that he could keep all his options open, what he was going to do. He clearly understood what was happening to him during his presidency. It was no secret to him that he was using up all of his ability to get things done. He recognized it, acknowledged it, talked about how his time was short and he was willing to--during the war people had what they called points to get out of the service, or come back from overseas, you had certain number of points and they bring you back. And he used to say, "I'm using up my points, but it's worth it." And that's the way he ran his presidency. He knew the press was not going to like everything he did. He resented what he thought, perceived to be, a certain skepticism on the part of the Eastern establishment as to who he was, and what he was about, and whether he was honest in what he was doing, and whether he really wanted to do what he was doing. He didn't like that but he clearly understood it, and complained about it but knew he couldn't change it.

But all in all, I think, and as I say he had certain weaknesses. One of which was sometimes he said things, usually minor things, that got him into credibility problems. He created some credibility problems for himself. It wasn't the war in Vietnam or--was to a certain degree, but it was mostly little stuff where he would in consternation, or angry [anger], or something, he would say something in a public setting or press conference that press would pick up on and say, "Dad gum, he's just telling a whopper." (Laughter)

You know, [I] must say, sometimes he was; sometimes he did. (Laughter)

It was usually on things that really didn't matter all that much, [to] tell you the truth. Like making an announcement that his granddad had died at the Alamo. Which we could

never live down. You know his granddad never set foot in the Alamo.

(Laughter)

We lived with that in the White House and after. You know little slips like that.

But I'd rather have questions. I could tell war stories; I could tell some yarns about some of the peculiar things he did, if that's what you want to hear. I don't want to make this too weighty an appearance as far as I'm concerned, because it's been so long ago that we've reached the point now where we look back and we say, "Dad gum, did he really do that? And wasn't that funny this circumstance or another?" So that's what I'd rather talk about it if you want to get after it.

M: When John Kenneth Galbraith was here several months ago--as you probably all know he is the father of Professor Jamie Galbraith [of the LBJ School of Public Affairs], and he spoke in the Library and we had a small dinner party up here for him afterwards. George you were here, I think you were. Anyway, Barbara Jordan was here and Dean [Max] Sherman and on that occasion, I was reminded of this when George said that he often--the President would often get outside help in writing his speeches. There was a speech on economics that he was going to make at one point and he wasn't satisfied with what he got out of his staff writers. And so he called John Galbraith in Massachusetts and said, "Ken you've really got to come here and help me on this speech." And so the distinguished John Kenneth Galbraith did go to Washington, went in the White House, was given an office and in the course of day turned out a speech that the President liked very much. The President was reading it very enthusiastically, complimenting him on it and then on second thought said, "Ken, you know writing a good economic speech is like

pissing down your leg; you think it's hot but nobody else does."

(Laughter)

C: Tell them about the speech on the airplane that he got all over you on.

M: Well, this story really has more to General [William] Westmoreland than anyone else. Why General Westmoreland will always be a great hero in my mind whatever the hell everybody else thinks of him. In late 1968 the President was going to address a veterans group in Detroit. And I was called upon to write that speech, and I did. And then I was notified that I was to go with him to Detroit and I was in the body of Air Force One when the steward came and said the President would like to see me in his cabin. And I went into his cabin and George Christian, press secretary, was there and the President was reading the speech, obviously reading it for the first time, and this was at a tough time in his life. He had in--it was in the fall, as I remember in October, and he had thrown in his whole stack to try to bring a resolution to Vietnam and it just wasn't--it had worked, it appeared to be working for a while but it wasn't working now and everything was coming apart and he was really frustrated. And when he was frustrated sometimes you saw Johnson at his worst. But if you knew him you knew that he really wasn't quite at his worst. You really had to know the man. But he was quite upset with us. He said, "This speech isn't anywhere near strong enough. You've got to--let's make this stronger. I want you to say--I want to say that those people that are bad mouthing our policies have to go over there, stand up like men, go over there and take their places beside our boys in the trenches." Well, there hadn't been a trench in warfare since World War I to begin with, and why the dissentience would go over and fight--it was certainly a bafflement. But you

know, I knew perfectly well that he didn't mean that I knew that he was just speaking out of frustration. I went back. George said, "You know you can't say that. The press will eat us up." And I said, "Well, I know I can't say that. What are we going to say?" So we sat down and did something that was a little bit different from the speech, not a hell of a lot, but some different. And then gave it to the typist, it was typed and put on cards and given to the President and then he took it and George and I stood in the back of the hall while the President delivered that speech, holding our breath for fear that he might start straying and saying some of these extravagant things. But he didn't; he stayed to the speech. And we got back on the plane and I with a great sign of relief, settled into my seat and once again was told by the steward that the President would like to see me. And so I went in and this time General Westmoreland was there. Westmoreland had been called back from Vietnam and was now the Chief of Staff of the army. And so the President was very affable and he had me sit down and order a drink, seemed very friendly and then he said, "That speech that I delivered, that wasn't the speech I asked you to write, was it?" And I said, "No sir, not really." And he said, "You mind telling me why?" And I said, "Well, Mr. President, I thought that on reflection that you wouldn't really want to say it exactly the way you put it." And he said, "Oh you did?" And he turned to General Westmoreland and he said, "General did you hear that?" And Westmoreland nodded. And the President said, "Here's what I told him to put in that speech." And then he went through the whole damn thing about they ought to stand up and be counted and go over there and take their places beside our boys in the trenches. And he said, "Now General you heard what Harry said. He didn't really think that I

meant that. He didn't think that I meant I said what I wanted to. What would you do General if one of your officers decided you didn't really mean an order that you had given?"

(Laughter)

And Westmoreland said, "Well, Mr. President, I think we have to take these things on a case by case basis."

(Laughter)

And he said, "In this instance I think that Harry did us all a favor because, frankly, I don't [know?] what I would have done with those sons-of-bitches over there."

(Laughter)

C: Why don't we take questions.

M: Let's do. Anybody have a question they would like to . . .

C: If you don't have any questions we'll keep rattling.

(Laughter)

M: Alright, Bob [Dallek].

D: I listened to both of you with great enjoyment. And it certainly reflects an awful lot of what went on. I find in the record indeed, George was saying to you it is sort of old hat now, it's long ago history but I must tell for you it's like inheritance. As I've been sitting in that Library for essentially the last ten years and now the last four years and I go through your papers and I follow this trail of what you're doing, sort of day by day.

C: Don't read my papers too carefully.

(Laughter)

D: George, I must tell you one addition to what Harry was saying. You know Harry, you do, or can find the President in that record in a very special way. Not because he wrote much, I mean there is a handwriting file, and occasionally he scribbles a little note or something but you know, it's usually a check or it's "no" or "yes" or "see me." I mean I almost fell out of my seat one day when I found a . . . so it's--I jumped on that because it was a full blown sentence. But you do find, and find it because you folks were making records of what he said. Deep, George, in one of your boxes, I found this last week and most of the archivists didn't even know that it was there. But all of [the?] memos of the President meeting with the people from the press corps from around the world, not just the United Stated but, as you say, abroad and you kept these faithful memos. And of course they are a treasure trove for me. Because you have Lyndon Johnson speaking. It is not just somebody else observing him, but it's his words locked down. So you can find him and there are lots of memos of cabinet meetings, meetings with Congressional leaders and that's where you have to go to find him. But let me ask you a question--I go on talking about my book you think you can go on.

(Laughter)

I can go on too. I will in the next year or two--eight hundred pages. (Laughter)

I have a sort of tough question, which is what I anguish over, what I'm struggling with. Both of you describe quite accurately that Lyndon Johnson was probably the greatest presidential legislator in the history of the country. No question in my mind about it. Absolutely brilliant at dealing with the Congress. He knew exactly how to do it. And he knew how to build a consensus, as you said, George. How to create some kind of

coalition. The great problem for me is trying to understand why he let this get away from him on Vietnam. Why didn't he anticipate that there was going to be--as you said Harry--he was on top of things. He knew what was going on; he understood that he was losing his credibility, his standing with the press. Retrospectively, I think people see much more descent than there actually was until roughly 1967, 1968. But nevertheless, there wasn't that consensus for the war or whatever consensus existed eroded, disappeared.

M: Let me have a crack at that.

D: Let me make just one last point, Harry.

M: Alright.

D: He knew the model Frank Roosevelt and FDR had been brilliant at building a consensus and moving toward involvement of World War II. Johnson was there. He had seen this; he understood it. He was very mindful of that Roosevelt analogy. And I can tell you things which I think I understand about him trying to put Abe Fortas on the court and George's point that what Johnson was doing in the legislative arena was revolutionary. And he was deeply concerned that the court might challenge some of what he was doing. And he was very concerned to have--and that's why he probably tries to get Abe Fortas as Chief Justice in 1968. He wants to assure the continuing legacy of the Great Society. But the problem still is that he doesn't seem to pay the kind of attention that Roosevelt paid and he knew this historical example and that's . . .

M: There are two things I want to say and George will very likely have something to say about it. The critical decisions were made before I got to the White House. They were

made before George got to the White House, the critical decisions in early 1965.

A man who was there, Bill Moyers, says that Johnson knew what the war was going to do--what it was going to cost to him, what it was going to cost to the country, what it was going to cost to his presidency. But he believed that he could do nothing other than what he was doing. Now, you can believe Moyers or not. But this is Moyers' assessment of it. In retirement when I was working with Johnson on his book I heard him reflect, many, many, many times about that period and he said essentially the same thing. But he also made the further point that he could have done what Roosevelt did. He could have wrapped the flag around him. He could have tried to rally the nation. But he was afraid of the Right. He was afraid to unleash the dogs of war that once he fired up the war spirit to go for total victory that he wasn't sure what would happen. There might be packs [parts?] out there that nobody knew anything about.

So those two things combined, they answer it for me, now they may not for you but they do for me. One, he believed that there was a way that he might have rallied the nation to go to war, even when it was beginning to get tired, but he didn't. But even at the beginning he knew what it was going cost and he felt that as bad as it was that it was a price he had to pay.

C: Yes, I don't disagree with any of that. I do say this and I say it with some trepidation. I think President Johnson was highly susceptible to what he was hearing from the military during most of the time. I really believe that he thought maybe [they] knew better, but still hoped and prayed that what he was doing was going to bring about a settlement, namely not capitulation, but at least a willingness on the part of North Vietnam to enter

into peace talks that would preserve South Vietnam. I think he really believed that.

And you've got to remember, most of you all are pretty young and probably weren't even around during most of that period, but it is unbelievable the punishment that this country was--the military forces of this country were inflicting on the North Vietnamese. It is unbelievable. You know, the war was without censorship and most of the reports from the field certainly portrayed the victories on the ground that the U.S. Army and Marines were achieving. But it probably didn't really capture the damage that was being afflicted on them from the air. It is only in recent times that we've come to realize just how many people were killed for example, how many North Vietnamese soldiers, Vietcong soldiers were killed. It is a wonder it didn't drain that country. And I think there was a feeling, at least, on the part of some that in the war of attrition almost World War I type attrition where the French, British and the Germans thought the only way they could win was just kill more of the other guys than you were getting killed, than you were losing. And I think in the war of attrition it was believed generally that we would win that war, that their military would be so worn down that they would have to come to the peace table. After a while it became obvious that they weren't going to come. They had staying power and they had the added advantage of growing decent in this country, which no question in my mind, encouraged them to hang on. And I believed they would be hanging on yet. Looking back now you think, golly, how could they do that? How could they go on and on and on with that onslaught and particularly after what Nixon turned loose on them?

President Nixon did more damage to the North Vietnamese than we would have

ever thought of doing. We controlled every target; I mean, President Johnson practically picked the target areas of what could be hit. Like power stations and fuel depots, things of that nature. After he left office B-52 bombers hit Hanoi, Hifong, hit everything that Johnson had been very reluctant to hit. So we weren't fighting World War II over again, we were fighting Korea again. When--I don't care who is president--this country always seems to fight the last war. The next time they get into trouble they fight that war over again. And Korea was a case where the Chinese came in on the side of the North Koreans and we had to settle for a stalemate.

The fear of China was prevalent in Washington during the sixties. China was an ogre. I mean the cultural revolution had been underway; the Chinese Army had been pretty formidable in Korea. Didn't care how many people they lost. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers killed and they just kept bringing in more. The fear that China would get into the Vietnam War was compelling. The fear that the Soviet Union would be forced to do things that they didn't want to do. So it was a war that Johnson may have inherited and got trapped in but at the same time it was a war that our military leadership thought was winnable even though they criticized the administration's policy of limited targets, limited objectives. You don't know how many times President Johnson had to take a look at the possibility of invading North Vietnam.

Tape 1 of 1 Side 2

C: Wouldn't do it, wouldn't invade Cambodia. Nixon did after he left office. Wouldn't go after the North Vietnamese in their sanctuaries. He pulled his punch and he did that because he, frankly, thought it was the best military policy. He thought even with the

punch pulled if he could--if he could hold out, if the country could hold out long enough there would be peace talks and the objective would be accomplished which would be a return to the patrician which had been there since the French were kicked out in 1954.

So I just think in remembering all the Tuesday luncheons where they planned the strategy and all of the conversations with the military folks, they were an awfully confident lot, I'll just say that. They were awfully confident. And I mean they were folks that supposedly knew what they were doing. And frankly, I think there was a lot of reason for confidence. They weren't confident out of ignorance. They were confident because we were just kicking the devil out of them. I mean there isn't any question we were kicking the devil out of them. Well when you are [a] military man and you see success after success after success and you realize that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was getting bombed night and day and that we had to be interdicting a lot of their supplies and they were being hurt in the North by bombing. Used to have look at it from a military stand point, and say if we hang on, if we keep doing this we are going to minimize our own losses and get our objective. And if the President wants to return to patrician by peace talks we think we can do that.

And that's the bottom line to me, is the best advice he had was that we could do what we were doing and get by. And all the time he knew, as Harry says, that how long do I have to do this because the longer I have to be in this position the tougher it's going to be to get the Congress behind me with the money. And when Johnson worried about disaffection and opposition, he was more worried about the Congress than he was anything else. That he would get in shape for his own Democratic party would not give

him enough votes to get the money and get the support in Congress to proceed with the war. And that was a problem that other presidents have had. I mean Roosevelt had it trying to build up the country before World War II, and Truman had it in Korea, and Johnson, and later Nixon had it in Vietnam.

M: Back there.

?: I want to ask Mr. Christian about the methods that LBJ had for gathering information. You said he went outside the White House.

C: Outside the White House?

?: You said he would use the White House staff as well as using White House staff. And my question was what aspects of his personality allowed him to do that when for example in the *Agenda* Bob Woodward said [President Bill] Clinton used that strategy in his first year to win popular outside consultants as well as using people in the White House to get information, sources for information. For President Clinton he wasn't able to merge that into a coherent message. But LBJ was able to do that. What qualities about him--

C: Well, let me put it this way, if you compare President Clinton's relationship to what has happened in the past and the people who were involved in the past and President Johnson's relationship with what had been involved in the past you are going to get two different stories. President Johnson had been a creature of Washington for so long and knew so many people, knew so many people in previous administrations from Roosevelt on. He knew reporters and news people and opinion leaders like Arthur Crock, and Scottie Reston, and Walter Lipman. All those guys of that time. He knew all of them so intimately that he knew where to go and he respected what had happened in the past. He

sought President Eisenhower's advice all the time. He kept him informed; he had him briefed constantly by the top people. So when he talked to Eisenhower, Eisenhower would know where he was coming from, would be fully informed on everything. President Truman had gotten old and he couldn't do quite the same thing he did with Truman but he tried to keep Truman informed, and he tried to work with Truman and he certainly worked with a lot of former Truman people.

President Clinton in reaching out for outside advice, it's my impression, that he reaches out but he doesn't reach back sufficiently. There is a wealth of knowledge that President Clinton has not tapped for some reason or another. And I don't know why, but you don't hear about people much from earlier administrations, former members of Congress, folks like that who are involved in any significant way with the Clinton Administration. It is like a new day. You know, it is a new world and what went on before, I know that in the case of some of the people around him, what went on before is irrelevant, that we are looking ahead. We've got a whole agenda here and we're going to carry it out and it really doesn't matter what happened twenty years ago, ten years ago or whatever. That's the impression I have.

And Johnson had a big tent. I don't believe President Clinton has one quite that big. And I think he would be better served if he did. I think there are still some old timers around in Washington who could help him a lot more than they have. Now some of them have gotten a little too old, or gotten in trouble, or something or other.

(Laughter)

But you know there are some old Nixon hands that could be of value to him. President

[Gerald] Ford could be of value to him more than he has been. President [Jimmy] Carter, who defeated Ford, used Ford a lot more than Clinton has. And Clinton's relationship with Carter has been prickly. It is a waste; it is a terrible waste to just say that experience is there and that's great but you don't really draw on it. And every time--when he get in a problem, a pretty deep problem he does, I think, try to reach out, but it is not a constant thing with him.

And Johnson--I think Johnson's knowledge of people in Washington was the reason it was fairly easy for him to do it. He also didn't give you much of a litmus test. He didn't agree with Galbraith on a lot of things. Galbraith was way too liberal for President Johnson, but he also knew he was a great writer and he knew how to express himself. And if Johnson wanted to put forth a great liberal program before the Congress he got liberals to put it together for him, who else would you get? And he knew who to get.

Now inside, I've always said that he might not have been the best informed president but he was certainly the most informed president because he was a blotter. He read news accounts, and listened to news broadcasts, and kept up with current events in ways that the people around him couldn't possibly do it; they didn't have time to do it. He was always ahead of you. I mean he'd read the tickers, the AP and UPI tickers, all day long in his office. And you'd see him up here in the Oval Office--incidentally when they put the Oval Office in here they fudged a little. The wire service machines are in a nice polished brown cabinet, looked pretty nice in there. They were really in just white cabinets sticking up there where he could read those tickers. And he had a long cord on

his telephone and he would walk over, he'd be talking on the phone, walk over to the news machines, he would pull great sheets of paper off the machine and walk back to the desk you know with this stream of paper. He just read that stuff constantly. And he had this habit of trying to correct mistakes on the wire copy.

(Laughter)

And he would--I don't know how many times he called me and said AP-10. Okay, I had no idea what AP-10 was. I'd scramble to find AP-10 off my machine. Okay I had AP-10. He said, "Big credibility problem." And I'd look at it and I'd say, "By golly there was a mistake or two in AP-10." He'd say, "Call them up and correct them." "Okay. Yes sir. Sure will." But it got to the point where he got so amused when he saw somebody make a mistake that he started to try to correct typographical errors.

(Laughter)

And he didn't let them rest. Sometimes he's made the calls himself (Laughter) Sometimes he would call the AP girl chief in downtown Washington and say that they had a story on there that was wrong and he'd tell them what the fact was and most of the time the President was right.

But he monitored everything and as I said he read the *Congressional Record*; he read all the newspapers he could get a hold of every morning. The papers from around the country had them clipped, they came in late but he would read--you know he'd get the highlights and some of that, listen to radio news, CBS news, almost every hour on the hour. He watched all three morning shows on the networks at the same time on the three sets in his bedroom. He watched all the Sunday shows. If he couldn't watch the news

shows on Sunday morning, *Face the Nation, Meet the Press* and those shows he would have them recorded so he could pick them up later.

He expected his folks to keep up too. If you didn't you were in real trouble. There isn't any question--very few people--you couldn't filter anything from him. Different people around him have been accused of filtering things out and giving him only the good news and this sort of thing. Well I always get a chuckle out of that. He got more bad news during the course of day just from reading the papers and the wires than he could have ever--that have been filtered out of his memos and things.

M: I want to make a point before asking another question about something that George just mentioned. He talked about Galbraith being too liberal for Johnson. And this goes back to an earlier comment about the broad tent that Johnson pitched. I am a unreconstructed liberal right out of the New Deal days. And I think that Johnson was the greatest liberal president of the twentieth century. George is somewhat back in a different position and he thinks of Johnson as somewhat more conservative than that. We all have our piece of him. We all look upon him the way that we think he was. And we are all right; everyone of us is right. But I submit that I think that his domestic program was a liberal program, it wasn't a conservative program. Joe Califano says that--about it--that make no mistake about it what Johnson was about is revolution and he was. So that it is worth noting that he can be perceived in different ways and nobody is really quite wrong but--

C: Well, I don't perceive him as a conservative. I'm out of Texas politics I know the difference between a conservative and a liberal.

(Laughter)

And I'm a unreconstructed New Dealer myself. I'm just saying that President Johnson, having observed him particularly when he was in the United States Senate, he was not in the liberal camp, as they defined in those days in the U.S. Senate. He just wasn't. When he ran for office in Texas aside from his very early campaigns which I also remember, when he was a staunch Roosevelt supporter and was for everything that Roosevelt was doing including packing the Supreme Court, he was perceived to be quite liberal. When he started running for the U.S. Senate he wasn't quite as liberal. When he was running in a state that was a conservative state his close friends in Texas were not pro-labor by any stretch of the imagination and labor was a moving force in the Democratic party. Johnson was viewed as hostile to organized labor. He didn't even get the AFL endorsement in 1948 when he ran for the Senate against Coke Stevenson, one of the most conservative governors Texas ever had. They wouldn't support Johnson because he'd voted for Taft Hartley.

So Johnson had a--he had a record as a Senator that was quite productive and he pushed the envelope. He used words they use now as far as he could. But he had to survive politically. I've always viewed him as somebody who wanted to get things done but had to be there in order to get them done. And when he became president he felt that he could step forward and do things in civil rights and education and other areas that he had never had the power to do. And he wanted that power to do it and he did it. Yes, it was by those old labels, of liberal/conservative; it was a liberal program he pushed.

He thought his war policies were in the tradition of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy. He didn't think there was any difference from what he was trying to do in Vietnam than

what his Democratic predecessors tried to do against fascist and communist. So there wasn't any distinction between what he was doing in foreign policy. I mean, in foreign policy he was anticommunist liberal. Now, that's the way most of us were raised, frankly. That's what the old Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy period was. You've got to be firm against communism and try to pass good domestic programs that help the folks at home. And that's all he was.

M: One of his most eloquent statements I think was impromptu and it was after the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act. When he met with the press in the family quarters and the question was asked, "You put everything into the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act and it's done. But how does this square with the fact that there were those votes that you cast against civil rights bills when you were in the Congress?" And he didn't have time to have speech writers and he didn't have time to think it out but he simply said, "I didn't have the responsibility then that I have now. And I perhaps didn't feel as strongly about it then as I do now when I'm in this position. But now I do have the power and I'm going to use it." It was a supreme moment, I think, in his presidency. But let's get another question out here from somebody. Yes, madam.

?: You both have discussed how his vast legislative experience was certainly an asset to his ability be president. How do you think it might have served him in a liability? Was his legislative experience at all a liability in perhaps frustrating him in certain things that he could do as a legislator that he couldn't do as a president?

M: I can't think of way that it--

C: I can't think of any liabilities the--I don't know. You know, he could be accused of being

a trader in the legislative sense . When you're a legislator you can't just say I'm going to go from A to Z and march merrily on your way. Some presidents who had no legislative experience found out the hard way that you don't get from A to Z without compromise. That might have caused him to change some things that maybe he as a one hundred per cent strong executive he might have pushed through some programs a little differently but I don't think it's significant. I think it was a great asset.

M: The fellow here has something else.

?: My question was it is unfortunate that Johnson is not alive today as an elder statesman for the Democratic party and I wonder how you think he might respond to his Republican critics up on the Hill today? Just focus maybe on one or two things that he would continue to emphasize were he alive today and in the political culture that has changed so much since he was president.

M: Let me have a crack at that first. First of all, Johnson never believed that the legislation that he asked for and got was frozen, or written in stone. He believed that, first of all, his major--the thrust of his philosophy was to get it on the books and then perfect it. He believed that there would be improvements, and that subsequent administrations would find it necessary and desirable to make improvements in the laws that he thought were so essential. He didn't live long enough to see exactly what these were.

But I think if he were alive today my guess is that he would be right out there saying, "We've got to do something about Medicare." There is no question in my mind that he would. He did not anticipate, nor did anyone. John Gardener acknowledged here four years ago when we had a conference that nobody really thought that Medicare was

going to have the runaway costs that it had. But I think that Johnson might well say, on the other side of that coin to the people that are talking about dismantling the Great Society, which parts are you going to dismantle? Of the fourteen and a half million students in college today or in higher education, half of them are there because laws were passed during the 1960s, those years.

Medicare, whatever has to be done to it, nobody is calling for the repeal of Medicare. Senator [Lincoln] Chafee, a Republican who is chairman of the Senate environment committee, spoke here in December and he said, "Sure there have to be changes in the--modifications in the environmental laws but nobody is asking for a return to air you can't breath and water you can't drink." And I offer all that we've learned about, sadly about the fact that the civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965 did not solve all of our problems. I can't conceive of anybody asking for a repeal of the civil rights laws that were passed.

So what are these bills? You know I'm saying this, sort of putting these words in LBJ's mouth. I think he might well be saying that. That sure there are improvements that should be made, a lot of them. Particularly when they are runaway costs. But the bills are there. And they are now and they are going to continue to be parts of this society's fabric for many, many, years to come.

C: I think one he would be pretty firm on. President Johnson, because he was a federalist, he didn't really understand or appreciate state and local governments as much as the current crop of Republicans do. His vision of state government was that's the government that tries to stop things from happening. You can't get anything through a

legislature, or they're tight-fisted or whatever. I think he would have had to change an awful lot to have supported the current movement to return powers to the states. The Great Society, while it didn't really take away a lot from the states, it imposed on the states a lot of responsibilities that the states didn't have. I mean he made the states eat it with salt and pepper. And along came President Nixon and did the same thing.

I think he would have great trouble with this movement to decentralize a lot of the programs. I think he really felt, right or wrong, he felt that federal, regulatory control on a lot of true, real problems like the environment, worker safety, a lot of other things, was the way it ought to go. And he believed the federal government was the only one with a will to provide money for enrichment of some of the education programs and Head Start and the anti-poverty program and other things. I think he felt that that had to be done. He felt that the other states had had their crack at trying to solve problems and had not exactly made passing grades. And in that respect he was a lot like Franklin Roosevelt, his mentor.

M: Yes sir.

?: During the Johnson Administration what was the relationship and how was the interaction between President Johnson and Governor [John] Connally?

C: They remained the closest of friends all of the President's adult life. Connally was his eulogist at his funeral. They had a rocky relationship at times. I worked for both men. I saw it from two different angles. Again he viewed Connally as a fellow a little bit too conservative on some of the things he was trying to do. And he wasn't above trying to run over him if he had to. And there are some tapes that Harry's released out here, some

pretty sharp comments he had about Connally. But not to the extent of rupturing a friendship. Connally had a signal corps white telephone in the Governor's mansion that Johnson insisted be installed there so that he could call Connally direct at any time. Nobody called on that phone except President Johnson--well I did after I got to Washington. I called on it a few times because I knew about it.

(Laughter)

Ah, it was sometimes a little rocky. Connally disagreed with some of the things Johnson was imposing on the states on other matters or parts of the Great Society. Texas was in the forefront in trying to work them out, Job Corps, in particular. I think Texas had a better Job Corps program than any state and that's because Connally--something Connally liked. He got with the program and they put it together.

?: If Johnson had stayed in the race in 1968 and had been able to win the nomination how do you see the race with [?]

C: That race in 1968?

M: If Johnson had made it--been nominated.

C: Oh, I think he would have run a different kind of race than Humphrey did. And in my view Johnson would have defeated Nixon in 1968 and then been the unhappiest camper you ever saw trying to govern this country after 1968. I don't think the country was governable, frankly, by Lyndon Johnson after 1968.

The dissent in this country was growing so rapidly and the difficulties he was having in Congress were increasing so rapidly that I think it would have been a very unhappy administration. And he probably was--he was fortunate to be a lame duck only

those few months after he decided not to run again then four years.

M: Max, how long do you want this--when do you want us to cut this off?

S: We're shooting for maybe about 7:30 to [?]

M: Alright. There's a question back here then.

?: Well, I want you to do a little more speculation. If Vietnam was not there--

(Laughter)

Now just hold on a second, you commented on his domestic program and how you frankly thought it was revolution, and a lot of people did, too. If Vietnam had not been there to use up the President's points would he still have been using them up in getting this domestic program through and it would have hurt him in the reelection process?

M: Certainly wouldn't have hurt him in reelecting him--might have hurt him but if there had been no Vietnam I think he would have breezed through the next election. Do you see any reason to dispute that?

C: Yes, except for his own fears about his health which still had a whole lot more to do with his deciding not to run than people are willing to credit.

S: Harry, could I make a comment?

M: Yes.

S: Bob was there, but about the twenty-ninth of May [?] will run a program based on those lectures Bob and them participated in last spring and Rich Hurstburg who is the [?] and President Carter and that was a capacity in which was there in that interview wouldn't show up on the tape but Hurstburg says that it's a matter of timing and had it not been for that he thinks that Johnson would definitely be one of the great presidents. He's saying

it's a matter of time these things happening. It is interesting that someone--he said when he was at Harvard as an undergraduate that Johnson was their hero. They were very, very positive and supportive of Johnson.

M: I think indeed it's true and I've heard it said many times. But there is one other point that came out of that conference. I was not there but I have been told by Michael Beschloss, a historian who was there, that he made the point and it's a point that some of us have made but I have never heard a historian make it before and I welcomed hearing him make it. And Beschloss is a very respected historian and Johnson was not his subject. But in this round table discussion he told me that--he made the point that if the time comes in the future when Vietnam is seen as having contributed to a victorious end of the cold war on our part, then at that point Johnson will be seen as a hero. A man who sacrificed his career to--a hero worthy of a Profiles in Courage Award because a man who sacrificed his career to bring about this victory in a battle that eventually lead to victory in the entire war. It is an hell of an important point I think. The jury, history's jury on Vietnam is not yet in, I think.

So I think indeed, if it hadn't been for Vietnam he clearly would have been looked upon as one of the great presidents of the twentieth century and may still be with Vietnam because of that fact. I think it is getting close to that time but I want to share with you all a story which is my favorite story. Again it does involve a vulgarity. But--

C: You're a vulgar kind of fellow.

(Laughter)

M: But it has to do with this library and it's my personal favorite story. And incidentally, I

want to preface this by saying that it is obviously a pleasure for people like George and me to be invited to talk about Johnson because we love to do it. We do it without being invited, we do it when--

(Laughter)

we're having lunch together. It's gone on now for twenty-five years and it will probably go on for another twenty-five--maybe stretching the point.

C: That's stretching it a little I think.

M: But--it's because a good many facts. We loved working for him. He was a very colorful man. But there was something more than that.

C: Well, what other president would be more entertaining to work for than Lyndon Johnson?

M: That's right, there I agree. But him being entertaining--

C: Or make you feel that something has been accomplished, or being accomplished, you know.

M: We believed in him.

C: You know, most administrations don't come up with very much.

(Laughter)

M: We believed in him . . . man who is most exaggerated in speech of any of us giving to hyperbole had said that working in the Great Society was the springtime of our lives. And even allowing for hyperbole there is something to that. It was a great experience and I think that infects our whole attitude.

But at any rate my final story on this is after--when I became director of the Library I did not know what I was supposed to do.

(Laughter)

I came down here to work with the President on his memoirs and the man who had been selected as the director of the Library left after a few months and went back to the college in California that he had come from. And at the President's request I took over the directorship of the Library and the main thing at that time was to get the Library open. And we did. It took a year and we got it dedicated and then we decided that we were going to--the next thing we were going to do is to have a symposium--first thing we do is have a symposium on education and a conference, I mean a symposium on education and open the papers on education at the same time. And so in the months that we were doing these two things simultaneously: the archivists were bringing up to me the papers on education that they had read that they didn't know what to do with. The archival principle is that all papers will be opened except those that tend to be unduly embarrassing or harassing to living persons and those papers should be kept closed for that person's lifetime. So they would bring these to me and I would look at them and I didn't know what to do and they would pile up on my desk. At the same time we were planning the conference and the President was very interested in the symposium and he would call virtually every day from the Ranch to talk about that.

But just about ten days before we were supposed to do all of this he called again and once more I thought that he was calling about the conference, but he instead said, "Now, we are going to open all the papers, aren't we, on education?" And I said, "Yes sir, all that we can open." And he said, "Well what does that mean?" And I reminded him of the terms of his deed of gift, which were standard language about papers that tend

to be unduly embarrassing or harassing to living persons. And he professed not to know what that meant which is a typical Johnson ploy and asked me for an example. I had a whole stack of them and I picked the one off the top,

(Laughter)

which was a memorandum that Joe Califano had written to him that had a scurrilous reference to a Congresswoman named Edith Green from Oregon. And she had been derailing the education bill and Califano was giving some scatological reason why he thought that was true.

(Laughter)

And so I read that to him and I said, "This seems to me to qualify as one that ought to be closed." And there was a silence and then he said, "Edith's said worse things than that in her lifetime. I think that's being a little bit too cautious; I think you ought to open that." So then he said, "Give me another example."

(Laughter)

So I picked up another one. And we went through about four of them and each one of them is the same. He said, "Oh, you're being too conservative on that. There is no reason not to open that." And then he said, "Are you going to treat me the same way? Are you going to close these things that you think are going to hurt me?" And I told him I thought that probably he deserved the same treatment anyone else did and yes, if we ran across something that would be unduly embarrassing or harassing, we ought to close it. And he said, "Good men have been trying to protect my reputation for forty years and not a damn one has succeeded. Now what makes you think you can?"

(Laughter)

And so I was struggling for an answer to that, if there was one. And he said, "I suppose you think if I read something in the paper about something that's been released in that Library sometime that I don't like that I'll let you know about it." And I said, "Mr. President, that thought has occurred to me."

(Laughter)

He said, "If that ever happens here's what I want you to do. I want you to go outside and you go out on that hill in front of the Library and you look back at it and you think of all the things we've been through to get this Library open. Think of all of those things and you come back here and you call me. And I'll be waiting right here for your call because I'll know you're calling and you say, 'One of us is full of shit and let's decide right now who it is.'"

(Laughter)

So that has been the philosophy that we have followed ever since. We, I think, have the reputation of being the most open of all presidential libraries and it all stems from him. So you have a final word George?

C: Oh, I could tell you two or three final good stories, but I'm going to hold for some other occasion.

M: It's been a pleasure meeting with all of you. Thanks very much. And I understand we've got--

(Applause)

Max Sherman is providing some wine and some refreshment.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Retrospective of

HARRY MIDDLETON and GEORGE CHRISTIAN

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Harry Middleton, of Austin, Texas, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the LBJ retrospective George Christian and I presented on April 1, 1996, in Austin, Texas, and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Harry Middleton — 8 June 05

Donor — Date

Allen Weinstein — 7 Nov

Archivist of the United States — Date