

SPECIAL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Fleming, Deputy Press Secretary for LBJ

DATE: November 8, 1979

PLACE: Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT: Fleming's Knowledge of Daily Summaries of the Network  
Television Coverage During the Period of TET, 1968

INTERVIEWER: David Culbert

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CULBERT: Did you get those memos that. . . ?

FLEMING: I did, yes, and I must confess I'm not sure whether they are here on my desk or at home. I looked for them day before yesterday and couldn't . . . to do some more thinking and preparation. We had a great stack of stuff on that table at home and my wife went through it and I went through it and I read with interest some of my memos that you had xeroxed.

CULBERT: What I would like to ask you about is not the specifics of the memos but just the existence of this and I wondered if you could say something about it. These are daily summaries of the network television coverage during the period of the TET 1968. I wonder if you could say something about it.

FLEMING: Well, I think because it is pertinent, though it sounds a little self-serving, let me start with another question that you may want to raise, how I happen to go to work there. I was running the ABC bureau here in Washington. The practice was that whenever any president was going to do something on television, we rotated the turns. It was called the pool and each network would take its turn at providing the manpower and the technical people. When we later persuaded LBJ to permit installation of video-taping equipment, television equipment, really cameras in the theater of the White House and we built at network expense, built the control room, the frequency of things he would do increased.

One morning he had one that was just a simple thing of "Give to the American Red Cross," and it was to be fed to all three networks which feed from the White House. It was set for nine-thirty in the morning, and the President and Jack Valenti came downstairs from the bedroom at about 9:10 and walked in and said they were ready to do it. The young producer we had

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assigned to the job had to say he wasn't ready. He had been ready at nine o'clock with everybody, but when he said to all the other three networks, including his own, that everything was all set, somebody at NBC decided to go for coffee and we lacked one man to push one button in the NBC shop. So the President said, "Well, then, if you are not ready why don't I do it once and see how it goes." And so he did. He read [from] the teleprompter. And when he finished he said, "Well, that ought to be good. I can't do any better than that." Which Bill Weisel said, "I'm sorry, Mr. President, nobody recorded that one." So he said, "But we will be ready very shortly." In the meantime he is frantically telling NBC "Find your guy and bring him back." Valenti got impatient and went into the control room and leaned over the microphone and said, "Whenever you are ready, Mr. President." Valenti didn't know and nobody had told him that ABC and CBS were ready and could go and then later we could feed over our circuits to NBC and they wouldn't have missed anything. But the President started to read it again and Weisel, the producer, said, "I'm sorry, Mr. President, NBC is not ready." So, in just a couple of moments apparently, I never knew exactly how long, NBC was ready and they went ahead and the whole package was done before nine-thirty.

But later in the morning Valenti called me and said, "Don't ever send over people who are not equipped to do the job." And I said, "Well, I don't even know what you are talking about, Jack. I don't know what problem you had, but let me check and call you back." So I called Jack back and I said, "Jack, one thing you have got to understand is you don't belong in the control room. I don't go in the control room when a crew is doing a job. That is an



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engineering technical function where I cannot contribute anything and you cannot contribute anything; you just created confusion." We got to arguing a little bit more about it until finally I said, "Jack, there is no point in discussing it any further. You don't have anybody over there that understands the problems of television, so there is no point in me explaining them to you or to anybody else on the staff."

So about an hour later Bill Moyers called me and said, "Did you tell Valenti we didn't have anybody that knew anything about television?" I said, "Yes." He said, "What else did you tell him?" I said, "This is far as I'm going to go, because this is a personal argument that the two of us had and I've forgotten it already and I hope Jack has." This voice came on and said, "I have." And I said, "What is going on?" Bill said, "Well, I should have told you, I've got you on the speaker phone and Valenti and Marvin Watson and I are here talking to you. So we would like your recommendations of who we ought to get." And I said, "Well, this will take me a little while. I'll call you back."

So about an hour later I called him and said, "I've got four names for you to consider and I can send you over a memorandum detailing what background in each one of them was." It happens one was Bill Small, who is now president of NBC News. One was Bill Monroe that runs "Meet the Press." They were both my opposite numbers of bureau chiefs at NBC and CBS. One was a young fellow who worked for me and one was somebody else, I don't recall. Moyers' answer was, "Well, your name is not on the list." I said, "No." And he said, "Well, you didn't quite get the point. I thought you would realize that when Watson and Valenti and I called you together, we were calling you with instructions of

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the President, and we were expecting you to say you were the man that would take the job." I said, "I'm not sure I am." And he said, "Well, I will get back to you." So he called a little bit later that afternoon and said, "I need to have every place you've worked and lived for the past twenty years." Well, I knew that was a security check.

So I was fortunate that I worked for Jim Hagerty. Hagerty had been Eisenhower's press secretary and had gone to ABC News as the vice president for news and was the top man. So, I called Jim and I said, "What do I do?" He said, "You don't have any choice. If the President of the United States tells you that you are in charge of shoveling the snow off the front sidewalk every Fourth of July, you don't tell him that it doesn't snow on the Fourth of July. You don't ask him where you get a snow shovel. You just tell your wife you won't be home any Fourth of July. Not many people get asked to work for a president and if you get asked, you don't have any choice." So I talked to my wife about it and told her that this thing was moving pretty rapidly.

Then Moyers called up and said, "Will you see the President with me at six o'clock?" I said, "Yes." I went over at six o'clock and I knew we hadn't gotten into the Oval Office until he said, "Send them in." He was signing mail and he didn't look up. And there seemed to me to be quite a while. It probably was a couple of minutes. So Moyers finally said, "Mr. President, you and I have had some conversations today and Bob and I have had some conversations today," and then he said, "You thought it was time that you and he talked." He still didn't look up. He said, "I don't know what there is to talk about. I know him. I like him. I trust him. I need him." I said, "Mr. President, as long as I live I'll brag you said that, but let's talk about



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the fourth. I don't think you need me." I said, "Because I don't love you." That point was the first time he looked up. And he said, "What do you mean about that?" I said, "Moyers here and Watson and Valenti, they would do anything for you, but I'm an admirer of yours. I think you are a good president and I'm a supporter of that, but I've got a wife and two kids that are more important to me than any job and if I worked for you, I would have to work around the clock and I wouldn't see them and I don't think I'm the one." So we talked about an hour about what I could do for him. Some of it he just said, "Well, if you are not going to work here, what should I learn from you being here?" And we talked.

So then I said I'd have to go talk to my wife first. By the time I had gotten home he had called her and asked her . . . first time she had ever talked to him. . . . He said, "What don't you like about me?" She said, "I like you a lot." He said, "Well, I just tried to hire your husband and he says he has to talk to you and what are you going to tell him?" She says, "I'm going to tell him you should have hired him three years ago." And he said, "Well, I think you and I will get along just fine."

So then he told me, "I'm going to Hawaii this weekend to meet with Westmoreland and Ky and Thieu"--who have been number one and number two men in the Vietnamese government--"and I want you to go as part of the staff." I said, "Mr. President, I can go for ABC and I can arrange that with no problem at all, and when I go I can do anything that I can to be of help to you. But for one thing you have got to have a better security check than you've had before you'll take me, because Joe McCarthy used to say to me, 'Wait until you see what I've put in your FBI file.' I think I can deny anything that is

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damaging that is in that file. I don't know whatever is put there and you don't know what is put there. I can't risk embarrassing you. It could be that you take me on, announce that I'm coming and I start to work here and then find that the FBI has something that I would have to explain." So he said, "Well, you come along and go to Honolulu with us." He called Marvin Watson and he said, "How long does it take to get a thorough FBI check?" And Marvin Watson said, "Five days." He said, "I want this one in three days." Well, there wasn't anything about me in the FBI files from McCarthy, he was just being his loose threats.

But early on . . . and it wasn't very early . . . not immediately, but after a time it was the President's intention, he said, that I would become the press secretary. But I didn't think that was a very good idea so I kind of backstopped Moyers and I had frequent access to the President, because Moyers gave me what we called the morning shift. Four of us would go to the President's bedroom at seven o'clock in the morning. He would have been awake for an hour already and read a bunch of stuff, and he had a lot of questions or none. We would be there really just to get directions of things he wanted done. He oftentimes would ask, "What do they mean when they say such and such?" We were supposed to have read four morning newspapers before we got there. We split those up amongst us. And if none of us had an answer to this question, "What do they mean when they say. . . ?" I would immediately pick up and say, "Did you hear this on the radio?" He would say, "Yes." Well, I learned this very early that he didn't know what station he had listened to or he would switch from one channel to another. He had another . . . he had a push button, so he didn't even know where it was tuned to, but he was often



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critical of those who analyzed his motives in doing things and he would resent their doing it to the point of "Why did they say that about me when they can't possibly know?" But he wouldn't know who it was that said that. Which was hell trying to find out who it was that said that. If somebody else in the office hadn't heard it when they got back--Moyers and a couple of other fellows in the office and two or three of the girls who listened to the morning broadcasts for news--we wouldn't know. Oftentimes, I would do nothing about it and he would forget he had asked and so it wouldn't come up again.

But also, after a reasonably short period, he had me start monitoring the evening news shows and those memorandums that you saw were the daily product of those. I couldn't tell you now how long that was done. You probably may have it in going through the file and know better than I. It seems to me, it didn't last a very long time. Coincident with that, everybody on the staff was supposed to write memos on any conversations they had with reporters during the day. He was always very interested, very concerned in media treatment of him.

One of the problems really of working for him was that he needed five hours of sleep a night and that was all. He would have a forty-five minute nap in the afternoon. So he had more working hours than most human beings. Late in the evening I had learned very early that everybody on the staff would gather in the then big West Wing lobby of the White House--at about five minutes to eleven at night, if we were still there--because about eleven o'clock the phone would start ringing and he would look for people to eat with him. Those were the most fascinating times, but they were two-hour sessions from eleven to one a.m. and we were supposed to be back in the bedroom at seven.



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And also he had a dismal taste in food. One night I said to him, "Mr. President, I'm not coming here to eat with you any more. I'm going to eat before I get here out of the sandwich machine. I'll eat downstairs in the basement. I'll eat better than I eat here." He said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "For the last four nights hamburger patties, sliced green tomatoes, pinto beans and tapioca pudding." He said, "How do you mean, the last four days we have had that?" I said, "We have. Don't you know what you have eaten?" And he said, "No, I don't pay any attention to what I eat." To him it was just fuel and he didn't care. But in that period at night he was always just reminiscent. He never would be argumentative. He seldom talked about current problems. He would go back in his memory to other people and tell stories he loved to recall. He would talk about reporters he had known long before I ever came to Washington.

But the memos you speak of . . . I'm giving you an awfully long answer on this . . . was that he was very sensitive to what impression he was making. He had a strong feeling that he was resented as a Texan. I used to argue that I had covered politics a long time and never heard it used as a complaint. He said, "That must be because you wouldn't notice it, because you feel the same way." And I would say, "No, I don't have any resentment against Texas any more than I have a Georgian or the New Englander." But he did, he thought people did. And Moyers thought people did, resented the Texans. Christian would argue. So, most of the Texans I have known have had that.

CULBERT: No, what you told me was just fascinating and that is fine with me. Whenever I run interviews I give people a chance to answer questions however they feel. But since I sent these memos and was interested in the subject, I

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was just wondering if you can remember . . . I found some television memos written by Peter Benchley and also by Loyd Hackler. I think you are right, this didn't last very long, but it is during this especially critical period, just before he decides not to run for reelection in 1968.

FLEMING: Well, I think it was more the period when he was deciding what to do about Vietnam, changing his views on Vietnam. More often the greatest lesson I ever learned from him, the thing he probably said more than anything else . . . when he had a meeting and it would be over and we would be staying with him in his office to see what he wanted done next, he would say almost to himself, "It's not hard to do what's right. Anybody with guts can do what is right. Sometimes it is goddamn hard to know what to do." And I think to a degree, not very strong, the television was the opposite view from what he was hearing. It was always my feeling that he believed in what he was doing, but he also could have done better at selecting the advisors that he listened to. Walt Rostow and General Taylor both had a longtime feeling about Vietnam and never wavered in it. I think that is why Rostow's response to your question. LBJ didn't listen to much television. I also didn't think he wanted to hear the criticism that television was giving him. And President Johnson lost touch with TV people. I don't know how much he had, for instance, with Cronkite. For a time he had made Chancellor, he had appointed Chancellor to something in USIA, Voice of America. But the wagons just got put in a circle and these outsiders weren't heard. The checkmarks on the transcripts of the memos about indicated at CBS currently that probably I would think he might have been especially irritated at CBS. He thought that they were picking



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on him. It was not unusual for him to think that somebody had it in for him. And it could have been an honest disagreement.

CULBERT: Do you have any remembrance of Johnson with his famous three TVs watching the news himself? I wondered a bit about why the memos give at least additional evidence that he was watching a lot of television himself.

FLEMING: If there was something that was interesting on and we knew it was going to make the evening news, we would tell him so and he might try to. But that thing was installed, I think, as much as anything by the White House Communications Agency to show they could do it. You know, they would give him the push button desk control. He would occasionally turn on all three sets and then watch and if the picture was something that either him or some event he would flip the sound for that channel. It was a remote control thing in his hand. He didn't watch daily. He would watch at eleven o'clock sometimes, the late news. For a while ABC had a network late news show . . . I don't remember if any of the others did, but none of them survived very long for a network program and local programming wouldn't be adequate to take his attention.

CULBERT: Well, I gather he must have watched some television in the morning. I think he kind of liked those morning shows where they would get his . . . .

FLEMING: Dean Rusk one time said to me . . . I asked him why he went on the "Today Show" so often and he said, "It is the one place I can talk to the President and forty senators and have nobody talk back to me." He would have the "Today Show" on, to see who the guests were. He would only have to push the button for the sound if it was somebody he knew in the Washington scene and the government and sometimes in the Senate.

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CULBERT: You are giving me the kind of information that is especially valuable because though I am fascinated by television I'm not the least bit keen on magnifying in its presence that doesn't exist. When I looked at the record of what Johnson was doing day after day, it didn't look to me as though he could have physically have had time, so if that is what you are saying it confirms a suspicion.

FLEMING: Most days he didn't.

CULBERT: Do you recall anything about this Walter Cronkite special on February 27, 1968? George Christian told me that LBJ really did say what has been attributed to Christian and a couple of sources that he watched this special where Cronkite had gone to Vietnam and came back turned against the war and LBJ said, "Well, if Cronkite is turning against me, I'm really losing Middle America." Well, do you recall any of this sort?

FLEMING: No, I don't have anything. . . .

CULBERT: Okay.

FLEMING: He was a very troubled man for quite a while in that period and withdrawn so we would sit there in the morning and get a minimum reaction from him during the day. Somebody had the duty all the time. Anytime he left the Oval Office somebody . . . one of three or four of us were with him, mainly as an errand boy, and oftentimes he could be delightful. My wife's favorite story about it is that he was going in one day to the East Room. He was going to present an award to someone as Teacher of the Year. Some magazine sponsored it. He came down out of the elevator and Mrs. Johnson was with him, and he stood in the elevator reading a 5 x 7 yellow card on which his remarks were typed. He said, "You know, they expect me to be witty for five minutes and



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then in two minutes they want me to be serious about how important education is." He said, "Bird, what would you think if I dropped off the last two paragraphs?" He handed her the card and she read it and she said, "Yes, I think you are right and I would leave them out." He turned to me and said, "What do you think, Bob?" And he handed me the cards.

While she was reading the card he was watching her and I realized he was chewing gum. So, I always carried a pad of paper in my pocket and I reached in and got a sheet of the paper and I had it in my hand. When he handed me the card to read the thing, he saw this piece of paper and he looked at it and he said, "What is this for?" I said, "It is for your gum, sir." He said, "Oh, all right." Mrs. Johnson reached up and slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Bless you, Bob. If he had walked in there chewing gum, the headlines would have said, 'Lyndon Johnson chews gum in school,' and they wouldn't have said anything about what he had to say."

So we went in and did the thing and then as the routine called for, when the two of them came out I stood in the way and said, "Line?" That meant, "Do you want a receiving line?" If he liked the group and knew he had the time he would say yes. And this time he did. So, I stepped out of the way and said to the Marine Captain who was there, "Line." He stood up on the chair and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, President and Mrs. Johnson will receive in the Blue Room. If you will form a line and follow me, I will show you where to go."

Meanwhile, I had turned to go catch up with him to see if he had anything else in his mind. He walked right up to me and he was standing immediately behind me and he glared at me and said, "Where is my gum?" and turned around

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and walked away. That was his kind of humor. He had that touch and could use it and did it, far more than he would ever let us tell people. Later in the day he said to me again, "If you print that gum story you are out." A number of times human things he did, because he said the reasoning was he would be accused of doing them just to get a favorable press. And that was not his purpose. He was just having a little fun, but he didn't like it to look like he was posing as a congenial soul.

CULBERT: How about if you would say something in the sense of what your typical day might be or something about your relationship with George Christian.

FLEMING: When it was Christian, the situation was quite different, because when Christian replaced Moyers he took over the going to the bedroom and I no longer did that. So I would then thereafter handle things George wanted done. The President never understood his staff structure. If he would run into you in the hall, he might say, "I need such and such a paper." I may have no idea what the paper was. And I would go to Marie Fehmer, who was the best of his secretaries, and say, "The President just asked me for such and such a paper. Do you know what this was about?" She generally could say, "Yes, that is something he wanted from the State Department. Dean Rusk sent it over and it is on his desk," and I would go in and get it off his desk and carry it where he was and he would say, "Fine, thanks." But if I couldn't do it, because I wouldn't know what he meant, but Mrs. Johnson would explain that to me very early that he didn't understand the staff functions.

So when I first went, I would go to the bedroom each morning because Moyers wanted to get out of that. Then I would come back and sit with Moyers along



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about nine o'clock and tell him whatever happened up there. Then at eleven o'clock we would have the first briefing of the day. In those days we had two a day. I think Christian had two a day all the time. Moyers or later Christian would call the President shortly beforehand and say, "This is what we think we are going to get asked and what is your reaction?" Then the steno-typist would take it down on the briefing as we held it. When she would go to cut a stencil, the flimsy off the stencil was taken to LBJ. I think he wanted to see it that quickly. I think that was the source of the belief widely held that he had tapped the Press Office and could listen to it. I never had an experience where I thought he knew before he got the transcript. But I never thought he had bugged . . . in the first place he would call for the transcript from different places. Sometimes he would be back in the bedroom and sometimes he would be in his Oval Office. He had another little office next door where he spent considerable time. And if he wasn't in the Oval Office when the transcript was ready, we would either ask the Secret Service where he was, ask one of the secretaries, or he would call and say, "I'm back at the House, bring that briefing over." He would mutter about them and complain about hostile questions of someone and "Such and such reporter or something. He thinks he is a smart ass kid, doesn't he?"

One other thing your questions brought to mind. One of the things I said to him very early was that I was impressed being with him frequently--how much more relaxed he was when he was talking in the East Room to a group of congressmen or visitors or something and not tied to a podium. My suggestion would be that we would get him away from that podium. I said, "Basically, Mr. President, you are a teacher in your skill and you don't teach as well when

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you have to be at that podium." For news conferences he would have a book with questions in it, expected questions and answers and the thumb tab where he had been through it and so on. If he got asked a question somebody may say to him, "What are we doing about the Burma's skin problem?" It could be that he would know, but it also could be that he could quick flip it and he could glance at some brief reminder. He would sometimes but not often say, "I'm sorry but I'm not equipped to respond to that, but I'll get you an answer."

But so we finally agreed that he was allowed to wear a microphone. He would try it. We used a microphone which hung around his chest. It is bigger than the present ones. It was about as big as a cigar butt and it was hanging to the electric cord hanging down to his belt in the back. When he got up on the platform, I would grab the loose end of it and plug in the electricity so the microphone was active. He used it one time and everybody thought he was magnificent, far more relaxed. I've got pictures of that when he waved his arms and gestured and he stalked around it. When it was over I told him, "That is the best I ever saw you. I hope you will keep on using that microphone." Well, he said, "I didn't even notice that I had it on." I said, "That is the answer for you. If you don't notice that you had it on and not worrying being conscious of it, then you are not anchored to it any more than you were to that podium," which is a big . . . we used to call it Mother. It was a big podium built with microphones built in the side . . . you didn't see them. But the next day, the New York Times carried a page one story of Johnson's performance at the news conference the day before which was mindful of Jack Kennedy at his best. Well, I always felt he objected to the comparison



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with Kennedy, but his comment was, "Now you are trying to make me into a performer and I'm not an actor. I'm a president. And I won't wear that goddamn microphone again." And he wouldn't.

Another mechanical incident . . . he went down to San Antonio or he went down to the Ranch one weekend, and Friday morning Marvin Watson called me and said, "The President wants to make a speech tonight on Vietnam." I said, "Where?" He said, "I don't know. You just tell the networks that he wants to make a speech at eight o'clock on Vietnam and see if they agree to carry it." I said, "Well, we have got to know where. Are we going back to Washington? And he said, "No, it is going to be here." I said, "Is he going to do it from the Ranch?" The President ended up speaking that night at the San Antonio Home Builders' Association. It was having its annual dinner dance in a big hall in San Antonio and it was the only place we could find where he could get a crowd. Watson had called the real estate office and said, "Would you like to have the President be a speaker at your dinner?" And of course, they said, "Yes." But when he called me back and told me that I said, "You know, you are going to give me a hell of a problem here." I said, "I've been in that building and looked it over and checked it out, because I knew sooner or later we would use it, and it is going to be very hard to light for television." Marvin laughed and said, "That is your problem."

So I called Washington and said, "I've got to have enough lights down here to light that room." The White House Communications Agency sent down a bunch of lights on a plane, but they also had to be on extension poles on easels that rested on the floor. No way you could get in the balcony of this place. There was no balcony. You had to use the ceiling to light adequately.

So we had these things standing on eighteen foot poles and we had somebody standing at the bottom of each one to keep it from being knocked over. When the persons arrived that night, I said, "Mr. President, you are going to have problems with the lights. They don't work very well because they are too low but eighteen feet is as high as we can get them. Now if you will not look beyond the fourth table in an audience like this . . . ." When he came I said, "You can't look beyond the first four rows of tables. You will be looking at the lights and they will blind you." So when he was through, in fact, he hadn't looked up at all from the desk.

As he walked off the stage I said, "I hope the lights didn't bother you." And he said, "You and your damn machine." I said, "What machine?" If anything went wrong it was my network or my newspapers, and if things went fine it was the press or the New York Times or my friends at CBS. So I went to Colonel Albright, who was head of the White House Signal . . . I keep calling it the Signal Corps. They changed it to Communications Agency. "What did something go wrong with the teleprompter? That is the only machine?" And he said, "No, that monitor worked fine. Let's look at what he looked at." We went up and all we could see was this brass cylinder and Jack said, "Oh, I know what happened." I said, "What happened?" He said, "This podium is in storage out at the Ranch and I had two men clean it today and what they did was they crossed two wires and after they cleaned it, the machine ran backwards. When the President started to talk the master control area back behind him kept rolling right and the guy could keep pace with what the President was saying, but the one in front of him would run backwards just like toilet paper running off a roll. That is why he hadn't looked up, because all he could see



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was a brass cylinder." Months afterwards he would say to me, "How about you and your machine?"

That picture behind me is his State of the Union message and the night that he did it . . . come over here and look. Here is the teleprompter control back here going around. There is another one here and they are hard to read, but you see behind those things were two one-way mirrors. So they requested his reading text, but no one else on this side could see that it wasn't just . . . but he had me sit down here. . . . There is a little mirror to watch this roller of the teleprompter. I was instructed: "If anything goes wrong you fix it with that hand." No way in the world I could fix it. I knew nothing about it, but I was confident by then because he had checked out thoroughly the machine and it worked. So, I sat down and three days later he gave me the picture and said, "Your machine worked fine that night, even though it didn't work in San Antonio."

I would think maybe a summary of his attitude is he never really liked television. He was often a little uncomfortable. But again, that was as much as anything because he had to stand within range of the microphone, and if he could get up and move around then he would forget about it.

CULBERT: You mentioned this particular circumstance and refer to the New York Times. Would you say in spite of all of what we heard about the three television screens, that Johnson got most of his information about the press either from memos that the staff members prepared about television or from reading newspapers?

FLEMING: Newspapers, I think so. Of course he had an awful lot of input that was not media. One thing that I learned at the White House was that the

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reporters get a small fraction of the facts of any story. There were many reporters that he would read with interest because he knew the columnist was a commentator that would analyze his action or motive, but they often didn't know near as much about the subject as he would have known from his sources that he had.

CULBERT: There are a couple of rather extreme memos... . Of course, that is probably you can't get enough of a staff and guys full of ideas and I don't mean because I found a memo that I've concluded anything, but some of them are pretty tough about what is really operation roll back on these television commentators and on some of the guys from the press. Do you ever recall getting any instructions to try and lean on anybody that was doing anything?

FLEMING: Not outside of just one time I had a bad briefing one day and they were tough on me. He called me and said, "You don't take that." He said, "You work for me and they have got to know." And I said, "Mr. President, I know all these fellows. I've been friends of theirs for twenty years and it doesn't bother me any. When they accuse me of not telling them all I know and you have told me what I am to tell them, now I will just say to them, 'Now it is not going to do any good to shout and scream; that is all we have got on the subject.'" He reached in his pocket. "I still care about you." He got a cigarette lighter out of his desk drawer. It has got his seal on it and his name is down at the bottom. He had a lot of these and he slid it across the desk and he said, "Next . . . I want you to look for a chance and when they are picking on you, sit down and load up that pipe of yours. Light the pipe, put your feet on the desk and say, 'Ladies and gentlemen of the press, screw you.'" And I said, "Mr. President, I can't say that." He said, "You



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say it and if anybody complains about it, you tell them I told you to say it." Within an hour Valenti came in and he said, "Have you got a lighter from the boss?" He said, "Can I have it back? I'm supposed to have something engraved on it." I said, "No, you are not going to get that instructions engraved on it." And I didn't give it back. But I think most of us became well acquainted when he was mad at somebody. It was relatively a passing thing, I think.

CULBERT: One of the things that has gotten into the. . . .

FLEMING: I never knew Peter Benchley. Did any memo. . . ? I never knew exactly what Peter Benchley did when he was around.

CULBERT: Well, he came in and that was his assignment particularly to do some work in television and then he got out again.

FLEMING: Well, he came in through the aegis of Bob Kintner, who had been the president of NBC. Kintner was never certain what his function was there either as he tried to create. . . . You were saying. . . .

CULBERT: Yea, I was going to ask you about something that I have thought probably didn't happen very often and that is, do you sense that LBJ quite often would get on the phone and call some reporter?

FLEMING: No, I know of it a few times, but I never . . . I thought it was one of those things that got magnified with the telling. An example: He called Merriman Smith one day and complained bitterly. Smitty was the UPI senior correspondent. Smitty had written in a column called "Backstairs at the White House," that LBJ had smashed a boat onto a rock down at Lake LBJ, and Johnson called him and just insisted that this never happened. About a month later, as I recall, Smitty's son was killed in Vietnam. He was a helicopter pilot. And a White House military aide called me at home and said, "Cause you are

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a good friend of Smitty's, been a friend a long time, I'll tell you that we have just learned that his son had been killed in Vietnam and the President is trying to reach him by phone." Well, Smitty's problem was that there had been periods in his life that he drank too much to the point that at one time UPI had pulled him off the White House and made him the third man covering the Treasury Department, which was the first job he had when he came to town, trying to jolt him back. And as far as any of us knew he hadn't had a drink in quite a while. But here all of a sudden was the death of his son. So I called Bill Lawrence who worked for me at ABC and was a close friend of Smith's and said, "Will you go out to Smitty's house and just be there." I wanted a close friend of his to be with him and in a little while Lawrence called me and said, "I don't need to be here." Bill said LBJ called Smitty and told him he was going to put a plane at his disposal to go any place he wanted. If he wanted to go to Vietnam, fine, whenever he wanted to go. Bill said, "Smitty is now packing and is going down to South Carolina to be with his daughter-in-law, the widow of the newly killed kid." So Bill said, "I'll go to the airport to Andrews with him and see that he gets on the airplane." Bill had been through the liquor problem too and he knew what Smitty's problem was and he said, "He will do all right."

So after he got down there Smitty called me and asked me to go to the Gridiron dinner with him. I said, "Smitty, I would love to go, but I don't think you should go, because if you stay down there until just the day before the Gridiron and then come back, every one of your friends is going to talk to you about your boy and you are going to have a miserable evening." So he said, "Well, I'll see." So the next morning I said to the President that I



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had said this to Smitty. He said, "I think that is a good idea. Let me see if I can move on that." So he called Smitty down in South Carolina and said, "Smitty, instead of hurrying to come back here, why don't you take a leave of absence? Do a book on me. I'll make all the papers you want available. Anything we have got." And he said, "I've got a house down there at the Ranch and Lake LBJ that you can use. In fact, I have got a boat down there that you would love to use if they have got the thing repaired after I smashed up on that rock." Smitty told me the story later. Said he just wanted to say, "Is that the rock you denied you ever ran into?" But he would not. . . . Well, I shouldn't generalize. There were times when Lyndon Johnson was fact and sometimes fancy. Oh, yea, I would have to say also on minor matters. So, he was mad at Smith for saying he had cracked up.

Side 2

FLEMING: . . . the logs down there at the Library would tell you because they logged everything he did.

CULBERT: Yea, that was what I was looking . . . but I'm sure it was possible for him to call someone without a record being made. I think the record is every call that went out of the Oval Office, but still if he were calling anything like. . . . You would think from the stories running around then there would be records and I can't find the records.

FLEMING: I think it was one of those things that grows and everybody wanted to be in on the act.

CULBERT: One of the things that interested me in what I could find of records there concerned all kinds of messages, phone calls, letters and et cetera from Frank Stanton. I got the impression that in one sense of all of LBJ's

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involvement with Frank Stanton that you would imagine that this was designed among other things to make sure he got a good break on CBS television, and it didn't work out very much that way.

FLEMING: I would doubt that it was. I think it was more the fact that Frank Stanton was one of those who directed LBJ's investment in television property, that their station in Austin was a CBS station. And I think it was Goldwater that said one time, "A bigot is a man narrow-minded enough to think there ought to be more than one television station in Austin, Texas." But I really don't know much about the Stanton/Johnson friendship, except that I don't think it has ever paid off as far as influencing CBS News much.

CULBERT: Do you know whether anybody did anything about these memos that you were preparing or you said it didn't last for very long and then. . . ?

FLEMING: He read them and then when he tired of them, we must have had the word that we could spend our time on something else.

CULBERT: Would you say it is far based on your observation of the President that he really was almost obsessed with the media coverage and getting information? I never heard of anybody who wanted to pay as much attention to what people were saying about them. Of course, I'm not president.

FLEMING: I think it is reasonable. I'm not going to say obsessed but he was certainly actively interested. I don't know whether you know the story of Joe Laitin? Laitin, when he went down there, said LBJ used to call him every night and want to know what the press was doing. And one night, Laitin says, he didn't have any story for him, so he invented a story about an AP reporter and in a little while the President called him and said his story just moved on the AP wire that says such and such and obviously this guy had been out



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chasing girls and dreamed up a story like that. And Laitin said he thought very fast and his answer was, "Well, that is what people in New York wanted to know too, so they called him back and sent somebody else in here to replace him." Later, Joe said he fabricated the story, but LBJ was interested always in reporters, but Laitin's story that he was often interested in their misbehavior or their moral conduct. I never saw any special evidence of that.

CULBERT: Did you ever hear from any of these reminiscences or anything else where Johnson might have talked of when he first started getting interested in watching television? Like do you know whether he had television sets in his office in the Senate? Did he ever talk about listening to the radio in his early campaigns?

FLEMING: Well, when he said . . . I remember he would be saying to me, I would brag about it a lot. \* Then when he said he knew me, liked me and trusted me, I had done two interview shows with the producer for ABC in his office at the White House and on both of them he thought they went well and he liked them. Now retrospect I can't remember and I wouldn't have known at the time. It may have been that I thought he got the kind of questions he wanted to answer and therefore he liked the way he was treated by the reporters and therefore everybody around him had an aura of confidence that. . . . I would think George Reedy might be the best to ask that. I don't know whether you know Reedy is now at Marquette.

CULBERT: Yes, I know. They did a long interview with him for the Library and I looked through all of that. They didn't ask him this particular question. Did you think that your appointment because of your television background ended up being something where actually maybe you were being appointed so it

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would look as though the White House cared about television, or would you say. . . ?

FLEMING: I think actually it was there was an intention to pay more attention to it. I never would have known and it was one of my earlier questions to go talk to Moyers of whether or not . . . I've often wondered how much my influence diminished when Moyers left. But I knew I wasn't going to be the press secretary and didn't want to be the press secretary. And George Christian and I got along very well, but I think LBJ was just not going to change a great deal in his own methods and attitude. I don't think anybody else would have changed him much more.

CULBERT: Maybe I can ask just one last question and that is sort of a general one. Do you have any opinion, simply having gone through this period in the position that you did, about television's coverage of the war in Vietnam? How it affected even people in Washington or you personally?

FLEMING: Well, I think it exists. I said it in a speech, which caused some of the correspondents out there to get pretty angry, that the Vietnam War was so unlike the previous wars that most correspondents were sent there because they had great legs and useful energy. The result was that instead of choosing the men who had been through even a considerable amount of domestic coverage, that would give them a little more balanced judgment . . . covered legislatures or the Congress, or the Capitol or something, they took these energetic and young guys and sent them out there. Most of the good ones, the ones that were really good, made their reputation there without us knowing what their conditions they were working under or how good they were. I never knew or ever became convinced that Halberstam or Mal Brown or two or three more



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of the young ones who got well known . . . I didn't have any way of knowing how well they did the job. I think the only way you can judge a man, a fellow reporter, is to cover the same thing he covers for a time and know what your impressions are and then read or look at what he does and see if they measure up to your beliefs. That he did as well as he could especially when you know that television is going to take just a tiny segment or whatnot.

CULBERT: Did you yourself have an impression of how . . . what kind of a job television was doing of covering the war in Vietnam?

FLEMING: No, I suppose not. At least at the time I didn't. In retrospect certainly it was a definite factor in the public reaction of how much the blood, guts and horror of that war and possibly would have been true of any war, but how much at that time came into the living rooms and families saw it at home. I've often wondered whether or not our attitude on World War II would have been different if we had had photographs of what actually went on on the ground in the cities we bombed. Certainly I didn't even know how many Russians Stalin had ordered killed in his purges. I thought Stalin was an ally and therefore on the side of the "good guys" and only history told me of the cruel tyrant that he was. He was helping. . . . Well, I was in World War II and didn't get into his area at all, but anybody on the other side had a certain brutish look about him, whether the fact it wasn't factual. And as I say there wasn't television then to let us know.

CULBERT: Do you spend much time with television now?

FLEMING: Not a great deal, no . . . surprised really how little. Actually I get home about the time that network news shows are on. Because for so long I was working downtown. I saw so little of my wife that I help get supper and

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we sit at the supper table for forty minutes and by then the news shows are over and we go look at "MASH" maybe or whatever few shows a day. I don't know whether Cronkite would be any judge or whether he would know if they ever tried or if he ever felt any, or he would say whether if the President ever tried to influence him. I don't know how much time Valenti has to see people whether or not that they are not useful to you. Moyers would be. But I think one reason why there isn't any Moyers tape in the Library is that there was a falling out. I never understood it. I could see it coming and all of a sudden . . . and Moyers never said goodbye to me. He wrote me a two and one half page page hand-written letter generally apologizing for having not being able to achieve for me what he hoped he could or what I thought I could. And my wife thinks I was hurt by going . . . I don't feel that . . . I wouldn't have had much more responsibility. .

The only problem that I had was and I left the White House . . . first place there was a Republican president coming in. Well, I left the White House at LBJ's suggestion to go to USIA and he said, "If Humphrey wins in November he will pull you out of there fast and use you for something better, but if he doesn't you may be there long enough so Nixon won't notice you are there." Well, I stayed until the first of the following April when Frank Shakespeare, who had come down from New York to CBS with Nixon called me and said, "I hate to do this, but I have got to find some more slots here for people of the Nixon team. Then as I looked around the media, the general feeling was that you are such a known Democrat. . . ." I had never been a known Democrat. I had voted for more Democrats than Republicans, but then I came up to the Hill because very frankly because the pension program was the best fast



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one in government life available to me. Well, there are several people in media organizations both newspaper and magazines. I said I would waive pension right. I just can't. The law won't let us do that, but then when I talked to three different schools about going into journalism, teach journalism, I heard simply that Washington was an anchor for us. We got a house we are extremely fond of, two boys in town and my wife was active here and I didn't care about leaving. I always knew I never was much good appearing on television anyway. I never was going to get to be anchor man some place, but under Hagerty's supervision I have been responsible for building the Washington bureau of ABC and where it started out with seven people when I joined it and it was a hundred and sixteen when I left.

I don't think of anything else, but I would say if you come across some individual questions that occur to you and if you want to write or call, we will see if we can be of some more help.

CULBERT: Okay, thank you very much.

FLEMING: Do you think you have got it far enough along to have a publisher lined up?

End of tape

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