

SPECIAL INTERVIEW

DATE: October 12, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: BILLY GRAHAM

INTERVIEWER: Monroe Billington

PLACE: Interview was conducted over the telephone

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B: Why don't you just talk a little bit about the time you first had contact with President Johnson?

G: Well, I've been trying to remember, but I think that the first time that I met him was through Mr. Sid Richardson in Fort Worth. Mr. Richardson became a wonderful friend of mine for many years till he died. In fact, I preached his funeral. It was through him that I met John Connally. I remember that he introduced me to Senator Johnson just after he was elected, I think by just a few votes.

B: That's correct.

G: It was at a dinner either in Dallas or Fort Worth. Senator Johnson said that he had heard a lot about me and had heard me preach somewhere, and said he'd like to get to know me and he'd like for me to come by Washington and see him. So I went by Washington, oh, a few months later, and he heard that I was in the Senate Office Building and he sent for me. I went to his office and talked to him. We became acquainted and liked each other, and we were friends ever since.

B: Well, that was my next question. What were your general impressions? You say you liked each other. You were attracted to each other, were you?

G: Well he had, as you know, an overwhelming personality. He always liked to have preachers around him. I think he was attracted to me at least partially because I was well known in Texas; I did a lot of preaching in Texas at that time, and I think he wanted to see what made me click. The second thing is that I was attracted to him because of his tremendous personality and the fact that his great-grandfather had been a professor at Baylor, I think in Bible.

B: Yes, that's correct.

G: He had a tremendous interest, as you know, in religion and in Christian things, and he could talk quite easily about it.

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- B: That's been my impression, that he was in many ways a very religious person. Would you agree with that?
- G: Yes, I would. He was very religious. Sometimes--oh, he did many interesting things. I remember one time we spent the night with them up at Camp David, and the next morning when my wife and I went over to the main house, he had the Attorney General there and different members of the cabinet, and he had Jack Valenti out on the porch reading an evangelistic sermon that his great-grandfather had written, and everybody had to listen. I conducted, of course, services there for him at Camp David on two or three occasions, and always when I went to the Ranch, if I was there over the weekend I conducted a service in the living room. I remember one time Cantinflas, the film actor from Mexico, was a guest, and I remember I think Walter Cronkite was a guest one time.
- B: I get the impression what you're saying is that an awful lot he did in regard to religion wasn't necessarily for public consumption.
- G: No, no. In fact, a number of times I had prayer with him in his bedroom at the White House, usually early in the morning. He would get out of bed and get on his knees, while I prayed. I never had very many people do that.
- B: That's not the sort of thing he was doing for the television cameras or for the radio announcers.
- G: This was entirely private. And he liked to have the Bible read to him.
- B: Yes.
- G: I had several new versions of the Bible that made it simple. He liked that very much.
- B: He liked to refer to the Bible in his public speeches and all, and I got the impression he had a familiarity with it.
- G: He had a very definite familiarity with it. He liked to quote some of the stories especially from the Old Testament that would illustrate what he himself was thinking or doing at that particular time.
- B: Yes. Yes. Well now, you and Mrs. Graham, I know from the research I have done, spent a number of overnight visits at the White House. Were these primarily social or did you talk politics?
- G: I think that the first time he invited me there he had only been president about five days. I went up with one of my friends, Grady Wilson, and spent the night there. I remember that we went down to the pool--they then had a swimming pool at the White House--and we went swimming, and I was somewhat startled because they didn't have any bathing suits and you just went as you were. There was a congressman--I cannot think of his name; he was later appointed a judge--he was there [Homer Thornberry], the four of us.

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And Grady Wilson told so many funny stories to the President that the President called in someone--I forget now who it was; I at first thought it might have been Bill Moyers, but maybe that was a later date--to write down some of these stories that he was telling so that he could remember them.

B: Well now, did you have a chance to talk Bible, theology, religion, at times like that?

G: From time to time we discussed the Bible and we discussed especially the theology. He was so interested in his great-grandfather, and of course his great-grandfather held the same theological views that I hold, and it was very easy to say, "Now, this is what your great-grandfather would have said, would have done."

B: Right. Well, I got the impression that he wasn't a deeply theological person, but he certainly had a great deal of interest in theology, Scripture.

G: I think part of it was political in this sense, I think he thought more about what the Baptist Standard said in Texas than the Dallas Morning News.

B: Well, that's to be expected of course with a person in a political role, that's right. Well now, Dr. Graham, some people have called you his spiritual adviser. Would you think that's an appropriate term?

G: No, because I think he had a lot of friends that were--Dr. [George] Davis at the Christian Church in Washington--

B: Yes. Yes.

G: --and the little Catholic priest down in Stonewall. I remember he told one time, maybe you've heard this story, but the President told me this personally two or three times, that he was showing a movie at the White House, and of course during the movie showing he usually went to sleep. The movie always put him to sleep. Every time I ever saw a movie with him he went to sleep, and he would be snoring. So he had this Catholic, the priest--I can't think of his name now. I knew him.

B: Yes, I know him. I've forgotten his name also [Wunibald Schneider].

G: Yes. Well anyway, they showed The Graduate. So after it was over, the President woke up and he turned to the priest and he said, "Father, how did you like the movie?" and the priest said, "Mr. President, it was awful! It was terrible! I'm amazed that you would show that here." He took great delight in telling that story.

B: (Laughter) And he had slept through the whole thing.

On a more serious note, Dr. Graham, I got the impression as the Vietnam War deepened and became a real quagmire that President Johnson got very much concerned about that, not simply from a political standpoint, but from this nation's involvement in a

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very serious crisis for us. Would you say you became a spiritual counselor more so during those days, or gave him political advice?

G: I wouldn't say that it increased in any way. I went to Vietnam a couple of times at Christmas time, one time with [Francis] Cardinal Spellman and one time with [Terence] Cardinal Cooke. Well, pardon me, I went I guess three or four times, but I've forgotten now, unless I had reference to my notes, whether I--it was two times I think under President Johnson, and he always took a personal interest in my going. In fact, he asked me to go one time. Then when we got back he had Cardinal Spellman and me to the White House for lunch, and he had Mr. [Walt] Rostow and he had I think the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and one or two others. And he asked Cardinal Spellman, "Now, what do you think? We can't go on with this thing. The American people are not going to take it. We've got to get out of it. How to do it?" And of course Cardinal Spellman was quite hawkish in what he had to say. Then he turned to me and he said, "Now, Billy, what do you say?" and I said, "Mr. President, I'm going to limit my remarks entirely to the moral and spiritual conditions that I found among American troops while I was there. This was my main concern. I'm not going to get into the fact as to what you should do or should not do. But I agree with you that the American people are getting restless over this thing."

B: Yes. Would you say that he probably had a sympathy for that view, that he saw the moral consequences and implications of it?

G: [inaudible]--didn't know how. That is in the latter stages. I think in the early stages, of course, he had the backing of the American public opinion. When he went into office, as you know, Mr. Kennedy already had several thousand troops in Vietnam. And the American public was in back of the American involvement, as was Senator [William] Fulbright and all these others that later became leading doves. I think it was the length of the war and I think, secondly, it was the fact that it was fought on television, the first war in American history to be fought on television. I think all of this--and I think President Johnson had a great difficulty in communicating on television. He once told me when we were sitting alone watching a sunset down in Texas that television is what had killed him politically.

B: That's an interesting comment. Yes, very interesting comment. You know, I have a Baptist background myself. As a matter of fact, I come out of Oklahoma Baptist University and Louisville Seminary myself before I got into teaching, and I've had some feelings like his and like yours in terms of some religious beliefs. I know Baptist mentality, if there is such a thing, pretty well. Would you say that one of the reasons he stayed in the war so long was a kind of stubbornness to religious convictions, that once you get into something you've got to get it finished, you've got to get the job done. You want to win this thing. Would that play a part? And I don't want you to answer that because of my own feelings, but I'm beginning to wonder if there isn't something like that in his thinking.

G: I could not answer that, because as you know, he was an extremely complex man.

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B: Yes, exactly.

G: He was influenced by many different factors that were unknown to me. There were times that even with me he could say something sharp and then a little bit later, you know, he would try to make up for it. He realized he said something sharp to me that might offend me. But it didn't offend me, because I knew the tremendous tensions he was under and the tremendous work he had to do. I was there a number of times at night, late at night. He would have a massage and then he would offer me a massage. Then I'd go into his bedroom at his invitation, and he'd have a great stack of papers that he had to go through before he could go to sleep. The tremendous burdens that a modern president bears is something that the average American just doesn't have any idea. I think he allowed some of these things to get to him.

B: Quite naturally. Yes, quite naturally.

G: The only president I've met so far that seems not to be bothered by them is Mr. Reagan, to be able to throw them off.

B: Yes. Yes. It's a different kind of personality I suppose in terms of how they respond to that pressure.

Well, the same kinds of questions could be asked about Mr. Johnson's Great Society programs, Dr. Graham. What do you think about his concern for the unfortunates of the country? Was this really totally politically motivated?

G: I would lean--on a scale from one to ten, I'd say about eight that it was a conviction of his. I think that this was a very deep conviction that he had, that he wanted to do something for the underprivileged and the people that were oppressed in our society, especially black people. I remember after he left office I visited the Ranch a number of times. Just to see him with little children, little black children, and how he loved them and would take them for rides and take them up in his arms. This had no political motivation whatsoever.

B: Not for television consumption?

G: No, sir. I think that he did have a very deep conviction at this point. I'm not sure where it originated. I do not know what influences. You would do that in your research, find out. But I know that he had it even when I first knew him. He might have gotten it from Mr. Roosevelt, the Roosevelt era. I don't know.

B: Yes. Or his own Texas background, which does indicate that people have care for each other.

G: He had a great feeling for the Hispanic people. I found that out very early in my relationship with him. He always liked to have some of them around him.

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- B: You know his first teaching job down there at Cotulla had to do with the Hispanics apparently, and he got acquainted with the children very early in his teaching career.
- G: Yes.
- B: Well again, there are these powerful influences, but we know he had interest in his background, in his [great-]grandfather, and his mother apparently was a very religious person, coming out of a Baptist background also. One wonders if one couldn't speculate that religion had some factor in those kinds of attitudes he expressed later.
- G: There's no doubt about it. I think that he had a conflict within him about religion. One was he wanted to go all the way in his commitment to Christ. He knew what it meant to be saved or lost, using our terminology, and he knew what it was to be born again. And yet he somehow felt that he had never quite had that experience. I think he tried to make up for it by having many of the outward forms of religion, in the sense of going to church almost fanatically, while he was president even. Sometimes he'd go to church three times on a Sunday.
- B: We know he did that, of course, because that did get in the papers and on television.
- G: That did get in. He asked me to--for example, I gave the sermon at the Christian Church in Washington on the day of his inauguration, when he was elected. He invited all the governors and all the mayors and so forth, and I spoke about his religious background and his family background and so forth. When I finished speaking I sat down, and he put his finger up at me in the pulpit, in other words he liked what I said and he was letting me know that. But privately he said, "You know, Billy, that was a wonderful thing. I hope that I can live up to the standards that my mother set for me." He had a tremendous affection and awe apparently for his mother. And then there was an aunt of his that was very religious that he kept quoting. I've forgotten which one it is, but I remember he said that when he went to Washington that this aunt said to him, "Lyndon, don't forget the Jews, God's chosen people." I can remember certain things like that.
- B: Yes. And those kinds of influences, sometimes he might not even be conscious of them himself in terms of the subconscious, the way it operates, in terms of his early background. Yes, yes. This would be true for Jews, Hispanics, blacks, the poor, the underprivileged, children and so on, sounds like.
- G: I think that, you know, some of the things that some of these people are writing about now, they're not really getting down deep into the real Lyndon Johnson. There was another side to him. I'm sure there was this side [that has been written about], and I saw it at times, a rough side and a tough side. But there was the other side of Lyndon Johnson that was warm and tender and thoughtful. I remember when, oh, the election was taking place, he had me spend the weekend, or part of the weekend, with him at the White House, the weekend before the election. I left to go back home to vote on Tuesday. While I was driving from Charlotte to Montreat, which takes about two hours, I heard on

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CBS that my daughter Anne, my second daughter, who was then maybe fifteen, had just endorsed [Barry] Goldwater and [William] Miller. Some fellow had put a CBS camera in front of her at a rally and she'd gone out of curiosity, and she got caught up in the enthusiasm, "Goldwater and Miller." It came out "Billy Graham's daughter" and so forth. I hadn't any more than reached home till the President called me, and he said, "Billy, I know those things. I have two daughters of my own, and I have trouble sometimes controlling what they say. When the election is over, you bring Anne up to the White House, I'd like to get acquainted with her." He was that kind of a person.

B: Yes. Yes. I think most of us who have done very much work in studying him and his administration recognize this complexity of this person, who apparently did have some of the darker sides that you've mentioned of maybe greed or ambition, deceit, and yet at the same time being a very deeply religious person. Maybe that's not uncommon with human nature.

G: Yes. It also brought out a side to him of tenderness. He could be very tender at times and very reflective. I remember not long before he died, he and I were watching a sunset, as we did on several occasions at the Ranch. And I talked to him very straight about his own personal relationship to Christ, and I talked to him very straight about what he could do if he would use his influence now for Christ throughout the country. He sat there a long time and didn't say much. Then he turned to me, and I'll never forget how he looked. He said, "You know, Billy, you're right." Then he started up the car and moved on. That's all he said. I don't know what he was thinking, but he was very reflective. We must have sat there for an hour without saying much at all, just looking at the sunset. And the Secret Service people were right behind us in another car. But he just wanted to do some thinking I think, and I believe he was thinking about spiritual things and religious things, because he always felt that he didn't have long to live. I remember--and I do not believe, by the way, that he ever left office because of political pressures from Robert Kennedy or anybody else. He told me months before, oh, I would think at least a year before he had to run again, he said, "You know, my family are not long-livers. They die early. If I run again and get elected, I don't think it would be fair to the American people, because I'm not sure I could live out another term."

B: He had had a heart attack already, of course.

G: He had already had a heart attack, I think in 1956, didn't he?

B: Yes. Somewhere along there, yes. 1956, yes, that's right. [1955]

G: He said, "I'm giving serious consideration to not running again." Well, that was before the pressures of the war and Bobby Kennedy and so forth had reached its climax, as it later did, and people thought that he decided not to run on that basis. That could have been contributing factors, but I believe he did feel that he might not serve out his term. He thought a great deal about death, and he talked to me about it several times. I remember that we even prayed about it. So these things were in his mind.

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But I also saw him on occasion get quite upset. I remember one time when he had left office, I was visiting with him and Lady Bird, and he had sold his stations to the Times Mirror Company in California, or at least he was in the process of doing it, and I think Lady Bird was opposed to it. He turned to me and he said, "Billy, what do you think?" and I said, "Mr. President, I agree with your wife. I think you ought to keep these stations. They're very profitable, and it will mean a great deal to the family later on." He said, "Well, I'm going to do it whatever both of you say," and he got up and walked away and slammed the door into the house. She and I sat under a tree and talked, and about twenty minutes later he came back out just as mild. He'd gotten over what little feeling of irritation that he'd felt.

B: It's part of that complexity of a person that we may never really fully understand, I suppose. Yes, I suppose that's true. I'm sure this is sort of a gratuitous question, but one of these biographers of President Johnson who is much more favorable to him than most of the writing that's being put out these days is entitled The Compassionate Samaritan. Isn't that an interesting title? I wonder what do you think about that in terms of the kinds of programs he had and how he responded to, say, the unfortunate, the poor folk of America.

G: --your book to be?

B: No, this is the title of another biography that's been written about him, and the title of it is The Compassionate Samaritan. It's about two years old now, and it's the only one of the recent biographies that has been what one would say favorable to him.

G: I'd like to get that.

B: Well, yes, I've forgotten the author's name for the moment. Roulon, R-O-U-L-O-N, Phillip Roulon. I've forgotten who published it, but he's a teacher out at Northern Arizona University, and he primarily emphasizes President Johnson's interest in education. Of course, this would be a part of the new [Great] Society program. His argument is that he got these feelings about education from his own background and from his first teaching of those Hispanics in Cotulla in South Texas. So he titles the book The Compassionate Samaritan. Isn't that interesting?

G: Well, that's very interesting. I'll have to read that.

B: Yes. Well, I'll send you a notice on it.

G: I've written it down.

B: Very good. Yes. One other question that I hadn't talked about yet with you, and I don't know to what extent you'd have some information on this, but I've been doing some research on President Johnson's Administration. in regard to the separation of church and state. We know that while he was a member of the Disciples of Christ, he did have that Baptist background, and I've gotten the impression that he was a very strong believer,

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like Baptists are, in the whole business of the separation of church and state. That's become an important political issue, as I'm sure you know, in a number of presidential administrations. Would you care to comment on that?

G: Yes, he was a strong believer in separation of church and state, but he also--I think he had a difficult time understanding what we mean by civil religion, because he talked to me about it two or three times. I myself read definitions of it and I hear people talk about civil religion and so forth. I don't think that any country can separate its religion from the government. We don't have a state church, as they do in England, because the people that founded our country, many of them had left the persecutions of Europe that had come from state churches, and they didn't want a state church. But I think that it's not separation from religion, it's separation of church and state. I think sometimes I have the feeling that the Supreme Court and some of our other courts have just gone too far. I think that you can't take religion out of the political thinking of people, because this is a part of the thing that is a part of their lives, they've grown up in a religious atmosphere perhaps.

B: I think that would be President Johnson, in fact.

G: That's President Johnson as well.

B: I have read some of his talks at some of the prayer breakfasts, the annual prayer breakfasts, and I got the impression he was expressing pretty much what you were just now saying, that while he believed in separation of church, he did not believe in separation of religion and government.

G: I gave all the main addresses at every one of the prayer breakfasts while he was president, and I also gave all the main addresses during the Kennedy presidency and during the Eisenhower period except two. I quit when Nixon became president because he had asked me to lead the inauguration prayer as well as preach the first service at the White House, and I felt that it was just a little too much of Billy Graham at that particular [inaudible]. But they had a tradition that I was the speaker, because I was the speaker at the first one, and they just kept it up year after year, year after year. It had to stop, and I didn't know how to stop it. But that stopped it.

B: Well, as a matter of fact, I'm sure you've seen an article that's been published in the Journal of Church and State that comes out of Baylor, it's an article on you in which the author deals with you as spiritual counselor, friend, adviser, to several of the presidents, not just President Johnson. You don't know about that? I'll send you a copy of it.

G: I haven't seen it.

B: I'll send you a copy of it, because it does deal with Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kennedy as well as Mr. Johnson. I'll just xerox a copy and send it to you.

G: And interestingly, I have been a friend of Reagan longer than any of the others.

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B: Yes. But have you spent time in the White House with him?

G: Oh, yes. I've spent several nights with them.

B: Yes. Yes. Quite a lot of time. Yes.

G: It was with the understanding that there would be little or no publicity. Last time that we spent the night with them there was a picture then, yes. It did get into the press. But most of my contacts with Mr. Reagan have been very private.

B: Very private. I appreciate the comments you have made when you spent some time with President Johnson alone or sitting and watching sunsets or spending time in prayer and all that. Can you think of some other incidences like that, or would you like to elaborate on some of them?

G: I think, if I remember correctly, my wife and I spent the last night with the Johnsons at the White House.

B: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

G: I remember that he and I alone late at night walked up to the East Room and we stood there where all those mirrors are. I said, "Mr. President, could we--" [gap in tape] remembering what had happened while he was president, the good things that had happened primarily and asking God to bless the situation in Vietnam and help the new president to steer a right course, and that the killing could stop and so forth and so on, because President Johnson at that time felt strongly that way himself. He had stopped the bombing and all that, and I think he was trying to wind it down before Mr. Nixon ever got in there.

B: That sounds like a genuine concern for what we were doing and for this country and Vietnam. Again, it doesn't sound very political to me.

G: No. I think he had come to the point to realize that mistakes had been made. He hadn't been able to keep the country with him, and this was a great, of course, I think disappointment to him. He felt that maybe it interfered with many of the great social achievements that he wanted to do. And of course he did take a great many of these things that President Kennedy found difficult to get through Congress, as you know already, and he was able to get them through.

B: Well, then you would say in terms of Vietnam that you would agree with probably what most people say, that Vietnam probably brought an end to the Great Society legislation in many ways. The kinds of programs he was trying [to] institute here at home were harmed because of the all-inclusive involvement of Vietnam?

G: I wouldn't say it brought an end, I would just say that it was harmed.

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B: Harmed, yes.

G: Slowed down.

B: Yes. Yes. What about some other personal anecdotes that you can think of? You may have been thinking of some since we've been talking about this for some time, that you might think would be interesting to people who would try to get a better understanding of this complex man. Your relationship, Mrs. Graham's relationship?

G: Well, I don't know. I remember sitting in church with him once at the--let's see, what church?--oh, a little church in Texas. He wanted to go to church on Sunday morning, and we went to that church that's--I can't even think of the name of the town at the moment. And he didn't have any money with him when the collection was taken, so he asked me if he could borrow five dollars. I didn't have five dollars, but I had a twenty dollar bill, and I gave it to him and he put it in the collection. I never got the money back. Maybe I'll get the credit in heaven.

B: I found that people who have a lot of money are less concerned about having some in their pockets than those of us who don't have so much. (Laughter)

G: With Mr. Nixon it was the same way. He never carried any money.

B: I've heard stories like President Kennedy taking people out to lunch and have a big meal at lunch, martinis and all that, and then not have money to pay for it. Some of his guests had to pay for it.

Well, Dr. Graham, I don't want to keep you, I know how very busy you are. But you have answered some questions.

G: --I'm sorry to be so--if you can think of other things, I'll be available for another conversation.

B: Well, I appreciate that very much. That's very kind of you. What I think, since we've been at this now about forty minutes, I told Stephanie [Wills] what I'd like to do, and I could do this in writing as well, is to type up our conversation here as we have spoken and send it out to Stephanie and to you. And sometime in the next few weeks or months, when you have a moment, I wish you would just go through it to be sure that you haven't misspoken yourself or that you might have given the wrong impression, you see. Let's be sure that we have it exactly what we would like to have, and when you get that approved, then what I'd like to do is get it typed up and send you folks a copy of it.

Then what I'd like to do, if you would not object, is for us to turn you over then to the Lyndon B. Johnson Library staff at Austin, Texas. What they have there, Dr. Graham, is a very large oral history collection of interviews just like this with many people who were involved with Mr. Johnson, both in politics and otherwise. Then they

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have an arrangement there so that anyone who goes there to do some research and would like to see what people like you and others have to say, then they can use that as part of their research documents. What they do is get a statement from you saying if you'd rather no one but qualified historians read this, or you'd rather certain comments you made not be [available]--I don't think there's anything you said that would be sensitive, but if there's something sensitive--in other words, they have some various forms that you can sign that would allow this to be used by qualified researchers out of the Library. You wouldn't object to that I hope?

G: Not at all.

B: Very good.

G: [There are some] incidents that would be historical that people don't know about that I'm not free yet to tell.

B: Yes. We understand. We understand. I take it then, in view of what we said, since we been going for so long, what I will do is type that up, write it up, and if you have some other things you might even think of then you could elaborate it, as if we did it on the phone. It would be perfectly all right. Or if we think of others, then, sometime in the distant future we might have another conversation.

q: Thank you. I would like that very much.

B: It's been very pleasant, and I appreciate very much.

(Interruption)

G: One thing I would like to say about Lyndon Johnson, and that is--I'm sure that's been brought out many times--his tremendous love and loyalty to his family. He raised two marvelous daughters. Ruth and I just fell in love with both of them and, of course, the story of that is interesting, too.

B: Well, of course, people who are not Christians raise fine children. I have a feeling that those of us in the Christian tradition like to think that we try to raise them with Christian values and Christian views and so on.

G: That's right. He was very interested, of course, in Luci's religious feelings, and he had me up there twice to talk to her. She's a wonderful girl.

(Interruption)

B: Well, I really appreciate your talking to me and I wish you the very best and I thank you again for calling.

G: Thank you, sir. Bless you. Goodbye.

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B: Thank you. Goodbye.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Special Interview]

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