

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW CONDUCTED WITH MR. HARRY MIDDLETON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LYNDON B. JOHNSON LIBRARY, IN HIS OFFICE AT THE LIBRARY, AUSTIN, TEXAS, JUNE 20, 1979.

(Interview conducted by William C. Spragens, Bowling Green State University)

1. How long did you serve on President Johnson's staff?

For two years. It was the last two years of President Johnson's term.

2. In what capacity did you serve? I'm told you were a speech writer among other duties?

I was a writer, and since writers were called speech writers, I suppose that statement is true. I did write messages to the Congress. These were the two things that I did primarily. After March 31, 1968, after President Johnson announced he was not going to run again, I began to get assignments related to his transition out of office and and regarding things related to the future development of this Library. I was concerned with relations with the various Departments, and with writing, preparing and recording the history of the Johnson years.

3. What did you think was unique or unusual about the Johnson staff?

In retrospect, one of the things that occurs to me 10 years later was that it was a very strong staff, a very able staff and one whose members have survived very well. They were men and women who have gone on to make their mark in a very positive way on their times. At the time I was there, I feel it was effective, efficient and strong. I was impressed by how harmonious a staff I thought it was at the time. I also remember having an obvious balance of liberals and conservatives, with liberals perhaps outweighing the conservatives, but there was no contention between liberals and conservatives, and all were totally loyal to President Johnson and his Administration.

Some members of the staff were stronger than others. Observing Joe Califano was a first real experience to me on how power on a staff could be wielded. Other members of the staff did not exercise the same degree of power and strength that he did. This was probably the case because he was so capable.

4. What kind of speech-writing techniques did President Johnson use?

The President during the time I was there always talked about brevity. He wanted short simple sentences composed of short simple words. I was always puzzled by that requirement of his. Some of his best speeches were not that way. Horace Busby, who was not on the staff then but who was called on occasionally for assistance, was a writer of convoluted sentences. But he was the writer of some of LBJ's best speeches. The President liked his speeches to be short and simple, and yet was quite proud of having issued others that weren't. In his

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own style, he was not a man of short simple sentences. As Mrs. Johnson said, he was a survivor of an earlier era in his extemporaneous style. His sentence structure was fairly complicated (when he was speaking extemporaneously).

5. On what kinds of occasions was President Johnson most likely to seek assistance in drafting of speeches?

Of course there were numerous such occasions. If he was making a major policy speech, foreign or domestic, of course he paid more attention to the speech than to one welcoming a group of Girl Scouts in the Rose Garden (or the East Room of the White House in the winter time). These speeches were often far more voluminous than the ones he made on major occasions. A fairly important speech would give him an opportunity to say something that was important.

I recall that on one occasion, for the swearing in of a member of the Council of Economic Advisors in the final part of his term, it was fairly low key and I was writing remarks for it; but he wanted to say something about the way negotiations were going on in Paris about Vietnam.

6. Did the White House staff members have a good working relationship with each other? With the President?

(a) I think they did. It was an excellent working relationship.

(b) Yes, I think the staff had a good working relationship with the President. It is now accepted as fact, but in a lot of places I've read about the Johnson White House that LBJ was an intimidator; I suppose there is some element of truth in that, but I've never known anyone who was more expert at and desirous of drawing opinions from his staff. Access was open. Opinions were invited (from the staff). There was also ready access to prepare memos for his "night reading". We didn't want to abuse it, but it was there. He would read it and respond.

7. Did you have occasion to work with holdover members of the Kennedy staff?

No.

8. What do you think was the most important speech made by President Johnson?

I can only speak about the time I was there in 1967, 1968 and 1969. Historically his most significant speech (in that period) was the one on March 31, 1968, when he took himself out of the running (for another term) and changed the war. That changed a great deal of the political life of that time.

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9. Did you work with all of the Johnson Press Secretaries?

No.

10. What do you think was President Johnson's most important achievement?

The leadership that he gave the cause of civil rights. His being there when he was, his commitment to the cause, the muscle he gave to it, the leadership he gave to it, was a main factor in the achievement of what was accomplished in civil rights up to that point. His skill in maneuvering legislation through the Congress was extremely important, but beyond that, it was he who aroused the conscience of that part of the nation that had not felt strongly about civil rights up to that point. When President Johnson stood before Congress in early 1965 and in those Texas accents spoke the words, "We Shall Overcome", I think that was extraordinarily important.

11. What kind of relationship did President Johnson have with the news media between 1963 and 1965?

I have no first-hand knowledge of that.

12. What observations would you care to make about President Johnson's relations with the Congress?

Obviously my two years there (1967-69) were not the glory years. The high-flying years of 1965 and 1966 were past. Nonetheless, despite the contention over the war, I thought his relations with the Congress were secure and strong. Even after the March 31, 1968, speech he still was getting controversial, important legislation passed, including the Open Housing Act of 1968. This was not just because of his knowledge (of the Congress), but also because of his love and respect for it (as an institution).

13. In what ways did President Johnson achieve greater success with the Congress than Presidents Truman, Kennedy and Carter? Why?

If I were going to respond in terms of comparisons, I would only be able to respond in terms of what I've read (about the other Presidents). I do know that he knew how to work with its members.

14. What was the most important foreign policy decision of the Johnson Era? Why?

I don't see how anyone could ignore the decisions on Vietnam; he felt it was good for the national interest. When the early decision were made on Vietnam, those were not unpopular decisions at the time. In 1965, Clark Clifford felt the decisions were popular then. The weight

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of opinion on the part of his advisers and the contentions that came up later did not enter in at the beginning, and the war was not that unpopular in the early years. In the later years, LBJ held that the national interest as he saw it was more important than making the most popular decisions. He truly, truly felt that these were decisions in the best interests of the country. In March 1968 he recognized the changing trend, and reversed the trend of his decisions in Vietnam, but that was not a contentious decision.

15. Did you accompany President Johnson to the Glassboro Summit in 1967?

Unfortunately, I did not.

- 16 May I follow up this interview by sending you a copy of the transcript, and sending additional questions in writing if necessary?

Nothing else occurs to me now, but I would be glad to answer questions.

Note to Mr. Middleton: I do not have further questions at this time.

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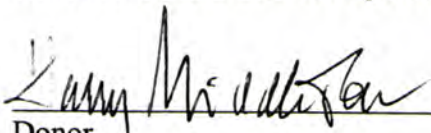
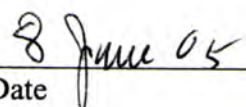
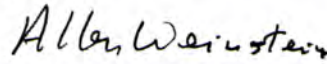
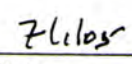
Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

HARRY MIDDLETON

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 personal interview conducted with me on June 20, 1979, in Austin, Texas, by William C. Spragens.

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.

	
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Bowling Green State University

Department of Political Science
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

October 9, 1979

Ms. Tina Lawson
Supervisory Archivist
Lyndon Baines Johnson Library
Austin, Texas 18705

Dear Tina:

I am pleased to grant my permission to place the transcript of my interview with Mr. Middleton in your Library collection of interviews, for the use of other scholars.

I feel gratified that it may be of use to them. Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "W. C. Spragens".

William C. Spragens
Associate Professor

wcs/cat