A DISCUSSION CONDUCTED BY WILLIAM S. WHITE WITH A GROUP FROM LYNDON JOHNSON'S DAYS AS DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH ADMINISTRATION IN TEXAS FROM 1935 to 1937

The NYA group includes:
WILLARD DEASON
J. J. (JAKE) PICKLE
RAY ROBERTS
FENNER ROTH
ALBERT W. BRISBIN
C. P. LITTLE

The tape was recorded in 1968 at Mr. White's home in Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

W: Now, gentlemen, we are discussing here, as I understand it, the activity of President Johnson when he was Texas director of the National Youth Administration in Texas during the Depression.

I know Mr. Deason here was close to him, and I wondered, Mr. Deason, if you would tell us about your impressions of his general method of operation in an administrative job of that kind?

D: Well, yes, he was at that time, Bill, I would say, a young man in a hurry. Always, whatever he had to do, he wanted to get on with it right now, and didn't take a lot of time to stop and research and develop and counsel over it. We did do some counseling, but once his mind was made up, then he was ready to move. And he expected the folks around him to move about as fast as he moved. That was a pretty difficult thing for somebody with short legs to do.

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W: Would you have any idea of how many young people the agency through him, or through his work, helped at that time, during the period he was there?

D: Oh, that would be difficult to say because the total number of the rolls went up and down. We might have several thousand, maybe twenty or thirty thousand, on part-time employment on any one given day, but it was only part-time employment. While one group would work for one week, then they would be off for two or three weeks, and the other groups worked. Spread it around, so that all of them would have an opportunity to get into it. So I would guess, I don't remember, somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty to a hundred thousand.

Now maybe some of these other fellows will remember that better than I. C. P. Little over there had a lot to do with the number of youth employed at any time. C. P., would you have a recollection on that?

L: I certainly would not have any recollection of the total number. I can only agree with you. It seemed like there were multitudes of them because there were far more in those early days than we could begin to put on projects.

W: Congressman Roberts, on the point of playing politics here, do you think looking back on it, or did you think at the time, that this work, Mr. Johnson's work with the NYA, was consciously the beginning of a political career? Do you think he had that hope in mind then of coming to Congress later? Did this help to build a political base for him?

RR: Bill, I don't know whether he had it in his mind. I would think so. But I will say this: we all used to sit around in our meetings, and we were a very small and close group. We made no bones about it

before he was thirty years old that this man was going to be vice president. We never thought about a southerner being president. We'd talk among [ourselves], "This fellow is going somewhere, and he'll be vice president someday."

W: You mean you really had a serious belief that he would be, or you were hoping he would be?

RR: Oh, yes, he was an inspiration to all of us, and I don't think there was a one of us that thought he wouldn't make it.

W: I wish all of you would join in when you feel like it. We don't want to have this in the sense of an interview. I was just trying to pop this thing off. Does anybody have any comments on this latter point? I think this political point is probably the most interesting point.

D: Why don't we stop at this point and see if we've got anything here?

W: That's a good idea. Let's see.

Now we are back on tape, gentlemen. Who has another comment? Would you care to make another political comment? I really believe this, probably from an historical point of view, is the most interesting aspect of it. Ray, do you have further observations on the early development of his political career through this mechanism?

RR: I think Bill [Deason] would make a comment that would be more fitting right here, even though it wasn't politics. That was his tremendous ability to organize. He's the greatest organizer that I've ever seen. I think Bill could tell you that. Because without his organizational ability, regardless of his political aspirations, they wouldn't have

come to fruition.

D: Well, that's right. He moved around over the entire state, he saw lots of people and he was quick to grasp situations. He recognized opportunities quick and early and took advantage of them.

W: I take it it would have had the effect of making him known well outside the area where he had grown up and where he had had his earlier contacts?

D: Yes, his work was over the entire state, and I'd say he was just about as well known outside the Tenth District as he was within the district, except for the fact that he headquartered in Austin.

Pickle?

P: I think you all ought to remember that he had come back to Texas as the state NYA director after having been in Washington for two or three years and having served as Congressman Kleberg's secretary, and obviously he was designated for this state role because of his organizational ability, his administrative ability, and his political know-how.

When he came into Austin, Texas, I was a student at the University of Texas, but there was considerable publicity about the fact that he was there and had taken on this new job. Every day there was another story about he and Tom Miller, our mayor then, getting involved in some kind of project for the youth. So I think he came to Texas in somewhat of a political climate, because this was in President Roosevelt's day and he, even then, had been selected as

President Roosevelt's Texas choice. So he came into our midst with some sort of a political blanket around him, and I think he recognized it. I did as a student at the university. You know I didn't meet him until later.

W: Gentlemen, on this point I think it might be interesting--we're recording, after all, for later history here--to point out that at this moment in 1968 when the President is very hard pressed politically apparently, a good deal of people make the criticism of him that he will not, or cannot, or doesn't care to organize the Democratic National Committee, that he doesn't care to exert a direct influence on it, and so on.

My own impression of this is as follows. I wonder if the rest of you agree. As I have known the President, he has never had much real interest in mechanical politics and committee operations. He has always been, to my mind, pretty much a seat-of-the-pants political operator himself, pretty intuitive. Now, first of all, I wonder if you agree with this, and, second, if you do, we have a situation that I think illustrates his complexity. He's a man we all agree is a tremendous administrator in the general administrative sense. Is it true that he is not a political administrator in the partisan sense? Jake, what do you think of that?

P: These other men could speak about those early days better than I, but I think I would disagree with you about him being just an operator by the seat of his pants. That would be correct if you meant by the

seat of your pants, because he was right after you all the time. There wasn't anything left undone. (Laughter)

I think what you mean is he wasn't always wanting to put down on a paper in an outline form how things get done. What he'd do is sit around, then and ever since I've known him he'll think a problem through. And he'll think five miles, ten miles further than the next fellow and you would have thought the problem out. That doesn't mean, though, that he commits it into a big brochure and a big pretty outline, but in his mind he has researched it exhaustively. Now if that is what you mean by the seat of his pants, then, yes, but--

W: That's really what I meant. I think that the type of politician who depends entirely on formal organization, and many do particularly in the East, have never understood that he sometimes organizes without seeming to organize. Or to put it another way, I think his concern, as I have known it, has been principally developing issues, developing programs. In that sense, he is very different from an urban politician in the North.

D: Bill, it has always been my experience with him that he puts first things first and more or less takes them one at the time as they become immediate. As I said a while ago, he is not a fellow to research and plan and lay down blueprints because, as I have observed it, he solves a problem when it becomes immediate and has to be answered today. As Jake says, he may be conscious of it looking down the road, but he doesn't activate it until it is ready to be activated.

W: Yes. Some people have made an expression about him that always amused me, and I think there is a lot of truth in it. They say he can see around corners.

D: That's my expression.

W: I think they mean, as Jake Pickle said, that he is able to see the probable development of a situation a very long time ahead. Now, was this demonstrated when you men worked with him way back then in NYA? Did you see him in this light, as very farsighted or just see him as terribly driving?

FR: I would say at that time we weren't speaking or thinking of politics but in the way of projects for the youth of the country or the state and the student aid program, I think he was always ahead of the other directors. That's the feeling we had in Texas.

W: Let me interrupt. Is it true--I think I read this or heard it somewhere--that he reached his state quota, his assigned mission so far as processing these youngsters, that's a rather harsh word, but taking care of these youngsters, quicker than anybody in the country. Is this true?

FR: I can't recall that, but I do know that we had one of the outstanding programs in the United States. Hours meant nothing to Lyndon nor to us, because he kept us up there many a night until they turned the lights out in the Littlefield Building before we could go home.

W: Give us a more exact description. How late would it be?

FR: It seemed like to me they turned those lights out around ten or eleven o'clock, and we had to go down the steps to get out of the building.

W: What time did you usually come in in the mornings?

FR: Well, eight o'clock because that's when--

W: You had a fairly long day.

L: I think that we ought to inject in here, too, that there is one thing interesting about this working late: Lyndon Johnson was there working with us. He really closed the door behind us. It wasn't a case of him going home and giving assignments. He stayed, too.

W: I think it is a very good point and a very human point, too. Because I observed him in his later years here in the Senate and as vice president. It is often said of the President that he is a very hard man to work for, in that he drives people, as they say. I think this is entirely true, and you fellows know this better than I do. But I've always noticed that he drives Lyndon Johnson most of all. I believe-- I know that is true in the presidency. Was it true then, in those days?

L: Very definitely this was true. And where you say he drives people, it bothers me every time I read this. I never got a feeling of being driven by Lyndon Johnson. He gives you enthusiasm for the work that you are doing, and he set some kind of a vision and objective ahead of you that makes you want to work just as hard as he works. And that's pretty difficult to do.

W: I have a friend, a friend of all of ours actually, who once said to me with a laugh, and I think it is true, that the President didn't know what a clock is, he never heard of a clock. And they say, some people-- well, you have all observed that around the White House for example,

he might eat dinner at seven and he might eat at eleven. But it never seemed to me to make any difference to him when he ate.

RR: Bill, he inspired us to work so hard that we didn't know it was work. We had a normal week. We worked six days and drove to Austin and back on Sunday. We had a staff meeting every Sunday.

W: Every Sunday!

RR: And some of us were two and three hundred miles away. We'd work in the district, or in our offices, wherever we worked until nine o'clock Saturday night. Then we drove to Austin and had a meeting all day Sunday and were back on the job the next morning. Isn't that right, Fenner?

FR: That's right.

I'll never forget one time Aubrey Williams came to Texas. I wasn't with him in this car, but Lyndon was taking him on a tour of the projects. It got around one or two o'clock and the story goes that Aubrey said, "I'm hungry." And Lyndon just wheeled into a hamburger joint and said, "Give him a hamburger. We're in a hurry."

W: That sounds very much like him.

FR: He didn't ask what he wanted. He just ordered him a hamburger.

W: You know, I've had the impression over the years that--of course, as we all know, the President had once been a schoolteacher before this episode we're talking about. And I have always thought that he had not only a political and a general interest in education, but a strong, very strong personal interest in it and a personal attachment to it.

I know you have all seen that in many ways. I'd like to ask this question of anybody who wants to answer it. Did the President, when he was director of NYA, act, as I suspect he did, something like the principal of a school? Is there any of that touch in him, or is it something I've imagined myself?

L: I didn't detect it in any of my relationships with him. I never had the feeling of him trying to run NYA as a schoolteacher.

W: Well, what I meant by that--

D: He does have one little. . . And I think he still uses this some. Sometimes he presses you for an evaluation of a situation, and you start equivocating, and he says, "Now would you give it an A or a B or a C or an F?". He used those tactics in those days.

W: That's the spirit in which I asked it really. I have noticed him many times, as you say, estimating a performance in this way, as a schoolteacher would, or I have sometimes seen him estimate it as a debating coach--as he once was, you know. Estimate, say, a speech in the Senate or comment on it later and say the rebuttal wasn't--the point I really meant to ask was whether in these days when he was dealing with young people if you could define what his highest interest was in connection with the program, what would it be? In terms of the educational aspect of it, or on some other terms?

B: It seems to me he always did see himself as a teacher.

W: I've always thought he did.

B: It seems to me at our staff meetings that you alluded to, he was

always trying to say, "Now, fellows, we can do this if you all put your shoulders to the wheel and pitch in." He was leading the way. He was making the contacts and always urging us to extend ourselves to try to reach the goals that he'd set.

W: I was rereading tonight some basic material, research material on that period, and it said something to the effect that when Roosevelt sent him down there to take over this work, before he went anywhere even to wash his hands, he went to call on Governor [James V.] Allred. I take it that was because there was an intimate state-federal relationship, right?

FR: Exactly. He used his relationships with the Governor and with the State Highway Commission to lay the foundation for the basic sort of work projects that we set up for these young people.

B: That's how we got those highway parks started, you know.

FR: That's right. Texas has always led the nation in highway parks.

P: The roadside parks were the first major statewide project we had and the first in the United States.

RR: Yes, that was the first NYA project.

FR: It started under Jimmie Allred and the State Highway Department. Lyndon made the contacts for that, see.

B: So when we got out into any part of Texas, all we had to do was to go to the highway department and say, "We're from the NYA and we want to start in," and they'd pitch right in with us.

W: Now having in mind the nature of Texas in those times, a highly individualistic state as it certainly was, and is now, and having

in mind the residual suspicion of Washington, as it used to be and sometimes is now, wasn't, in a political sense, one of his most intelligent and subtle movements this early effort to get the Governor on his side rather than against him, or to get him to feel he was a part of this rather then just being handed it?

L: Well, I think I would like to comment on this. In going back to your story about him going to see Governor Allred the first thing. The fact of the matter the story is, and it's true, that he arrived in Austin on a train, of course not an airplane in that day, we didn't fly them very often then. But when he got off the train early in the morning, he didn't go to the hotel or any other place. He went right on up Congress Avenue and went to see Governor Allred.

W: Did he have an appointment with him, or did he just go?

L: He must have had an appointment by calling him from Washington because very definitely he went right directly up there, and I've heard him tell this story, too. As you say of course, it was part of his total planning here, of having the Governor as part of his total program from the very beginning.

W: Did he ever have any real trouble with the Governor? I don't know about that. Any difficulty with him?

L: No, they were the closest of friends.

D: Very close friends.

W: Was it because you think the Governor was seized with great interest in the program, or was it more because of the personality of Lyndon Johnson, or was it both? How would you define the fact that the

relationship was as good as it was?

L: I would contribute it to just what you have said--to both, of course. The personality to one, and also if I recall correctly Governor Allred was a very strong supporter of President Roosevelt at the time, too.

W: Oh, was he? I didn't realize he had been.

RR: Oh, yes. And they were very outstanding young people. Jimmie Allred was governor when he was in his thirties, and of course--

W: As a matter of fact, he wasn't much older than the President then, was he?

RR: About the same, maybe a year older. They are pretty close to the same age.

W: I noticed that through the years that friendship or that association he struck up with Governor Allred persisted to the very end, didn't it?

RR: Yes.

W: As far as I know, he always deferred to him--the President did--and they always had very good relationships. I think myself this is one of the personal attributes of the President that has always interested me, the fact that generally speaking when he had a friend forty years ago, he's still got one now. Now that leads me to ask this: people with whom he was associated in those days or whom he helped, say the much younger people, are there many of those people still around him?

P: Well, we're talking to six or seven of us right here tonight.

W: What I had in mind, Jake, was not only you who were with him, his colleagues, but were there any youngsters helped who have later

made their marks that you know of and who, for example, have had any connection with the President or been in his support in later years?

FR: Yes. Governor Connally was on the NYA student aid program and later went to work for Lyndon.

W: Governor Connally then was a beneficiary of the program. He wasn't connected with it?

D: He was not a staff man.

RR: That's right. He was going to the University of Texas and working on the NYA student aid program.

W: Are there any members of Congress from Texas by any chance who were connected with it in the spirit I am now asking, that is, beneficiaries of it rather than associates?

RR: Not so far as I know.

W: I imagine there may be in the Texas Legislature.

R: It's very possible. But there were two divisions to this program, Bill, and we primarily were concerned with the vocational end of it, or the work projects end. Back in those days we built complete school buildings and things like that with these boys on a part-time basis besides these roadside parks and things like that. But we had a high school program and an educational aid program that was handled through the Department of Education. If there was some trouble developed, one of us as a field man might go over and see about it, but we had no cognizance of it directly. So we

know very little, I think--I would certainly, very little--about the university programs and so forth, except some of the friends we have met since then.

W: Right. Let me ask you this. As you all know, the President as a politician from Texas, as I believe, always had the pretty sympathetic support of the Mexican-American minority. He has always had a lot of help from them. He has always been very sympathetic to them. Could this factor in his career have been essentially started in his NYA days?

D: I think it goes back further than that. You remember he taught school when he was about nineteen years old in a Mexican school. And I think probably the first real close contact and association and deep understanding of the Mexican people came from teaching that school at Cotulla.

Now this was chapter number two because there were a lot of Mexican youngsters that were on the NYA program, particularly the work project program which Ray was talking about, as well as the student aid program.

So he had an appreciation and an understanding of the Mexican-American people when this project started. He didn't have to acquire that.

RR: And in his work with Kleberg who had a tremendous number of Mexican [constituents].

D: Oh, yes, that's right.

W: This is off the point, but I want to record this on this tape in case it isn't recorded in any other of these many oral interviews we hope to have. That is an incident during the Korean War when the President was a senator. There was a Mexican-American who was killed in Korea, and when the body was taken back to his little home town in South Texas--

FR: Three Rivers.

D: Yes.

W: Three Rivers, was it? There was some objection to burying him in the so-called Anglo cemetery. I was in the President's Senate office when that matter came up, and he got on the telephone. He called the Pentagon, and he didn't ask them, he ordered them to send a plane and get that boy and bring him up here to Arlington National Cemetery and bury him with full military honors. And they did it. I interrupt this just to put this on in case it doesn't come up later.

Incidentally, are we running too long?

D: We've got all night left. We're in good shape.

W: Good. I think we could turn this maybe usefully over for a moment to just a general discussion by anybody and everybody as to the impact of the President on the state community, the nature of his personal impact to the community during these years when he was with the NYA. [How] was he regarded? I'm having in mind now what we all know, that in those days there was kind of a basic suspicion of federal intervention in local affairs, et cetera. Is it too

much to say that the President helped to abate that feeling?

RR: Bill, I don't think there was that feeling in those days. That was too early for that. People were hungry and all they wanted was somebody to help them, and we were helping them. There was no resentment, none whatsoever. There was no conflict of interest. Everybody wanted help.

W: Ray, this period of "suspicion of Washington," quote, unquote, really came after people got a little bit well. Isn't that about it?

FR: That's right. After we had what we call in Texas as states rights. Well, that came later on after they got the wrinkles out.

W: After the wrinkles got out, they began to be a little suspicious of things they liked very much in the first place. Would you say that in retrospect--guess at it--say ten years after this happened, after what they did down there was done as it was done, would it have remained popular in the public mind generally, or would they have forgotten it, or would they then be turning on it?

P: I don't think there is any way to judge that.

W: It's speculative, I know.

P: History changed all that when the war broke out. For all purposes the program that we had started or was under way then phased out into the military. And, you know, to speculate what would have happened. . . .

W: Were you training men, in effect?

D: Sure.

P: Of course. By the time the war came along, I was an area supervisor. We had workshops all over the state, in my district and others.

W: You mean, training for military purposes?

P: Well, not for military purposes.

FR: Shipyards. Welding, and airplane repair.

P: Yes, I was in Beaumont for a while, and we had welding.

W: I never knew that.

P: Yes, woodworking, machine shops.

W: In other words, the old so-called made-work days, to the degree they existed, were gone by that time. This was strictly--

RR: Vocational training.

W: --a vocational training thing.

P: Well, it started off, as we said earlier, just more or less as curb and gutter sidewalk projects, or roadside projects, or just basically manual work. Then it went into programs that though they would have some construction involved, they would also have some training involved.

I think this is an outgrowth of Mr. Johnson's early desire that no matter what they did, you ought to have some kind of vocational training involved in it. Now, this was basic to the NYA program, too, but it was more so in Texas then anywhere else.

W: Now, that goes back straight to his interest in schoolteaching.

P: I remember one of the first times I came into the district, we'd go up into a project like Inks Dam. [They] had a resident project there, and they had machine shops and woodworking shops there at the project.

D: Electrical welding shops.

P: Now, they would work on projects, but then they'd have classes, too.

Another thing that is interesting. In the mornings, they would raise the American flag and have the bugle sound, and they would lower it in the evening. When Mr. Johnson would come to visit, he would get there at a time when the flag was raised and lowered. And he was there then. I think that was significant.

W: It's good to hear that [in view of] some of the present atmosphere in the colleges these days.

P: That's right. That was back in 1937, you see.

W: Didn't really think there was anything wrong in having some feeling for the flag.

FR: When they first established the naval base at Corpus Christi, they didn't have any trainees to go in and do the repair work on the airplanes. This was in O & R, overhaul and repair shop for airplanes that were coming back from World War II. And we set up all types of training projects there in Corpus Christi with dormitories to train these youngsters to go to work at the naval base.

L: They were also shipping them all the way to California, too, to the shipyards.

FR: And Seattle and New Orleans.

L: And even up to Seattle. The fact of the matter, when I was the director there in Dallas, I know that on occasion [we were] bringing welders in from all the shops around the states to ship them to the

West Coast. At one time I can recall shipping a whole trainload. Now, a trainload is passenger cars of about, I guess, fifty kids to a car, [kids] that were trained as welders. And you would find, as I later learned, hundreds of those youngsters stayed on the West Coast, and they've raised families out there. But they got their start in Texas in welding. That's where they learned this.

D: Bill, I want to go back to one thing. You asked a question a while ago, and we never did quite [finish with it]. I want to answer it this way anyhow.

I think this program and working in this program made a deep and lasting impression on the President. He was not a fellow who operated from his desk. He might be there for twenty minutes in the morning, but then he was out on the project seeing what was happening, talking with the youngsters, understanding them, and asking them about home conditions and encouraging them to work to go to school. And I think that had a very definite carry-over in his philosophy of government today.

W: Yes, I do, too. You know, Bill, that brings up a point I have often thought about. In fact I wrote it once in a book.

I think the Depression and everything connected with it had an absolutely profound impression on the President in many ways. For one thing, apart from the fact that he himself as a youngster had had, as many of us had, some pretty hard days, I think it made him in a very practical way, very effective way, really sympathetic to people in need that might not have occurred had this national

tragedy not happened to everybody. I think when you look at his social legislation of his years in the presidency, a great deal of it, I think, is based in a sense on his memories of what happened to people through no fault of their own in this terrible time we all went through.

Let me ask you a question now in some more detail about the nature of his operation as head of this organization. Now, I gather--you have already said, some of you--he did a lot of traveling. You have just said that, Bill, and he went around and saw a lot of people. But how would you describe the most essential of his functions as the head of this thing?

D: Bris, could you take that one?

B: Well, it seemed to me that he was always trying to see new ways that we could more effectively carry out our responsibilities. He relied on Bill and Jesse Kellam to keep the office operating when he was out trying to find out what was going on out on the scene. There were a lot of things that I think he took a great personal pride in in the projects that we operated, the workshops and the girl centers--we haven't said anything about those.

At the Negro colleges in Texas, we set up workshops for Negroes. I remember one of the stories about the school at Prairie View. We had a lot of Negro boys from the rural areas of all over Central and East Texas who had probably never seen a shower bath before, and you could hardly get them out of there. That was the sort of thing that the President was interested in.

W: That would intrigue him.

As an administrator--if I can sharpen this up a little bit, if you could make a guess, if you could estimate it--what would have been your impression of what the President thought to be--how shall I put this--the highest priority of his function? Was it to deal with his people on the staff? Apart from his going around and seeing the nature of the need, did he give you the impression that his central concern was to keep the staff going, or to keep them sympathetic, or to keep them understanding, or what was it?

B: Well, it seemed to me he was always trying to motivate us to work harder, to be more imaginative, to think of new approaches that we could take to stretch the boundaries of the limitations under which we operated, to be more effective in carrying the thing out.

P: Bill, the nature of the man is to think of a hundred things for you to do during the day that you can't get done. I don't care what the problem is, he'd start looking at it and he'd start asking questions, and he'll have fifty thoughts and fifty things for you to get done in the next hour. And he'll take off with his shirttail flying and leave you to do it, you see.

FR: And then tomorrow he'd want to know why you didn't get through with it.

RR: And the way he'd do, Bill, he would pick--Brisbin nearly worked me to death. He would pair us off or there'd be two or three of us, and you were always behind somebody else. It didn't make any difference.

W: He had a competitive system.

RR: He had it down to a fine point. I don't care how hard I worked, I was always behind.

D: He'd go into Ray's district and tell him how great Brisbin was doing. Then he'd go into Brisbin's district and tell him how great Ray was doing the job over there and he ought to try to catch up with him.

W: I've seen in many ways he is never satisfied with anybody's performance and that includes Lyndon Johnson's. He can always look back and say, "This is all right, but it's a B," as you said earlier, "or it's a C. It should have been an A," and so on.

But I think probably in the longer reach of the thing, the influence this had on the President's own social and sociological ideas is probably the most important thing. Would you say that his experience there and his perception of the need in terms of federal intervention and federal help, and so on, had a precise motivation in later programs? Or do you think it is a general feeling? Who could reply to that?

RR: Jake ought to, because the Job Corps Center for these men is absolutely the same thing we were doing back in the thirties with the resident center for men. There's no difference at all.

W: Let me interrupt to explain for later people the Job Corps thing is essentially a program to train the unskilled and, as it happens, primarily Negroes, so that they can have useful employment.

P: That is correct. That was the basic approach we had back in the

early NYA days, and the approach today is a great deal like it in these types of projects. It is rather surprising when you pause to think about how history has repeated itself. Back in those days we had the program because 1) boys and girls and adults had absolutely nothing to do because there wasn't any work to be had, there wasn't any money--you couldn't even steal money in those days, you see. Now, we had these kinds of projects then so people could do something and to get a little money in circulation. At the very beginning I guess if people were really honest you didn't really expect a full day's work out of them. Our boys didn't always work necessarily the full eight-hour day. But you were trying to get them started. After we got it started, then we went into a training program because we wanted them to get some skills because a lot of them didn't have that kind of an education.

D: Developed a sense of pride, too, in earning.

P: Now here came the war after we had trained them, and fortunately we had trained thousands of boys because by the time the war came along, the NYA converted almost overnight their boys right into the service. They had skills, and it was fortunate for the country that they had them.

But we thought that we had gone out of that area because we had the war and then came back, and prosperity was good and times were good. But history does repeat itself, because then set in a period of about twenty to twenty-five years in there in which America's

educational system kept giving emphasis to the advantageous boys, that is, the quick ones, the sharp ones, the ones who can take out of it. Our whole educational system has been geared, and is now, to helping the boy or the girl who can grab it quickly and move forward. The other fellow drops out. He can't keep up, so he drops out. Now as the farms grew smaller and there was less place for them to go, over a period of time now these boys have gone back into the unskilled market, you see.

And today, though, thirty years later when we ought to have a different area entirely, still here we have come back now with an education gap, so to speak. So the training is just as needed now as it was then, because we've allowed this hardcore to get bigger and bigger and bigger and haven't done anything about it. Now, everybody was like that back in there because there wasn't any work. Now though we just let the seed grow and fester.

W: You know, with what you say, the thought occurs to me--and I think it is probably unchallengeable--that there has not been any president in our time, if only because of the circumstances of experience like this NYA thing, who had a more practical understanding of how you go at these so-called welfare programs and why you go at them, than he did. Now Mr. Roosevelt certainly had great compassion, but Mr. Roosevelt's personal circumstances had never been such that he gripped this thing head to head nor hand to hand, and that was certainly true of John Kennedy. I think that President Johnson, it is obviously true to say, in the sense of real know-how, about how you

go at this kind of hardcore situation, that just by fate or fortune this NYA thing had an enormous amount to do not only with his hopes for the future, but with his skill in handling it.

FR: Of course under Roosevelt's regime, you want to remember that it was strictly an experiment. No one really knew what to do. Nothing had ever been accomplished like that before. But under the Johnson Administration, he had the benefit of this background.

W: Right. He also had the [first-hand experience]. The difference here, it seems to me, is the difference between a combat officer, which he was in this so-called War on Poverty, and a staff officer with all sorts of good intentions who is back in an insulated, higher echelon office where he doesn't really know, in a human sense, I think, perhaps what the President understood or certainly what he learned there.

I raise the point because many of the President's critics have always questioned, or tended to question, what they called his real commitment to these social programs. As a matter of fact, historically his commitment is very long and began rather a long time before most of theirs did. Is that not true?

P: There's no question about it. Absolutely. I think that's quite right.

I remember the story [about how] he worked on different jobs, and he was going to make his way in the world, and he found out it was pretty hard. I believe the story was that he was working on a road gang out of Blanco alongside with Wayne Smith and maybe one of the Crider boys. But anyway along the middle of the afternoon that

sun was coming down and his hands were blistered, and he just decided this wasn't very smart. His mother had been trying to get him to go to school. And along about the middle of the afternoon, as I recall it, he just pitched his shovel on the truck and said, "Wayne, this ain't for me. I'm going to go back to school and see if I can't learn something."

W: I think that is about the size of it.

You know you mentioned the Crider boys. I was smiling because the President in his personal folklore has these Crider boys very prominent, because when he wants to make a point-- (Laughter)

D: He's got a Crider story to illustrate anything he wants.

W: --he says a Crider said this or Ben Crider said that. Criders to him are almost Paul Bunyon figures. They're figures he can illustrate all kinds of points with.

I recall that he told one story that I think is worth putting down for posterity about one of the Crider boys. I can't recall the beginning of it, but the effect of it was the President and one of the Crider boys and some other people were in a car, and the man who drove the car had given them the lift--and particularly Crider. But they had a flat or they ran out of gasoline, and the nearest filling station was five miles. The man in the car had been the benefactor, and he rather expected that Crider would volunteer--whichever Crider it was--to go back to the filling station five miles. And Crider said, "Well, you fellows go ahead and I'll stay here and watch the car." (Laughter)

P: That's the gist of it. That's another story though. You ought to get J. C. Kellam to tell that one.

(Laughter and inaudible comments)

D: Bill, I want to make a statement before the tape runs out.

We've heard the President [discussed]. We've talked about him as a teacher, as an administrator. We've heard him described as a great leader in the Congress, sometimes as a compromiser. But I really think he is the nation's greatest salesman. Back in the NYA days we were talking about how he would work Ray against Bris, C. P. against Fenner, and things like that. And if it is a question of going into town and seeing the Mayor or going to see Jimmie Allred, he sold them on the idea that he had. He's always been a great salesman.

W: I agree. I once told the late President Kennedy not too long after he had been inaugurated with Lyndon Johnson of course as vice president--the subject of Lyndon Johnson came up and I said to President Kennedy, "I'll tell you one thing about him you'll find out, and that is that he never lost a head-to-head argument with anybody alive or dead."

D: I think that's right.

W: Kennedy looked at me a minute and smiled and said, "I think you are right."

L: I'd like to go back to a point, too, that we were discussing at the beginning of this conversation: the President coming back to Texas and possibly running for the Congress from the very beginning. I

think we are leaving the wrong impression. He may have had of course, and I believe he did certainly, some ambitions to go back to Congress some day down the road. But when he came to Texas I have every reason to believe by then and the year we worked with him, his first interest was for the youth of Texas.

W: Oh, I'm sure of that.

L: He was sincere. It wasn't politics.

W: I'm sure of that, and I didn't mean to imply there was some design in this. What I meant to say was that I thought I guess in the very nature of the thing--and after all, it seems to me running for Congress is not really any real crime.

L: No, I don't mean to imply it.

W: When he got to Congress I think on the whole he attempted in the same way to serve the poor and--

D: For the record it ought to be pointed out, too, that he ran for Congress only when the Congressman died. Congressman Buchanan had been representing the district for years and years, and he died. And again he grasped an opportunity that was there.

W: No, as a matter of fact, the President, although he is a very skillful politician, and everybody knows that, I think probably in the very last end of it, his real private interest is far more in the matter of doing things than it is even in politics as an art. I don't think the President is interested in political techniques much. It always struck me that he sees politics I think properly as an implement, but not a great thing in itself--an implement, a means of

reaching power to do things that he thinks need to be done.

No, I don't think anybody thought he went down there with some clever idea, "Well, I'll get some notice and run for Congress." What I meant to say was by the nature of the thing, it gave him large exposure over the state.

L: No doubt of that. We spread his name from one end of Texas to the other: Lyndon B. Johnson. And it wasn't L. B. Johnson. We used Lyndon B. Johnson on everything, of course.

W: Well, we've had some--oh, by the way, if we've got just a moment before this tape runs out, I think we've got a moment, was there any special association by the President in those days--

(Tape ends abruptly)

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Discussion]