

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 23, 1969  
INTERVIEWEE: KENNETH O'DONNELL  
INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN  
PLACE: Mr. O'Donnell's office, Park Square Building,  
Boston, Massachusetts

Tape 1 of 2

M: Let's get your identification on the beginning of the tape here, sir. You're Kenneth O'Donnell, and your official position with the Johnson Administration was as special assistant to the president from the time he took office, a job you continued in from the Kennedy Administration, on until the early part of 1965. Is that correct?

O: In addition to that, Doctor, I was also executive director of the [Democratic] National Committee. I held two positions at the same time.

M: You had been in Washington beginning in the late 1950s with the Rackets Committee investigating staff, with, later, Senator Robert Kennedy. Did you get to know Mr. Johnson at all during that time?

O: No. I had seen him, but I'd never met [him]. The first time I saw Senator Johnson then was when the hearings were being conducted on the space program in 1957, where they used the same room we used. We were ejected from the room because of the hearings that the Majority Leader then wished to hold. But I never met him until the convention of 1960.

O'Donnell -- I -- 2

M: Do you think it's possible that the later well-advertised antipathy between him and Senator Robert Kennedy dated from that early?

O: No, I don't think. I think it's the most overrated differences that I've ever. . . . Both parties were guilty in the end probably, but we really have to put ourselves in some perspective. We were clerks, both Robert Kennedy and myself, to the Majority Leader of the United States Senate. I would be amazed if Robert Kennedy met him other than in a very cursory fashion, and if he was going to deal with our committee he would deal with Senator McClellan who was the chairman and who was--I presume he would consider him a contemporary but not staff members.

M: You joined Senator John Kennedy's staff in 1959, is that correct?

O: I began with him in 1952. Although not being paid, I really worked for him all that period of time in a private capacity. I went to the convention with him in 1956 and then I came back. As a matter of fact, we had taken control of the Democratic Party here for the first time in 1956, and John Kennedy then involved himself in the party. And in 1957, the day I got the phone call to go to Washington, I happened to be in the Democratic State Committee headquarters and I didn't really want to go. Robert Kennedy had just begun that investigation. It had really begun as sort of a minor thing and suddenly it was all out of proportion with Dave Beck, and he felt he needed somebody down there to give him some protection who was a friend. I was very much against it, but I finally did get down. I presumed that Senator Kennedy knew all about it, but when I got

O'Donnell -- I -- 3

there I found he didn't know all about it and he was very unhappy because he had planned for me to run his 1958 campaign and he didn't want me in Washington. So we made some accommodation.

As I say, I tell you, and it's a rather interesting incident, I think it lends some [insight]. The only time that I even remotely knew of a conversation with the Majority Leader was when at the end of the 1958 election, the Democrats had won that very large victory that year and had achieved a large majority now in the Senate, and the labor people wanted to change the composition of the Senate Committee. It was then a select committee which was bipartisan with four Democrats and four Republicans. The labor people wanted to make it five Democrats and three Republicans as a result of their victory, and make it proportionate as they did the rest of it.

Senator McClellan was totally opposed to it. I happened by accident to be in Senator McClellan's office when the Majority Leader, whom Mr. Meany had just talked to, called Senator McClellan and said that he wanted it changed to a partisan committee. Senator McClellan would remain as chairman, but it would be a five-three committee. Senator McClellan, who rather decides a lot of things for himself, just listened very politely and kept calling him, "Mr. Leader." Then he said, "Of course I have to go along with what the Leader says. But let me tell you, Mr. Leader, that, number one, I won't serve on a partisan committee investigating anything this sensitive, and number two, you obviously can change the committee any way you want it. Of course, I will have to take it to the floor

O'Donnell -- I -- 4

of the Senate and oppose you, and I intend to put it just the way it is. This is just cheap politics. If you want to work for the labor people, you go work for the labor people, but I'm going to work for the United States Senate." He slammed the phone down and you could hear it for ten blocks. Needless to say, the committee was never changed.

M: It was never changed?

O: It was never changed because very few people fool with John McClellan in the United States Senate. But that is the only conversation, and I realized then for the first time that one can be majority leader but they lead only where others are prepared to follow.

M: That's an interesting insight into one of my two senators, too. The people of my persuasion don't usually think very highly of Senator McClellan in Arkansas, but that sounds more credible really than [I would expect].

O: I cite that as my only [exposure up to that time]. And I went back with my judgment first of Lyndon Johnson which, number one, despite all the newspapers he didn't run the Senate; the senators run the Senate. And John McClellan was a tough guy.

M: And remains so. Did Mr. Johnson have any kind of working relationship or close personal relationship at all with Senator John Kennedy?

O: In 1956 I think that's their first, really. In 1956 he had the famous speech of the fighting sailor. So we had rather warm thoughts about Lyndon Johnson ourselves without knowing him at that time, because he had been friendly. They had obviously no social relationship,



O'Donnell -- I -- 5

the difference in age would dictate that, and political philosophy obviously.

I asked him one time how Lyndon Johnson ever became leader. We really have to go back. Lyndon Johnson was a rather insignificant figure in the Senate.

M: Yes, a first-term senator.

O: You get the Dick Russells and you've got some pretty heavy hitters in there. He said to me, "He's the only fellow that would take the job." He was then minority leader. He said, "It's a tough, tough job. It means you have to work full-time, you have to be on the floor full-time, and you have to go around and do the little housekeeping chores that nobody else was prepared to do. And he would do them." The southern leadership, those that could have had it--Dick Russell could have had it anytime he wanted it, or any one of those fellows--just didn't want any part of it. They wanted to work with their committees. And the northern senators, most of them have to be home all the time campaigning because they're mostly in swing states a lot. John Kennedy didn't want it because, firstly, he wasn't that much of the Senate establishment ever, and, secondly, he was going to run for president and he knew he had to be out in the country. He had some respect for--their relationships were very good in those years.

M: You and other staff who were working for Mr. Kennedy's ultimate run for the presidency, did you feel as if Mr. Johnson used his leadership

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 6

to stop the "Kennedy for President" movement in behalf of his own, or in any way tried to interfere with the progress of your political ambitions?

- O: Up till 1958 there was no--I think after the convention it became quite obvious in 1956 that Senator Kennedy was going to be a formidable contender. And then Lyndon Johnson had the heart attack which immobilized him for a period of time. In 1958 we were running our own campaign up here, and certainly with no attention to Lyndon Johnson. I speak for myself, but I'm sure I'm representative.

We felt that President Johnson, at that time Majority Leader Johnson, and Speaker Rayburn were certainly much more conservative than we were in a philosophical sense, and so therefore we were not happy with the kind of leadership they were giving in the United States Senate. We thought they were overly cooperative with President Eisenhower and that they were not--this really goes to the Democratic Advisory Council position almost, which would be similar to ours, and that would be our only thought in a philosophical sense. We accepted them as southern leadership, which was different than ours at that time. But it was certainly nothing personal. None of us ever considered Lyndon Johnson as a formidable contender at that time. He was not well himself, and whether he was ever going to get back on his feet and certainly get back to be a candidate for president was unthinkable to us. And also, I think I would make as a politician a very cold analysis that at that time a southerner could not be nominated for the presidency

O'Donnell -- I -- 7

under any circumstances, and so therefore we didn't [consider it]. To my knowledge, at no time did he ever place any--his relationship with the Senator continued rather friendly.

In 1959 and 1960, he was then recuperating in 1959 and it became a little more evident that despite everything else he might be a candidate. I think we all thought that if there was going to be any opposition it probably was going to be Stuart Symington who would be difficult.

But in 1960 then we did become concerned. Quite obviously he was supporting Adlai Stevenson in the primaries in a financial sense, and also Hubert Humphrey. We were aware that he had encouraged Humphrey to run. Humphrey was unelectable and unnominatable at that time, and we knew that, so therefore he was only in there as a spoiler and was being encouraged by people, which we now know to be true, who really had them in there to stop John Kennedy. So we had uncovered Lyndon at that moment in both of those cases. We had uncovered Adlai Stevenson and we had uncovered Lyndon. In West Virginia it became very, very obvious when Senator Byrd really took off after John Kennedy that he was being sponsored by Lyndon Johnson.

Our only concern at that moment, despite we had our own political problems, was Bobby Baker. Kennedy was making speeches on some rather crucial issues that affected the United States of America, area redevelopment and depressed area programs, and then to be caught not voting on them, you are pretty vulnerable. So our concern then

O'Donnell -- I -- 8

was whether they would call a vote when Senator Kennedy was out-of-pocket so to speak, and then Hubert Humphrey was going to know what the vote is and he was going to fly back and vote on it and say, "While I was there voting on it, the Senator was off making a speech about it." So that began to concern us.

M: Was some of that done? Did Mr. Johnson skip to some fast votes?

O: No, they didn't do it. We also had somebody in the Whip's office who told us when the votes were coming. But that was concerning us because Lyndon Johnson's hand was very large on the horizon then at the moment, and there was no question that he was--and rightfully, I don't quarrel with it or criticize it--but there was no question he was in with Bobby Baker, and being Bobby Baker we were very concerned.

M: Some justice, no doubt.

O: Yes.

M: The events at Los Angeles that year had been reported and over-reported, and I certainly have no intention of having you repeat things that are public record. Are there any details of the nominating process for vice president that you think have not come to light that might be important to add?

O: I think, number one, the whole. . . . Can I just say right now, I'm in the process of writing a book about President Kennedy, so I'm not going to tell you much, except one [thing]: it is so untold.

In the first place, as we got into the campaign his [Johnson's] strategy was quite obvious; he was going to use the senators and the

O'Donnell -- I -- 9

congressmen. That was his only knowledge of national politics, and it was totally without merit, as it was to prove. They just don't have that kind of strength at a convention. I might say, and I go back to Arkansas, that I found that out in 1956 when John McClellan was very friendly to Robert Kennedy. I went to see John McClellan, whom I had never met before in my life, and Robert Kennedy and I sat with him and he said, "Can you help us in the vice presidential thing?" And he said, "You know what? With Orval Faubus as the governor, I'm lucky to be here as a delegate." That's the first time we learned where the muscle was.

M: They tried one year there to keep Fulbright from being a delegate even.

O: Yes. I'm sure they could if they wanted to. But we learned a great lesson. We realized where the power was in the United States, and it does not lie with the Congress or the senators. Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn were just as convinced that that's where the answer was, and I think they got the total shock of their life as they suddenly started to realize that these fellows they were relying on really had no political clout at home at all.

So as we traveled around the West, we had won all the primaries and we were sure that we were going to be nominated, but a lot of the western states have these conventions at the later dates between the last primary and the convention itself. We traveled around and we ran into Lyndon Johnson at every stop. There would be a few we might call real liberals who'd be for Stevenson, but the majority of those

O'Donnell -- I -- 10

who were giving us any trouble in the smaller western states was Lyndon Johnson who was then portraying himself not only as a southerner but a westerner, as you recall. But we had our counts, and we got out to Los Angeles feeling very confident.

Then there was John Connally's famous--and Perle Mesta--when they said the President had Addison's disease and he couldn't serve out the term; if he was elected, he was going to die. And it started to get a little bitter between the Kennedy-Johnson people, which was to culminate really in that debate. It's interesting enough, the relationship between the two.

We had the votes on the first ballot, the second ballot, the third ballot or the tenth ballot. We had the votes. I was in the room when it came on television that Senator Kennedy had agreed to a debate with Lyndon Johnson. I called him on the telephone. He was in his car. I said, "You know, this is a real error. You don't debate with a fellow when you've got the thing won!" He said, "Look, I know Lyndon like no one knows Lyndon, and I can't wait to get there." He went in, and I think that was the end of Lyndon Johnson at the debate. That's when he [Kennedy] made the famous statement, "You're a great majority leader, and I hope you'll be the same for me," which even the Texas guys started to laugh at. But it was all over at that moment.

As far as the vice presidency, no one had ever even thought of Lyndon Johnson. I flew five thousand miles in a rickety old plane, The Caroline, which was then called a great airplane, that

O'Donnell -- I -- 11

went about one hundred twenty miles an hour and out west that's pretty good speed. You're in the air a long time going between spots. We used to just sit and talk, and once in a while we'd discuss the vice presidency and he never mentioned Lyndon Johnson's name. I don't think any of us thought an awful lot about it. You try to win what you win and discuss other things afterwards. The first revelation I had was the day of the nomination when I got a call from Pierre Salinger saying, "Come up to the room. Bobby wants to see you."

Robert Kennedy was in the usual Kennedy place; he was in a bathtub. Pierre said, "He just told me to add up all the northern states we think we can carry and add Texas." I said, "You mean Johnson?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I can't go for that myself." So I went in to see Robert Kennedy and I said, "Bobby, I've always dealt through you," which I had, he was our leader, "but this is too much. I'm not about to stand still on this one. I want to talk to Senator Kennedy myself." He was visibly disturbed.

He and I went up to see Senator Kennedy, and I then went in with Senator Kennedy alone, and he and I had the only real fight we ever had in our life, which I lost, obviously. Because the liberals I knew would not stand still for Lyndon Johnson. In a sense many of the delegations that we had, Pennsylvania and some who have some substantial Negro delegations, they'd really sold them on the basis that if it wasn't Kennedy, it would be Johnson. So it was a very difficult thing.



O'Donnell -- I -- 12

This is where the Robert Kennedy-Johnson thing begins, which is all false. Everything that has been written about it is absolutely false. I don't think President Johnson ever believed it. I told him, I told him to his face, and I told Phil Potter who wrote it in the Baltimore Sun at the time, that this just wasn't true. I was the one that objected to Lyndon Johnson.

After I'd made my objections quite clear and the Senator then told me his reasons, which I accepted, had to accept, then he asked Robert Kennedy--we had terrible problems with labor. After all, Lyndon Johnson had been the chief obstacle to many of the bills that labor had been interested in, and Walter Reuther and George Meany had gone to Johnson for seven years and received nothing, but showed the door. So I knew what our problems were, particularly with let's say the left wing of the labor movement, so to speak. So my last words from Senator John Kennedy were, "You get your tail end over and get your labor friends"--I'd been the liaison with labor in a delegate sense--"You get them and tell them this is the way it has got to be. I don't know whether he will take it or not, but I have offered it to him and I am suspicious he will take it."

So Robert Kennedy now was absolutely neutral in the whole thing. He didn't have any position one way or another, and he was not present at the conversation. I came out and said, "Bobby, we've got this problem and he may go. They're not going to listen to me, they're going to listen to you. I'm not that big, and you and I will

O'Donnell -- I -- 13

go over and see them. I know them all, but you're the candidate's brother and you've got the muscle. I don't have it."

So we went over to see all the labor people. I don't think Robert Kennedy ever was so savagely attacked in his life. I chuckled a little bit as I saw them after he [Johnson] was president all over at the White House at a dinner telling him what a great guy he was. I mean they murdered him and it was really rough. Guys, some of them who were great personal friends of mine, I had spent a lot of time socializing with these people and am still personal friends with all of them, families and everything else. They were just so bitter it's unbelievable.

We then came back. We did not mollify them in any way, and as we left that hotel to go back to see Senator Kennedy, my distinct impression was, and very clear, that they were going to get a candidate to run against them. I gather the same thing was going on back at the hotel. Soapy Williams positively said that there would be a candidate on the floor.

That's a pretty rough sort of a thought to go into a campaign. When you were on national television--I mean, it would have gone 60-40, but the speeches were going to get a little rough after a while and would advertise for sure the split in the Democratic Party.

M: Those were your states, those were the states you were strong in.

O: Yes, and it was going to be real, real tough. You were going to get into the Negro thing. You were going to get into the southern versus the northern. He is a Catholic candidate. Southerners, we've

O'Donnell -- I -- 14

got troubles with them no matter what we do over religion, and now you're going to get it in race plus religion. Now, beyond that, we have to go back to the Congress of the United States because Rayburn and Johnson have a weapon called the rump session in August, which means you now have got to go back to a total hostile Speaker, who was ten times tougher. Lyndon Johnson, we didn't worry about, but Sam Rayburn is a tough cookie, and well liked and respected, and we needed him much more than we needed Lyndon Johnson. So we were in rather serious difficulty.

Now we came back. They advertised Bobby Kennedy was ashen; well, he was ashen. We were all ashen. We didn't know what to do with it. The only hope we had at that moment, that I did, was that Johnson wouldn't accept it. Then you would have been in the position of offering it to him so the Speaker wouldn't get mad; at the same time you could move to Symington or Senator Jackson or whoever else, and reopen the thinking about it.

By the time we got back, Lyndon Johnson had indicated he'd accept it.

M: What had caused Senator Kennedy to choose him, did he indicate in that conversation with you?

O: Yes, he did and I'm not going to say what that is.

M: That's going to be in your book.

O: Yes. This is the key to the whole thing, and whatever has been said is not true. There were only two of us present, and one isn't here but I know other people who know it. But anyway it is going to be in

O'Donnell -- I -- 15

the book, and it is the key to the whole thing. Whether he chose him or just offered it to him, I don't know. That goes on between the two men and what was in their minds, who the heck knows! But the fact is we came back and Bobby talked to the Senator and told him what the problems now were. The labor people were not going to be sweet-talked out of it. That's when he went down to see Johnson.

M: When Bobby went down.

O: Bobby did, now with the fruits of all the bitterness that was alleged. He was sent down by John Kennedy to tell Lyndon Johnson that he was going to be faced with a fight on the floor, and if he wished to take that--and I'm sure he was hoping he would say, "No, I don't want a floor fight." He told Bobby he'd take a floor fight, he wanted the vice presidency, and if Senator Kennedy wanted him, he was prepared to fight for it. Now then the fat was in the fire. Allegedly Bobby tried to talk him out of it. I don't question that, but Bobby was carrying messages. As he said himself, no one would ever believe him years later. Later John Kennedy ran his campaigns and we worked for him, you'd better believe we worked for him. When he made a decision that was it, and Bobby Kennedy didn't have anything to do with any of his decisions. He carried them out.

M: He was acting then under very close instructions in all of this.

O: You'd better believe he was told to go down and tell Lyndon Johnson what the problems are and you're not going one step further. When John Kennedy tells you, he just wasn't that kind of a fellow to his brother or anybody else.

O'Donnell -- I -- 16

The fact is, this I don't even know about. Bobby came back up and he talked to his brother and I don't know what their conversation was. But he came out and said, "He's going to accept it. There's going to be an announcement right now. And we'd better get out to the convention hall and get our troops in line, because we've got troubles!"

He and I went out to the convention hall. At seven-thirty that evening I received a phone call from a gentleman named Jack Conway, who was Walter Reuther's administrative assistant, under the eaves of the television cameras and they said they would not oppose him on the floor. They would not put up a candidate; they were just as angry, but they would not tear up the convention.

M: Did they say why, what had changed their mind in between?

O: They thought it would hurt the party and it would hurt Senator Kennedy, and they wanted to win the election. They were committed totally to him, and they sat down and talked it over and just decided it wasn't worth that. Now we were faced with a situation with Governor [G. Mennen] Williams, who had indicated he would put himself in if necessary and there would be a candidate. Then the negotiations began with him, which were to culminate ultimately in the Speaker asking for a unanimous--no one else being nominated--[vote] before we got to Michigan. At the end of Massachusetts, when they came to Massachusetts, they would ask for a unanimous vote for Lyndon Johnson and Michigan would not be called upon to vote. Williams went through an act of opposal, and "Let me get

O'Donnell -- I -- 17

the microphone," but he didn't want the microphone. It was all over. That's Lyndon Johnson's nomination.

M: Did that open up any kind of lasting divisions on the Kennedy staff between those who had opposed his inclusion on the ticket and those who had gone along without opposing it?

O: In fairness, the only ones involved were Bobby and I. Other members of the staff were not. I'm not being mean, but they were not on that level that they could talk to the Senator on that basis and even have that kind of influence with anybody anyway.

M: It just wouldn't have arisen in that sense.

O: They didn't even know about it. They would receive information and that's it. And most of them weren't even on the floor of the convention who would be called the Kennedy staff. Perhaps outside of myself and O'Brien and Bobby Kennedy, I don't know anybody that was on the floor that really was working in that sort of a political sense. We had guys like Governor Ribicoff and Speaker McCormack and senators and governors and people like that who would be called Kennedy people, but they were not involved in it. Most of them received information from him, such as Mayor Daley, this is the fellow the President wanted, this is what he gets, and Bill Green and people who really had some influence, some delegates. But the only two people involved in it were myself and Robert Kennedy, and the only one that I know that actively opposed it was me. And my relationship with Johnson probably ended up being the best of any of them.

O'Donnell -- I -- 18

M: So there was no lasting division there?

O: None.

M: After the administration began, you as appointment secretary were in a position to know more than anyone else, I suppose, what access, how frequent and so on, Mr. Johnson had to President Kennedy. The people we've talked to always indicate that Mr. Johnson was usually at the important meetings, but he rarely said much. They intimate at least that they thought he probably rendered his advice privately. Did he? Did he get in frequently enough to render advice on important matters privately?

O: Can I go back just for a minute?

M: Yes.

O: On how I first met Lyndon Johnson.

M: Yes, by all means do that, if I miss an episode.

O: Then I'll go to the other.

We then opened--we went over and took over the National Committee. Senator Kennedy called me up to the Hill to discuss his schedule with me. That was the Whip's office; it was now Senator Mansfield's office where he moved into. I walked in. Senator Jackson was then national chairman, and Senator Jackson was there. It was the first time I ever met Lyndon Johnson. We sat down to discuss the schedule. He was also discussing how bad the bills were going to be and how badly they were going to be beaten. Lyndon was a great pessimist and wasn't too happy, I don't think, that he now had a new leader. The relations were a



O'Donnell -- I -- 19

little strained quite clearly from the beginning. This fellow who had just been one of the senators hanging around was suddenly the boss calling the shots on what they do with the bills, and that irritated quite obviously. This was what I detected. Now he's got to talk to some little jerk that he wouldn't have spoken to two months before, and he was very difficult to deal with. We got to talking about the schedule, which I am somewhat of an expert on and which I had been working on for six months. I started to explain to him the things I thought he ought to be doing, which didn't set very well with him at all, and which I saw very clearly and Senator Kennedy saw very clearly. And [Kennedy] said, "Look, you assign someone to work with Kenny. He knows this stuff better than anybody I know, as to what you're going to do." I think Lyndon Johnson saw himself just being sent around the South, and he began to feel he was being used as the southern half of the ticket, and I think he began to resent that right then and there. We talked about an hour. I listened for about an hour. And then we left.

Then I got a call from Senator Kennedy and he said, "You see what the problems are, don't you?" I said, "Yes, I think I do, Senator." He said, "Well you've got to work it out yourself. We have to mesh those two schedules or it makes no sense, and I'm going to be stuck here for a month." I then went around the country to set up the schedule, and I didn't come back until September.

The next time I saw Lyndon Johnson, I'll interject a little humor. We arrived in El Paso on the way to the celebrated Houston

O'Donnell -- I -- 20

ministers' confrontation, and got off the plane. There was a fellow who used to work for John Kennedy many years ago who had moved to Florida. He had worked for him in his first campaign and he wanted to do some advance work. Inadvertently--really, I had come later than he did, he was in 1946 and I was in 1952--I kind of felt we had shuffled some of the old fellows out and it wasn't fair, so I allowed them to do it against my better judgment. But this fellow had gone to advance the Texas trip. I didn't really have any control over the individuals; that would be done by someone who worked for me. We arrived in El Paso, and the most outraged Lyndon Baines Johnson got on the plane that I've ever seen in my life. He had a clipping in his hand. The clipping is a statement by this gentleman that Senator Kennedy didn't need Lyndon Johnson in Texas, that he was so unpopular in Texas. He had made it [the statement] at a party, I'm sure Mrs. Randolph's friends who hated--

M: Who said that.

O: Who said it. But there was a newspaper reporter present, and it's a long article about how unpopular Lyndon Johnson was in Texas. Well, you can imagine Lyndon Johnson getting on the plane, and Senator Kennedy [who] recognizes the name as someone he has fired sixteen years ago turned on me and blistered me for twenty minutes. I walked off the plane and fired the guy on the spot. He admitted he'd been drinking and he had said it. Well, Lyndon Johnson was just--the trip was just unbearable, and he brought it up every fifteen minutes. It was to me. He didn't dare bring it up before Senator Kennedy but it was all my fault.

O'Donnell -- I -- 21

M: He held you responsible?

O: I had to say, "Yes, I'm sorry" seventeen times. Speaker Rayburn was with us, who looked at Lyndon like he was a little baby and kept telling him to "Keep quiet. You've mentioned it once. Don't keep bringing it up all the time. It's all over. The man is not here anymore."

M: Nothing could be done about it then.

O: Nothing could be done, but Rayburn was looking at Johnson and just kept shaking his head and didn't know what was going on. Anyway, Rayburn was wonderful on the trip and really went all out because the crowds were terrific. Suddenly Rayburn realized they don't all hate Catholics in Texas, and "this is a little better than I thought." He made some of the greatest speeches for John Kennedy, particularly in Dallas where we really took the Democrats to task for--

M: There was no doubt about Rayburn's popularity in Texas at all.

O: No. But he made a great speech in Dallas, I'll never forget it. He was talking about Democrats and about religion and these rich oil millionaires in Dallas. He said, "I can remember when you didn't have a patch on your pants. The Democrats have given you everything you had and now the minute you get rich, you turn on them." There was silence in the place. But he made a great speech. He warmed up so much you couldn't believe it as the trip went on. By the time we left we ended up in Texarkana, and we must have had 200,000 people in Texarkana.

M: Which is four or five times as many as the--

O'Donnell -- I -- 22

O: Oh, yes, but they have something there that they do every year, so it wasn't just. . . . But they had a fantastic crowd, and Sam Rayburn got on the plane and said, "Well, we're going to win. I never believed it before, I thought we were just going through the motions."

But Lyndon was really sulking all through the trip in Texas.

M: And not helpful.

O: He was against going to the ministers, as the Speaker was. The Speaker and I sat together and watched it on TV and he was stunned, because he was totally against it. He said to Senator Kennedy, "These are not ministers. These are politicians who are going around in robes and saying they're ministers, but they're nothing but politicians. They hate your guts and they're going to tear you to pieces, and you shouldn't have done it." After it was over he said, "That was the greatest thing I've ever seen in my life," and that really was the key to him. But Lyndon sulked all through the whole trip.

We separated, and I was in touch with Bill Moyers and Jim Blundell, who worked for him then and who was working in Washington with my people, but Moyers and I would be in constant contact all through the campaign. He was a great kid, and they were more than cooperative. We never had any trouble with them as far as going, we would suggest they go places.

Incidentally the Boston-Austin access was my idea. But we brought them into Boston first because I sensed how self-conscious [he was]

O'Donnell -- I -- 23

that we northerners don't like him because he was a Texan. We put on a show from here; they had a horse for him and he was the happiest guy when he got back, because "they really do love him." They had a hell of a crowd, and that feeling is all in the newspapers. They don't care about Texans or anybody else, they just wanted him to get elected, and they did a great job for him up here. He was so stunned that they were all so nice to him, but he's an important man to people up here--the majority leader of the United States Senate is a very important fellow to an average guy in the street. He couldn't get that through his head. But this was a key part of our relationship. He was so pleased with that, because he knew I did it.

But then Moyers and I really hit it off perfectly together, and all of the Johnson-Kennedy crowd in the headquarters. Jim Blundell and the fellow who was doing for me was treasurer of the National Committee later--it was Dick Maguire--had become fast friends. Jim Blundell got married at Dick Maguire's house a month ago, so they're buddies. And Cliff Carter was a friend. So the relationship between Johnson's staff and the Kennedy staff of the political side was very close and very friendly and continues to be. Walter Jenkins is a great pal of mine. There was no friction going into the campaign and up until the election.

M: Then to move into the administration--I'm very happy you did go into that sidetrack--do you want to go back to the position of Mr. Johnson after the administration began and his access and so on to the present time?

O'Donnell -- I -- 24

O: We then go into the White House. Lyndon Johnson had, firstly, a lot of influence in who was appointed to what positions. He was down at Palm Beach, and from the very beginning the President instructed all of us to be overly--he understood Lyndon's sensitivity better than any man in the world. He came down, John Connally obviously, that was at the Speaker's personal request. And then the President had respect for Lyndon's judgment, and he knew some people the President didn't know. Staffing an administration, as Mr. Nixon has found, is very difficult. They talked almost every day on the phone about people that he might know, what his judgment was, and the President did everything in the world, including going down to Lyndon Johnson's ranch which he detested because he hates to hunt and it's just not his cup of tea. He and Lyndon are not the kind of fellows that can sit three hours together; they're talking about different things all the time. But he bent over backwards to help Lyndon.

Now we go into the White House. The President said to me, and I remember it as I sit here at this moment, we are sitting down having a drink. He said, "I just want you to know one thing. Lyndon Johnson was majority leader of the United States Senate, he was elected to office several times by the people, he was the number one Democrat in the United States elected by us to be our leader. I'm President of the United States. He doesn't even like that. He thinks he's ten times more important than I am, he happens to be that kind of a fellow. But he thinks you're nothing but a clerk. Just

O'Donnell -- I -- 25

keep that right in your mind. You have never been elected to anything by anybody, and you are dealing with a very insecure, sensitive man with a huge ego. I want you literally to kiss his fanny from one end of Washington to the other. And if I ever catch anybody in this White House demeaning. . . . In the first place none of them have ever been elected. Elected officers have a code, and no matter whether they like each other or hate each other, those who have not achieved that approbation of the people have got troubles." He said, and we used to kid about it, I was in charge of the care and feeding of Lyndon Johnson. He had made an agreement with Lyndon Johnson that every appointment in the state of Texas would be cleared with him, not that he was to get them all, but that they were to be cleared with him, every single one of them. This was a source of great arguments between all of us because sometimes we made mistakes and he caught you every time you made a mistake.

M: He, meaning Mr. Johnson?

O: Yes. But that was my job. We had a spirited relationship. He was very difficult, but Walter Jenkins and I used to talk every single day. He'd tell me what the troubles were and what the problems were, and then he'd come over. But he had total access to the President of the United States.

M: Did he use it much?

O: He used it when he had a matter to discuss, but as a matter of fact he would always call me and our relationship couldn't be better. He would always call me, and he knew he could always see the President



O'Donnell -- I -- 26

any time he wanted, he would come in the back door if he felt like it. Many times he would come in and chat with me about a matter he had. Their relationship, I thought, couldn't be better. The press really spent all that time trying to separate the two of them, and who was the second most powerful man in Washington, and then they started to put Bobby in between Johnson, they did everything they could.

Bobby and President Johnson may have had some problems. I don't know what they were, because we didn't have any with him. The President saw he was invited to everything. Jackie liked him very much. They weren't socially each other's cup of tea, but the President really I can't say how much he [tried]. He wasn't being unselfish about it. He was very cold about it, he was a very pragmatic fellow. He said, "I can't afford to have my Vice President who knows every reporter in Washington going around saying we're all screwed up, so we're going to keep him happy. You're going to keep him happy."

We had some hilarious contests with him that you wouldn't believe. Should I recite one of them for you?

M: Yes, this is the kind of thing we like.

O: This is a typical relationship. He came to me; Speaker Rayburn wanted to get a fellow appointed to the ASC, which to us in the North, we don't even know what it is. It's very important in the large states in the South particularly, a very important position. The Speaker had a candidate. He went through Larry O'Brien's office and he wanted this. We used to have a meeting, we had a member

O'Donnell -- I -- 27

from the National Committee who would relate the state political end of it, or John Connally would call him and this is John Bailey's problem; then we had a congressional side and that would be O'Brien's problem; then we had my side which at that time would be Dick Maguire. The three of them would sit down every day and go over all the appointments, and then they would send them to me with their recommendations which would usually be unanimous. Then I would take them up with the President and he'd make a decision.

This time they recommended this fellow, and I asked them if it had been cleared with the Vice President. The fellow said to me--it was Dick Donahue, who was an attorney now in Lowell, Massachusetts, who worked for Larry O'Brien and he got the call from the Speaker. The Speaker said, "I don't care"--he'd never bothered us much on patronage--"I want this fellow," because Eisenhower had fired him. In a minute he came in, he was an old pal of the Speaker's, and the Speaker said, "This is one I want." I had his Civil Service report because he'd been in and it was rather voluminous and I'd read all through it. We always cleared them with the Bureau and the Civil Service before we'd make the appointment.

I got a call from Vice President Johnson. He wanted to see me. He came over and said, "I don't want that fellow appointed. I have an agreement with the President that nobody's cleared unless they're cleared through me. I don't care, but the fellow is a confirmed alcoholic. He's going to embarrass the President and he's

O'Donnell -- I -- 28

going to embarrass me." I said, "Well, I think you ought to know that Mr. Rayburn wants this man very, very badly." He said, "Well, he's an old crony of his, but I don't want him." I said, "I think we'd better discuss this with the President of the United States because I don't want to be caught between the Vice President and the Speaker at this stage in my young life."

M: Right. It might end right there.

O: So I said, "Let's go in." He was kind of reluctant but he came in and we told the President the story, and the President said: "Well, I have an agreement with you." I said, "Well, we understand that the Speaker wants this very badly. I have read his FBI report, his Civil Service report, and I have not seen one single mention of drinking in the reports. Nothing. There is nothing derogatory in his report." The President said, "Well, I'll stick by my agreement."

The President and I had discussed it a little beforehand, so I said, "Okay, fine," and I reached for the telephone. He said, "What are you doing now?" I said, "I'm going to call Mr. Rayburn and tell him that the man can't be appointed." He said, "Good. You tell him that you don't want him appointed." I said, "Oh, no, Mr. Vice President, I'm going to tell him that you don't want him appointed." He put his hand on the phone and said, "You can't do that!" I said, "Mr. Vice President, it's either you or the President that's not going to appoint him, and it's not going to be the President." The President was just sitting back enjoying the whole scene, and he said, "Well, don't call him. I'll call you in

a few minutes." He went back and about five minutes later he called me and said, "Well, go ahead and appoint him. I guess he's all right." He wanted no part of a quarrel with Sam Rayburn.

M: He didn't want to get caught in the middle either.

O: But this is what's going on almost daily. We made a couple of mistakes. Judge Sarah Hughes got appointed in a terrible mistake. She'd already been turned down, and Sam Rayburn got her appointed. Lyndon Johnson was then in Berlin. He came back and you never saw such an outrage. He was right, he was totally right in the whole thing. But we were not aware of his conversations with the Attorney General and we weren't aware of any of these things, but he was right in the whole thing. It was a mistake, but he went through an act which is beyond belief with the President and me. But this was our relationship all through it, and that's what his relationship was with the President. He could come in any time he wanted.

You said earlier about the meetings. The ones I attended with him he was very silent. I think he was badly hurt by the meeting when he went up to preside over the caucus. He still was going to be majority leader and vice president. I don't think he ever recovered from that, and I think that was a source of some of these, it would be fair to say, "cry baby" stories that would emanate. He was rebuffed by the Senate. Their prerogatives they regard very jealously, and it had nothing to do with us because the President didn't care whether he went to the caucus. But he never quite got over that.

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 30

M: What did President Kennedy want Vice President Johnson to do? Did he want him as a political operative, or as a liaison with Congress, or did he have a specific job that he wanted him to accomplish for him?

O: I think he had great respect. Number one, Lyndon had been in Washington for thirty years and he moved in circles that John Kennedy did not move in. He certainly is as close to Dick Russell and some of the southern leaders, some of them didn't like him, but most of them did. Larry O'Brien is now a congressional liaison, but he'd never been there before in his life. So the President sort of hoped that as presiding officer of the Senate that he was going to be up there talking to these fellows every day, and that he is a source of intelligence to him, and he hoped that their relationship was close enough so that he could come back and say, "Dick Russell's mad about this," so if he is we could do something about it because we need Dick Russell, and we need these fellows up there. He had got good judgment on legislation, where he sat every Tuesday, what we're going to do about bills, or whether to send which first. That's what the meetings are all about, and Lyndon Johnson probably knows as much about it as anybody in the world. And that he'd contribute this expertise to the conversation.

The vice president of the United States is a very important fellow. I don't quite ever understand the talk about him. The people in Washington really respect the vice president of the United States. He's number-two man and we've seen, he may be president

O'Donnell -- I -- 31

some day. But a call from the vice president is pretty good. And also going around the country. He's not going to send Ken O'Donnell out to make a speech. Who's Ken O'Donnell! You'd be explaining who you were for the next six months. A special assistant to the president doesn't mean anything, but the vice president of the United States does.

We set up this program, which was under my direction, to go around the country and explain our bills. We brought in all the cabinet officers, who would go in and sit down and have a give-and-take with the mayors and everybody of what is HUD all about and what is this bill about housing and what we're trying to do for you. We're trying to help ourselves politically, and at the same time we're trying to find out what our problems are politically. You're running a campaign every minute when you're president of the United States.

I tried to get Lyndon Johnson to go and open them up. I went to him, as a matter of fact to his house, and had a rather long drinking evening. I said, "Number one, you're probably going to want to run yourself in 1968, Mr. Vice President. And you're not known in the North, you don't know two people outside of the South. This is the greatest opportunity you've got in the world. You go in there and they're all looking for you because you've got goodies to give them now. You are vice president of the United States, and you make the speech in Detroit and Cleveland and Chicago. We'll set them all up for you, we'll do all the work, we'll even give you

O'Donnell -- I -- 32

the speech. You just show up. You're going to meet all these guys, the Dick Daleys that you never met before. In 1968 you're going to want them." He wouldn't go. "No, they hate me up in the North."

M: No further explanation than that.

O: Lady Bird was there one night and she couldn't get him to go. He wouldn't leave me. He finally ended up at my house at six o'clock in the morning. Walter Jenkins was with us, and we argued and argued all night long. He just said, "They don't like me, all those colored people up there are going to boo me." So at six o'clock in the morning he agreed to go.

He went to the first one that was in Michigan, which he was scared stiff of. He called me the next day and said, "You know, I got the greatest ovation I ever got in my life. When is the next one?"

M: Now he wants to go.

O: He went to all of them. He cooperated one million per cent. Now he found the northerners really don't hate him, and they don't. He's vice president of the United States and he's a pretty big man and they don't hate him, I don't care where the hell he comes from. That came as a total shock to him, a total shock to him. Now he has started to do all these things politically, this is what the President wanted him to do. He couldn't be out doing all of these things, and Lyndon Johnson was just as effective in Detroit as he is in Biloxi, Mississippi. Once he got that through his head, then he started to work at it.



O'Donnell -- 1 -- 33

You said earlier, at these meetings he didn't speak up, but I think he spoke up privately.

M: You do think he did?

O: He did. They went to parties together, they'd have a drink together, they had a little rapport, you know, as long as it wasn't a social event. Dave Powers will tell you a story about them going out to Eunice's house one day, and they both had three or four good drinks together and you'd think they were the two greatest. . . . But there never was any conflict. And the President of the United States, I never saw anybody do so much. He understood Lyndon like the back of his hand, he was an insecure fellow and as long as you treated him right, he was all right.

Let me give you an example of the problems that he had. We had a meeting on oil depletion, which has now arisen, on the tax bill. We're sitting in the room, it was Larry O'Brien and the President and Ted Sorensen and Lyndon Johnson and myself. We're talking about what we're going to do about tax reform. We had the package that's now going up there. We got into a conversation about what we'd do about oil depletion. Ted Sorensen, being the most liberal of the group in some senses, was saying, "We've got to send up an oil depletion bill." Larry O'Brien was silent. I said, "I think it's a terrible mistake. You're going to blow the whole package, you are not going to get an oil depletion bill out, and you're going to lose every other thing you're trying to get in there. It just isn't going to pass. Every man in that Ways and Means Committee, they

O'Donnell -- I -- 34

didn't get appointed until they agreed on the blood oath by Sam Rayburn that they would not vote against oil depletion. I think it's a terrible mistake. I think we ought to take it out and send it up later as a separate bill. It'll get killed, but at least we will have shown our good faith. But don't lump it into a package that destroys the whole bill!"

The President is saying absolutely nothing, and he turns to Lyndon and says: "What do you think?" He said, "I couldn't agree more. Kenny's absolutely right. Now they're going to say because I'm a Texan I'm for oil depletion." Then he said just about what I said. He said, "Kenny and I are in total agreement." That's fine.

The next day I got a phone call from Mr. Johnson and he said, "Have you read the Wall Street Journal?" I said, "Nope." He said, "Well, I'll send it right over to you and then I'm coming over five minutes after it."

There is the story that Johnson is trying to lick the oil depletion bill to pay back his Texas constituency! He came over, and he and I went and had a cup of coffee. He said, "You wonder now why I don't speak up in the meetings? You know, you made that suggestion." I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you know one of the people, and I know it wasn't you, I know one of the fellows in that room went out and told the press that I was against it, right? And that's why I don't speak up, because some of the fellows in the White House hate my guts, and you're the only one I can trust over there. But you tell the President for me--will you bring that article in to him--if

O'Donnell -- I -- 35

he thinks I'm kind of silent at meetings, that maybe that's why I'm kind of silent at meetings?"

He was hysterical, and he was right!

M: There were those who were likely to leak his views--

O: Yes. They took it out, now they're trying to explain why they took it out. I talked to Pierre. At the President's request he called all the press in and said, "I want you to know the suggestion was made by Ken O'Donnell and not by Lyndon Johnson." They all laughed. You know, it's a joke. What's Ken O'Donnell doing suggesting tax legislation?

M: A clerk!

O: Yes. So they just think it's a big joke. He wouldn't speak now for another month.

M: With some justice.

O: With very much justice, yes.

M: Are there any other White House episodes that you think are important to get in here? Don't let me limit you or cut you off.

O: No. I think if there was any complaint about the Vice President through that period of time, it was he didn't speak up and the President needed and wanted his advice, particularly on legislative matters. He was so resentful of being at the legislative breakfasts with Mike Mansfield being majority leader and Hubert Humphrey, who was quite voluble, speaking on every issue. And they sort of all treated Lyndon like he was one of them and he didn't want to be treated like he was one of them. If he did say something, they'd say,

O'Donnell -- I -- 36

"You're wrong," or "I don't think you're right. You haven't been up there lately." So he just drew further and further into his shell as time proceeded, in National Security Council meetings and things of that nature.

For example, at that time we were consummating a wheat deal with the Soviets and couldn't get him to say whether it was right, wrong, or indifferent. Well, the criticism we're going to get is going to come from the right, and we've got to cover our right flank on this one. He wouldn't open his mouth so I finally gave the President a note that said, "Get Lyndon on the record. Is he for or against the deal?" We couldn't get a word out of him sideways or otherwise. Finally it ended up, the President said, "Well, you and Lyndon work out the details of it," the political aspect of it--who he should be calling. Obviously we had a problem with Paul Douglas because the wheat is going to go into Chicago and maybe the longshoremen won't unload it. We said, "We've got a lot of problems and Douglas is going to appeal to the Slavs up there, the Poles who hate the Russians. We've got political problems to put in line, and you and Lyndon will put these problems in line." And he left. Lyndon said, "I don't mind doing it with you. You're absolutely right on Paul Douglas, and these are the fellows we ought to talk to," which he went and did. But it was just that sort of-- he was uncomfortable all the time.

M: That's a good example, because that became the first big thing he had to do with Congress, I think, after he became president, was

O'Donnell -- I -- 37

put through a program that he had been unwilling--he did so with energy, I guess, after he became president.

O: He changed totally, after he became president.

And then the Texas trip comes along. This was just a general-- Lyndon Johnson was not cooperative, but he had a lot of reasons not to be cooperative and it wasn't personal. His relationship with the President was excellent. And whether there was something going on between him and Robert Kennedy, I wouldn't have the slightest idea. I'd never heard about it, I used to read about it in the newspapers.

Then the Bobby Baker thing came up. That's another important thing, which is a total, absolute accident.

M: Accident in what sense?

O: The Attorney General's office didn't know it was coming up. It just came up all of a sudden because Bobby was sued in court by the vendor who said he took out his machines at a Defense contractor-- it went before a court, and all of a sudden the FBI is in it. What is Bobby Baker doing selling vending machines! And then like Topsy, it just exploded. So that was Bobby Kennedy's fault! Bobby Kennedy had no more to do with it than a man in the moon. Lyndon thought he did. Now Lyndon thinks everybody's trying to get him.

Then there'd be stories in the paper that President Kennedy is going to drop him in 1964. And Lyndon, being of a conspiratorial mind himself, said this was all a plot. The last time we rode down, the week before the President died, we sat on a plane and George

O'Donnell -- I -- 38

Smathers said to the President, "Everybody on the Hill says Bobby is trying to knock Johnson off the ticket." And the President sat there and looked at George and said, "George, you have some intelligence, I presume. Now you're trying to say my brother--now who's he going to put on the ticket, himself? That would be a great ticket, wouldn't it? Now, that's not possible. Correct? So why would he want to knock Lyndon Johnson off the ticket? Can you see me now in a terrible fight with Lyndon Johnson, which means I'll blow the South? I don't want to be elected, do you mean? You know, I love this job, I love every second of it. And, George, do you know how that would read if Bobby Baker was indicted tomorrow morning and with the girl situation involved? Life Magazine would put twenty-seven pictures of these lovely looking, buxom lasses running around with no clothes on, twenty-seven pictures of Bobby Baker and hoodlums and vending machines, and then the last picture would be of me. And it would say, 'Mess in Washington under Kennedy Regime,' and 99 per cent of the people would think I was running around with the twenty-nine girls because they don't read the story, and I'm going to defeat myself. You think my brother doesn't like the attorney general's job? He wants to be out? Smathers, you just haven't got any sense, and if Lyndon thinks that, he ought to think about it. I don't want to get licked. I really don't care whether Lyndon gets licked, but I don't want to get licked and he's going to be my vice president because he helps me!" But this was all simmering in Washington up till 1963.

Now the Texas trip comes up.

O'Donnell -- I -- 39

M: That's another one that has been reported in vast, vast detail.

O: Yes. You go back to Manchester and read the trip was started by me because I was irritated that we never got any of that wonderful Texas oil money that I used to read about that financed all these great campaigns, and I know is true, and so I said to the Vice President: "All I hear about is how rich you people in Texas are. We are running all over the country campaigning. In 1962 we spent an awful lot of money on congressional campaigns. We took every cent we had and financed congressmen and senators' fights." So we were dead broke. Not that you can't raise money as president, because you can in 1964. But I was saying to him half in jest and half not, "Where is some of that money? You know we had dinners in Massachusetts and raised 3 million dollars in the last two years and they're starting to complain a little bit up there that they're getting a little broke, because they don't get anything in return anyway. So what about it?"

So he reluctantly [agreed]; this went on for four months before he'd agree to go to Texas. Now the reason he didn't want to go to Texas was apparent: Yarborough. He didn't want to point out that he was not up to handling the situation in Texas.

Incidentally he didn't do anything for Texas, and John Connally got me one day on a problem he had. We were down in El Paso on a trip out West and we were having a few drinks in the hotel room. He and I went in the bedroom and he said, "Look, you've got to take care of us because Lyndon won't lift a finger. He thinks that they're



O'Donnell -- I -- 40

going to accuse him of being another Texas crony, and we do live in the country and we ought to have some rights to get something somehow. So if you don't mind much, I'm going to call you directly on our problems."

M: Rather than going through Mr. Johnson?

O: Yes. Mr. Johnson was there, he was in the room. It was Johnson and myself and I think Homer Thornberry was there and a couple of other congressmen, Jim Wright. So he did. He used to call me, every problem Connally would call me directly, so we had become very good friends. But Lyndon was very sensitive.

Anyway, the Texas thing was set up on that basis. He went over the Yarborough problem with me, and Connally went over it. The problem was more with Connally and Yarborough than it ever was with Lyndon and Yarborough. John Connally said to me that they didn't invite Yarborough to the house that night [November 22, 1963]. I said, "That's impossible. You'll just have to cancel the trip. You can't have the Senator. . . ." He said, "We're not inviting any of the congressmen." I said, "But look, John, we're going down there to mend some fences and when we end up with every single reporter saying that you refused to invite Yarborough! They don't care about the other congressmen." He said to me, "My wife won't let Mrs. Yarborough in the House." Now you're down that wives don't like wives, how do you get into those things!

We eventually straightened that out and the fellow who straightened it out was Congressman Albert Thomas, really, who is no longer with us

O'Donnell -- I -- 41

but was a great pal of the President's and he got them on the plane and really knocked their heads together.

M: But again, Johnson wasn't the one who--

O: Johnson had no more influence in that situation because Yarborough-- just getting Yarborough to ride in the car with Johnson! Now Johnson was totally amenable, but Yarborough wouldn't ride in the car with Johnson. Eventually Albert Thomas got them to work it out, but only after Connally agreed to invite Yarborough to the house. Connally agreed to do that and to invite the whole congressional delegation. So as we end up on our way to Love Field, everything is smoothed out. Johnson and Yarborough agreed to ride together, we're going to go to Austin to the dinner, and everybody's invited to John Connally's house. It was a tough, tough fight. Thomas and myself sat with Connally for twenty-five minutes, but Thomas is the fellow that finally put the thing together for the President. Everything had been solved when we ended, but Johnson had very, very little influence on it. He was willing to do whatever we wanted, but he sulked all through the trip.

M: Are you going to cover the events of the day in Dallas in considerable depth in the book you're doing?

O: Yes, there's not really much change from the Manchester one except I will say that the allegations of the fights are just absolutely totally untrue. The plane situation which I don't mind going into, I'll go into it right now, is a total misunderstanding which President Johnson compounded because again everything was a conspiracy to him.

O'Donnell -- I -- 42

They left. He and I had the discussion that it might be a conspiracy, which is a very proper judgment to make at that time. And he made it. I'd already sent agents to cover John McCormack, and he and I were in agreement on it. We don't know what happened, we're all in a daze anyway. We discussed whether he should go back to Bergstrom Air Force Base, where he'd get some police security--military. I strongly urged him to go right to Love Field. Number one, if it was a conspiracy no one would know what hospital we were at and no one would have any route covered and he'd be safer than if they had had a route in the newspaper. It only took ten minutes, and speed was of a necessity. Get back to Washington. Which he agreed to do. I asked him. Manchester has got in the book, he said, "I'm in your hands, whatever you tell me to do. Kenny O'Donnell's in charge of everything." He obviously was in a state of shock himself in trying to figure what we were going to do. He got in the car and that was the last I saw of him. I waited and the rest of it is history.

Then we got on the plane. We arrived on the airplane and we're all punchy now. I'm concerned that the Dallas police are going to come and take the body off the plane and Jackie Kennedy's going to have a heart attack right in front of us there. I'm petrified. We get on the airplane and I'm urging them to take off. We don't know Johnson's on the plane. McHugh runs up to the pilot, who's our pilot, and that's the first time we knew we were on Air Force One. Told him to take off and then somebody said, "Tell O'Donnell he's not the

O'Donnell -- I -- 43

commander-in-chief anymore. President Johnson is on the plane." That's the press secretary who I had fired the day before, that was his last trip. But this is the first I know of the presence [of President Johnson].

So then I went in to see the President. Before I could say anything he said he'd talked to Bobby and that Bobby told him he ought to be sworn in right there. On the surface it doesn't make any sense, because he's president of the United States the minute they say "you're dead." You don't need to ever be sworn in. I think the man wanted to be sworn in in Texas, and there's nothing really wrong with that except if you've got a crisis and a conspiracy you ought to be up in the airplane, which I thought at the time. But that's not my business, he's president. I was just concerned about Jackie.

But I went back and sat down and Judge Hughes arrived ten minutes later. I'm still trying to get them to get the plane off, swear him in and let's go before those cops show up and get us all in trouble. Even if the President's here, they can just put a motorcade cordon in front of him. An autopsy under the law is required. I'm illegal, not them.

M: Did you explain this to Mr. Johnson?

O: No, never mentioned it at all, never mentioned it to him. I saw no point in it because he said if the law requires and the Attorney General said, then I'm in no position to say the Attorney General

O'Donnell -- I -- 44

doesn't know what the hell he's talking about, let's take the plane off.

So anyway I went up to see him get sworn in and I'm trying to get them to get moving. He said to me, "Would you ask Mrs. Kennedy to come stand here?" I said, "You can't do that! The poor little kid has had enough for one day, to sit here and hear that oath that she heard a few years ago! You just can't do that, Mr. President!" He said, "Well, she said she wanted to do it." I said, "Well, I just don't believe that."

She was then in President Johnson's room then. That's where Manchester said I kept pacing up and down the hall. I was pacing up and down the hall, I was waiting for her to come out. You don't break into a lady's bedroom quite often, and the President of the United States' wife. I paced up and down for five minutes, and I'm hysterical myself now, so I finally walked in. She was combing her hair. I said, "Do you want to go out there?" She said, "Yes, I think I ought to. At least I owe that much to the country." So I said, "Fine."

She walked out and stood there in the swearing-in ceremony and we took off.

M: There has been some confusion about that conversation than Mr. Johnson told you he had had with Bobby. Had he in fact talked to Bobby, and did he say Bobby or did he say the Attorney General? Manchester makes a point of that is the only reason I go into it.

O'Donnell -- I -- 45

O: Bobby's recollection of the conversation--obviously, he's hazy, must be. I reconstructed it in the fashion that he called Bobby to tell him what happened and also to get what the legal views were. I don't know who suggested that, maybe Homer Thornberry did, because really that makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, to be frank with you. He is president of the United States the minute they say, "You're dead," with all the powers of the presidency. He never has to be sworn in ever in his life. He says Bobby said, and he really sort of hedges that, and he said Bobby put Katzenbach on. In the first place Bobby wouldn't have the slightest idea, I would think that very few people off the top of their head could find what the Constitution really says. I know it is the fact. The fact is you're president. You can get sworn in eight months from now if you feel like it--

M: The vice president on the death of the president.

O: You'd better believe it, it says right there in the Constitution. And I think Bobby got irritated at that because that didn't make any sense, but Bobby didn't know any of the background either. I'm sure he just threw the phone to somebody.

There's no question in mind that Lyndon Johnson wanted to be sworn in by Judge Sarah T. Hughes, an old family friend, and he was afraid somebody was going to take the thing away from him if he didn't get it quick.

M: And in Dallas, Texas. In Texas.

O'Donnell -- I -- 46

O: In Dallas. But now in fairness, he doesn't know any of the other things. I think if he'd realized, I'm quite certain he would have taken off, but you couldn't explain it to him. He doesn't catch it that quick, and it was this long, involved sort of a situation. He didn't realize the Jackie part of it, so therefore he was not at fault in any of this.

We took off and we were in the air, he asked me to come up and see him. I talked to him for a few minutes, and he used the famous line that he used on every single staff member "I need you more than he ever needed you." He came back, and he was changing his shirt with me and he said, "You can't leave me. You're the only one that I really get along with there. You know that I don't know one soul north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and I don't know any of those big city fellows. I need you. My staff doesn't know anything, they don't know anything. They don't know anybody outside of Texas."

I'm noncommittal at the moment. I went up and talked to him about ten minutes, but I wanted to stay with Jackie. So I went back and sat with Jackie. And the longest conversation I recollect is Bill Moyers came back and asked me if I'd go up there and talk about a meeting with the NSC and I said, "Bill, I don't have the stomach for it and I'm going to stay here with Jackie. I can't leave her." He said, "That's fine. I don't blame you and the boss understands fully. No problem whatsoever."



O'Donnell -- I -- 47

Now you come to the famous last complaint about getting off the plane. He never asked anybody to get off the plane. And there wasn't the slightest--if he had asked, he certainly could have gotten off with the First Lady. I don't know who ever suggested he said he would like to get off with [her]. Eventually Manchester makes a big scene out of it, Jim Bishop does worse, that all the Kennedy people crowded around. Who were all the Kennedy people! There were only three of us on the plane!

What happened really was the soldiers got on, they brought the ramp up, and I said, "I think we ought to leave with him. We came with him, we ought to leave with him." It was a moment of emotion. And we grabbed the casket and told the fellows to wait downstairs. "We carried it on the plane, we're going to carry it off the plane." We don't even know Lyndon Johnson is within five thousand miles of there. Bobby had come through the plane and panicked. He took Jackie. We carried the body. I never saw him, I hadn't seen him to this minute, and never heard anybody saying he'd like to get off in my life. That's all made up. There were never any arguments. There was no Johnson staff on the plane, except Bill Moyers, who was a personal pal of all of us. Johnson had no staff. Jack Valenti, we'd never met in our lives before. I used to talk to him on the telephone, I thought he worked for Albert Thomas. I didn't know he had anything to do with Lyndon Johnson.

M: He was on the plane, wasn't he?

O'Donnell -- I -- 48

O: He was on the plane. He joined the plane. He asked me could he have a ride in the plane and that's the first time I ever talked to him. I had talked to him on the phone fifty times in planning. He was a PR guy and Albert Thomas told me to talk to Jack Valenti because we'd been to a dinner for Albert Thomas in Houston. That's why we went down there. I mean the timing of it. So all of this is concocted baloney.

We now go back to the White House, and that's about it. I didn't go to the White House for another two or three weeks. He used to call me every day. I just didn't have the stomach for it, but there was no problem with him and me.

M: That would tend to indicate then that what Manchester called the groupings of the Kennedy staff, the loyalists and the realists, that that's fictionalized pretty much as far as you're concerned? Manchester talks about the ones who couldn't adjust and the ones who could and tags them with those names.

O: I don't think that's terribly unfair. I considered myself a loyalist, yes. I was not going to stay in the White House with Lyndon Johnson. Firstly, because I knew I couldn't get along with him, which is not any more his fault than my fault, and, secondly, I don't see where there's a job for me. When you work for President Kennedy, and when you work for the President as his appointments secretary you live with him. Every single decision--I know his personal banking problems as Walter Jenkins knew Lyndon Johnson's. He's lived with him, and they're personal and social friends. You

O'Donnell -- I -- 49

just can't exist without that kind of relationship in that kind of a position. That doesn't accrue to anybody else in the White House. Whether they like it or not in all the books written there's not one single soul who can get to see John Kennedy unless they clear it with me, period! And they've got to tell me why they want to see him because he doesn't want to see a lot of people. He has got a lot of things on his mind. That's true of whoever [does the job]. Marvin Watson did it for Lyndon Johnson. Marvin Watson wants to know why you want to see him because that's what his job is. You go on trips with him, you live with him, because you're the only fellow that is with him. That's just a relationship which never could pertain to Lyndon Johnson and Ken O'Donnell. If that's being a loyalist, I'm loyal to what I believed in. I don't have any differences with him, I got along with him better than anybody else did. When I finally agreed to stay, I agreed to stay on a basis that I would resign as soon as the election was over. In fairness he didn't know anybody in the United States, and I didn't want to see Barry Goldwater president of the United States. I worked with him on the McClellan committee, and I don't want to see him president of the United States. So I would have done anything to prevent him from being president.

M: So your job then wasn't really as appointment secretary after that. It was sort of an undefined special staff position mainly as a liaison with, say, the northern political leaders that Mr. Johnson felt like you knew better than he did?

O'Donnell -- I -- 50

O: It started out and sort of evolved into--I came back some time in January, and he wouldn't let me out of his sight. Lyndon is a rather demanding fellow. He was frightened I was going to leave. He had a good relationship with me, he knew Walter and I had an excellent relationship, and so did Bill Moyers and so did Valenti. So I was pretty invaluable at that moment, and I didn't mind trying to help him--how they transferred the sort of things away from me. For example, the FBI reported to me on everybody.

Lyndon at that time was really gun-shy over the Baker case. He saw that as his most formidable problem, and I'd say he probably spent the first three months trying to get out of that one so it didn't end up in his lap. He didn't want to talk to me much about that because he still in his own mind feels that Bobby began it. You know, the humorous little things. The week after I was there I found a lock on my door. All of our doors were open in the White House when John Kennedy was there. Now all of a sudden the door is locked. I couldn't care less, but I don't know how you're going to go in and talk to the President if the door is locked. Of course Valenti was now in my office, and a girl--my girl--Jack Valenti just threw up his hands, he doesn't know what to do either. He can't get in either. But it was Lyndon's all along suspecting Bobby's going to run for vice president, concerned about my loyalty in the long run, which he had every right to be. I had frankly told him to his face, I said: "If Bobby Kennedy runs for vice president, I will tell him I think he's wrong. But if he runs I will resign

O'Donnell -- I -- 51

and go to work for him because that's where my loyalty is. But you'll be the first one to know." So he said, "That's fine with me, I don't quarrel with that.

M: Did he ever try to use you in resolving that situation?

O: Oh, yes. I was the go-between between Bobby [and President Johnson]. I think President Johnson trusted me. He didn't think I was a liar, he may not have liked my attitude upon some occasions. But I think without any question that if I had been willing that I would have been appointments secretary. He came out one day and said, "I don't want anybody [else] ever to sit at this desk as long as I'm president of the United States." And he meant it. He had great confidence in my judgment politically, and we talked every single day. He chased me all over the place.

M: His favor can sometimes be as smothering as his disfavor.

O: Oh, yes. But I went to every legislative meeting. He asked me to go over, after about four months when he thought he had the White House under control Walter Jenkins was now doing the FBI stuff and Valenti had come more and more into, and Moyers, being really the appointments secretary, and I think he felt then that he wanted me for the campaign, but that he could sort of start to move into his own troops, which is quite proper. He asked me if I'd go over to the National Committee, and I told him the same thing I'd said before. I said, "You are not going to trust me. If I talk to Dick Daley, you in your own mind are saying 'are you talking to Dick Daley about Bobby or about me,' and there's no point in that. After the

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 52

convention is over, then I'll go over to the National Committee but not until. It doesn't make any sense." He agreed with that.

We used to have a drink every night together and sit in that little room and it couldn't be better. I've just given you incidents--again, I had some sympathy for the fellow.

We went up one day, I think Jackie Kennedy had a birthday, and he called me and said, "Would you ride up with me?" So I did. We went up to the party--it was at the F Street Club, I think--and we walked in and they were presenting Jackie something. I think we signed something and gave it to her, all of us. So the President of the United States arrives and Mr. Dillon and all of the Cabinet members are there, they're all in white ties and tails, they're going to a meeting at some embassy after this about six o'clock at night. The President is in a baggy, old brown suit and I'm dressed in civilian clothes. We stood there. I don't think anybody even spoke to him. He stood there. We had a drink. He wandered around, almost trying to get somebody to talk to him. It was just outrageous. It was really outrageous.

M: It was calculated, do you mean?

O: No. He still was vice president to most of those people. They were fluttering around Jackie and Bobby was there and they were fluttering around Bobby, all chatting with him, McNamara. . . . Larry O'Brien with us, the three of us were standing around having a drink talking to each other. Finally he turned to me and said, "Would you come back to the White House with me and have a drink?" I said yes. We

O'Donnell -- I -- 53

got in the car and he said, "You know, it's a funny thing, I am the president of the United States, after all, aren't I?" I said, "Jeez--" You know, it was ill-mannered. But knowing his ego, you can imagine what it did to him.

So we went back and sat there until about eleven o'clock at night. Lady Bird came over and got him out of there, and we just chatted about it. He was really hurt.

M: The press began to publish a lot of things shortly after that about the Georgetown dinner gossip and so on and various Kennedy staffers demeaning Johnson privately. Was that highly exaggerated in his mind above what actually occurred?

O: I don't think that began then though. I don't think there was any of that. Arthur Schlesinger resigned, Sorensen had resigned. The only fellows that he had any interest in whatsoever were O'Brien and O'Donnell. He was thinking totally politics, his re-election, and he wanted us. He thought Larry did a good job on the Hill, he also knew politics, and he had a nice big Irish Catholic name. Lyndon thinks of those things. O'Donnell was purportedly the closest guy to Kennedy, he has got a very lovely name with Dick Daley and up north. It was a cold understanding on both our parts. He wanted us for that purpose, and we wanted to see Goldwater not elected president of the United States and I had no reason to not want Lyndon Johnson elected president of the United States. He couldn't have been nicer to us in that period of time. We never had any problem with him and we got along famously with all the



O'Donnell -- 1 -- 54

staff. There was no friction whatsoever between our group, and I don't know of anybody else in the White House that ever had any problem with Johnson. He didn't begin to change in these things until much, much later.

M: You said you were the go-between between him and Bobby frequently. What about the famous alleged episodes of the blow-up at the first cabinet meeting that Mr. Johnson was supposed to have had at Attorney General Kennedy, at that time, and later during the episodes about the vice presidency? Did you have personal confrontations during that time, or were you the man who kept them apart mainly?

O: They had one confrontation about a fellow, which was Robert Kennedy's fault, that was employed by the National Committee. He was the Rasputin of our administration and what his relationship is with the Kennedys I will never know. I fired him nine times myself. He was the fellow who was telling all the bad stories about Lyndon Johnson as vice president. He also was telling bad stories about John Kennedy, that Bobby was really president--this was all coming from this one fellow. Bobby finally came over and I said, "The President said if you want him you pay him, I'm not going to pay him." This is John Kennedy now. "I don't have to pay guys to be knocking me." This fellow had been out in Wisconsin and I had fired him in 1959. But I don't know--he had some relationship with them that I am not aware of.

O'Donnell -- I -- 55

Anyway, the President used to love to get figures. He watches his money very carefully--Johnson. And he saw this fellow's name on the payroll at \$20,000 on the National Committee and said, "I want him fired." And amongst two or three others that shouldn't have been there, I didn't disagree with him. I was handling this stuff because he didn't want to be firing the Kennedy people. I didn't mind doing it, some of them I would have fired myself, I didn't want them there anyway. I said, "This is a personal one with the Attorney General, and at this stage in your relationship and what has happened, this is not the time to do that." He said, "All right. You tell Bobby that I don't want him over there." I said, "Yes, let me do that."

So I told Bobby and Bobby said, "Tell him to go to hell." And I said, "But Bobby, you can't tell him that. This is his committee now. Unfortunately he is the president of the United States, we may not like it, but it happens to be the way it is. It is his money. The man is knocking his brains out, and if I were him I wouldn't want him either." So he said, "Well, I'm not going to do it."

So I went back and Lyndon said, "Well, I'll give him a couple of weeks and then ask him again. I don't want to do anything precipitately but I don't think that's unfair, is it?" I said, "Nope. President Kennedy fired him six times. He wasn't just knocking you, he was knocking him, too." He said, "Yes."

So anyway two weeks later, he said, "He was at a party the other day and he just murdered me. I don't have to pay him to do

O'Donnell -- I -- 56

it, do I? You tell Bobby I want him gone." I met Bobby at the airport, and Bobby was "No." I said, "Well, you'd better tell the President yourself then because I'm going to knock him off the payroll by Monday because I'm under instructions or I'll have to quit. I don't think that's probably the way to go out. I don't want to go out over this fellow, if you don't mind." He said, "Well, I'll go see him."

So he went to see him. And he stormed out of there, and that's their first fight. He said to me, "What right did you have to tell President Johnson that President Kennedy was going to fire him. I said, "Was? I fired him six times. He couldn't stand him." He said, "Well, you had no right to tell him. You're my friend." I said, "I've got a right to tell him the truth." That's probably the only fight Bobby and I had during all of the years we were in Washington, was over that. Johnson was stunned. He said, "How could you possibly have a fight over that? All I said to him was 'pay him yourself if you want him. Put him over in the Justice Department and pay him.'" So that's their first fight.

M: When did this occur?

O: This must have occurred around January or February. Bobby was still heartsick anyway. But that never was brought up again. He sent him to Indonesia after that. Their relationship was correct. Bobby was not himself at all.

And then the vice presidential thing began to occur. New Hampshire, which drove Johnson up the wall. So now he is very deeply concerned about Bobby Kennedy.

O'Donnell -- I -- 57

To go back to December, Bill Green had died, the chairman of the City Committee, in December and we flew up to the funeral--President Johnson and Ethel Kennedy and myself. Bobby was already there, but we went up on Air Force One. We were sitting around and chatting. We got on the vice presidency then and he said: "Look, if I need Robert Kennedy I'll take him. I'll take anybody. I want to get elected. I'm a very pragmatic fellow. If I don't need him I'm not going to take him. I don't want to go down in history as the guy to have the dog wagged by the tail and have the Vice President elect me because that's what they're going to write. Bobby and I don't get along, and that's neither one of our faults, but there's no sense in that." He was very good about it.

As the thing started to generate Bobby didn't want any part of it. Around January or February or March or April it was quite clear Goldwater was going to be the nominee by now and that Lyndon Johnson could nominate Mickey Mouse if he wanted to, so it didn't make any difference. So Bobby wants to get out now.

We had a meeting. That's why when I read some of these great humorous stories about who was for who where--and I'm talking about the liberal end of our Democratic Party, which is Walter Reuther and myself and George Meany and a lot of the labor people and a lot of the liberal congressmen, and we are very concerned that he will pick Mickey Mouse and that we're going to end up with two nice conservatives in that White House and that we just lost the Democratic Party which we thought we ran. Our stripe of fellows had the majority

O'Donnell -- I -- 58

in any convention of our party at any time. So we're very concerned about it. We realize that the minute Bobby Kennedy's not a candidate that his hands are totally freed, but he has got troubles with Bobby Kennedy because he can't just dump him like anybody else can be dumped. As long as he's there he has got to play with the Hubert Humphreys, and our agreement totally was that if Bobby is not the candidate we're all going to go Humphrey. He was then playing with Gene McCarthy, he had Sargent Shriver, everything was calculated. He spent all that six months on getting rid of Bob Kennedy, nothing else. He got Shriver up there. "Well, we won't have a Kennedy, but we'll put a Shriver on." Well, we blew that one out of the water because we wouldn't go along with it. I said to him, "If you're going to have a Catholic then you're going to go first-class, take the best Catholic, not somebody's brother-in-law because he's a nice looking fellow. You're talking about a man who may be president of the United States, as you are today. We want someone who's qualified to run this country. Religion really doesn't interest us."

So we had a very interesting meeting on it, and this was prior to Bobby's--with Jim Rowe, John Bailey, Dick Maguire, Larry O'Brien, Valenti, Bill Moyers, Walter Jenkins, and myself. At that time he was plumping for Gene McCarthy. That's where the McCarthy-Lyndon rifts began, right then and there because he was the one who told McCarthy to get in it and go out and see Dick Daley and Jess Unruh and round up his support. Lady Bird told Abigail, "he's the candidate,"

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 59

so poor Gene went out and made a fool of himself running around the country.

But anyway we sat at this meeting, and Lyndon has Walter Jenkins read a poll which is as false as anything. It was just made up in their office about fifteen minutes before, typed in a book which I knew all along, and Walter read the poll which shows that Barry Goldwater can beat Lyndon Johnson unless he has got a Catholic on the ticket.

M: Oh, boy, that would be some kind of a poll!

O: Yes. And Bobby's out now, that's the first statement, but he has got to have a Catholic on the ticket. Then they start talking about Gene McCarthy. With Gene McCarthy on the ticket he picks up eight percentage points, so we listened to the hogwash and get all done. And he turned to me and said, "What do you think about it?"

I said, "Mr. President, I thought we licked that in West Virginia--religion. I never voted for anybody for their religion in my life, and do you know what? I don't know any Catholic in the country that gives a damn where the guy goes to church. Whoever gave you that poll, you ought to get your money back. Because personally I'm for Hubert Humphrey. He deserves it. He has worked hard for the party all these years, and you cannot pick the junior senator over the senior senator. If you pick him just on religion alone, which will be written in every paper in the United States of America, you will blow the election. I think I would totally be opposed to it."

O'Donnell -- I -- 60

Then he went to Jim Rowe and Jim said, "My hands are not clean. I'm for Hubert Humphrey, I've been for Hubert Humphrey for years and years so I happen to agree with Kenny, but I'm not going to say anything." Then he went to Dick Maguire, and Maguire said: "I'm for Humphrey." O'Brien said, "I'm for Humphrey." Bailey said he's for Humphrey. Now Lyndon was furious, furious!

Now everybody in the room was a Catholic, if you look at that batting order; except for Bill Moyers everybody in the room was a Catholic. That just took the wind right out of his sails.

So afterwards he said, "Will you stay and have a drink," and we went in and had a drink and he said, "You really want Humphrey?" I said, "Yes, I really want Humphrey. All the people that I represent want Humphrey." He said, "All right, you've got him and you can go leak it if you want. I'm committed to Humphrey. So forget it." This might be April.

Now Bobby's still around. Now he has got to get rid of Bobby. He finally gets his courage up. He tried every possible way--leaks and there's no movement.

Now we have a meeting at Bobby's house about a week before the final--he asked Bobby not to run. I told him he wasn't running. Larry O'Brien, Ted Kennedy, Steve Smith, myself--they want Bobby to resign as attorney general and go back to New York and run for the Senate. Steve and Teddy particularly. Fred Dutton was there, too. I positively asked him--begged him not to do it. I said he could have New York any time he wanted it. We have enough friends up



O'Donnell -- I -- 61

there and they need him, he's the only man who can win the Senate fight, and they have a convention. In the convention there he doesn't have to worry about a primary, there's no question we can control a convention--our friends can. There's no sense in it, but the minute that he gets out, then Lyndon Johnson is going to pick-- because I didn't believe him when he said to me, "I'll go," and I was proven right later. But Bobby didn't want to do it. I said, "Look, you owe it to the party.. Now I'm speaking for a lot of guys, not me, a lot of guys whom I've talked to who are friends of yours who are just frightened stiff that he's going to take John Connally or some nice conservative fellow and we've just been dealt out of about ten years of hard work." So Teddy wanted him to go in the Senate, Steve wanted him to go in the Senate, and Bobby finally came back and said, "I'll go with you guys. I'll stay in. I wouldn't take it if he gave it to me on a silver platter, but I'll stay in there if you feel that's that important and Walter Reuther and all those guys feel it's that important. Okay." So the poor kid gets maligned for that all his life about being greedy and wanting to be vice president. He has just done the greatest favor for us that ever lived.

Anyway about a week later Lyndon decides he has got to cut the Gordian knot. He called Bobby down and "this is it." Lyndon has a propensity for monitoring your conversation. I had warned the Attorney General that everything he said would be on tape by the time he ended it, and to be very careful of his conversation.

O'Donnell -- I -- 62

So he went in. Larry O'Brien and I left and went over to the Sans Souci Restaurant. I'd say about three o'clock the Attorney General arrived and sat down, said, "He told me he wouldn't take me under any circumstances and that's it." He was kind of laughing. He was mad but laughing, and what their conversation was I still don't know. He relayed it. The President relays a totally different one, but whatever it is. . . . While we were sitting there, the phone rang. The man brought the phone over and it's the President. He wants me to come over to the White House right away. So he started telling me what Bobby said and I said, "Mr. President, before you go any further, can I tell you, I am sitting in the Sans Souci Restaurant and at my left is the Attorney General of the United States." He said, "Oh, is he? Okay, when you get free, come over." I said, "Fine."

So I went over. And we went into the little room and he said, "Well, I went and did it." Then he started telling me what had happened to the point that he said, "Bobby suggested that maybe he'd be my campaign manager."

Tape 2 of 2

M: Okay, you were going back to the White House after Mr. Johnson had told Robert Kennedy that he would not have him.

O: Yes. As I said, there was a totally different view of what was said at the meeting, but we discussed it for a while and he said: "Well, what do you think are the political repercussions?" I said,

O'Donnell -- I -- 63

"What is the reason why he can't be vice president? I know what they are, but what are you going to say they are?"

He said, "I'm going to say because he's in the cabinet." And I said, "Then you've got to knock out the whole cabinet, you know." He said, "Well, you write the statement," which I did. I wrote that statement and I said, "Well, you've got to put everybody else in there, too." I figured I ought to eliminate all the other potential vice presidential candidates while I was doing it, and at this moment he'd do anything because he was a nervous wreck about the ultimate repercussions of this.

So we put Adlai Stevenson in; he sits in at cabinet meetings and that eliminated him. Then we put Sarge Shriver in because he's cabinet level. He's calling people all over the country telling them to say they're not candidates. Poor Dean Rusk was down in Atlanta, and had never heard of being a candidate for anything in his life and he got a call. It was kind of a ludicrous performance. As Bobby Kennedy said afterwards, "I want to apologize to the cabinet for taking you all with me." But that eliminated everybody but a senator, and I think Humphrey's now the only one left. There's nobody eligible in the whole country.

M: There never was any question about Humphrey from really the time in April, do you think?

O: Oh yes, he didn't want Humphrey. He used to berate poor Hubert Humphrey; we used to have these legislative meetings. He didn't like Humphrey. All that stuff is just baloney about their great

O'Donnell -- I -- 64

relationship. Hubert, I don't know why he has been so good about it, but the fact is he wasn't very nice to Hubert Humphrey. He knew Hubert wanted it so bad, and God, he gave him an awful tough time. But he had no more use for him as vice president, because Hubert had a constituency of his own. He was looking for a fellow that had nobody but himself and his wife and his kids, and then he could do what he wanted.

M: Then by that time, during the campaign and thereafter, you were just marking time as far as your job in the White House. Did you work for the National Committee primarily during the summer and fall of 1964?

O: Then the convention came up. During this period of time I was working on the convention to some degree, but it really was a mechanical thing. Dick Maguire, who was the treasurer, was doing most of the work with Cliff Carter. It was really a mechanical thing, so I was at the White House most of the time and going over there once in a while and just overseeing it, because my agreement was that I would go over full-time as soon as the convention was over. He really wanted me in the White House, too, but we still hadn't planned what we were going to do. We were doing the television stuff and all these things for the convention itself.

Doris Fleeson wrote an article, a very interesting thing, on how disorganized Lyndon Johnson was with this campaign. He got hysterical over that, and then called me in and said, "I can't take much more of this. I know I'm disorganized, but I know we're going

O'Donnell -- I -- 65

to be all right once you get over there. God, you've got to go over there right now. I can't take any more of those stories from those great liberal columnist friends of yours who are crucifying me all of the time. I want you to be national chairman." I said, "I don't want to be national chairman. John Bailey is my friend and I wouldn't take his job if it was the last thing I ever did. I'm too far down the road in this game. I don't mind working for John Bailey, I'll be his assistant. I don't need any titles. I'm going to run it anyway, so what difference does it make!" He said, "Well, all right, but we've got to work this thing out." So we had a meeting. That's where I was named executive director of the national committee, so he will have both these established to shut up these columnists. It didn't change anything.

We went up to convention and the nomination went off. Humphrey and I were handling the liberal Mississippi thing, which we had so much trouble with, and Joe Rauh, but that's all I did at the convention. Marvin Watson first arrives on the scene about now. I'd never met Marvin Watson nor heard of him.

M: How much did Mr. Johnson do regarding the difficulties at the convention, the Mississippi trouble and so on? Did he have anything directly to do with that?

O: I think he was on the phone. Walter Jenkins was up there. I think Walter probably was the go-between really, much more than--I know I didn't see him. I talked to him two or three times. But he had all the delegates. It didn't really make a darned bit of difference.

O'Donnell -- I -- 66

He managed all of the show business, what film went where, and he made darned sure that the Robert F. Kennedy film came after the nominations.

M: John F. Kennedy film at that convention.

O: Yes. He wasn't going to have that come before the nominations. He was petrified all through the thing that there was going to be-- the reason security was so tight was he was afraid that there were going to be busloads of people coming in from Philadelphia and New Jersey and they were going to stampede the convention for Bobby Kennedy for vice president, not president. He just lived in mortal fear of what was going to happen to him at that convention, so he orchestrated the whole who said what to who and who was going to speak and who did this and what time they spoke, and that was his total consumption.

I got a kick out of him at that time. You know, this was typical Lyndon, as has come out later. They write an article saying "you're not doing anything on foreign policy," and Jack Valenti would then have the job of finding how many times he'd talked to Rusk on the telephone. That makes foreign policy, I suppose. You say, "Hi, Dean, how's your wife?" That's one. "I spent four hundred twelve phone calls on foreign policy," not what did he say or who did he talk to. We used to laugh like a son-of-a-gun, it was just so different than a John Kennedy.

A very interesting thing about him back there. Every one of the people about him took shorthand.

O'Donnell -- I -- 67

M: People around Mr. Johnson?

O: Took shorthand. And they took notes on everything he said, and it used to infuriate him that none of us took notes. And he'd say to me many times, "You northerners talk too fast. First, I'm a little hard of hearing and I don't know what you're saying. I don't know what you're talking about. Talk slow and maybe repeat it a couple of times so I can get it."

M: So his secretary could get it.

O: Right. It was just sort of a joke amongst us.

M: You said a while ago in passing that he was really totally dominated by considerations of, first, the Robert Kennedy denial and then the convention and so on. Then you would say, I guess, that maybe it's true that he didn't really get into problems of, say, foreign policy, Vietnam particularly, in that first half of 1964. He really was preoccupied with politics during that time.

O: Totally. Bobby Baker, Bobby Kennedy, period during that period of time. I'd say he spent 90 per cent of his time on who he was going to pick for vice president. He took the position, right or wrong, that he had a cabinet and they had their job to do. He'd get into things and legislative but not often, not really often.

His record on legislation in that year, there really isn't anything that he got that everybody else wouldn't have. The tax bill, for example, is a very interesting point here. Lyndon Johnson got the tax bill only because he gave in to Harry Byrd, which President



O'Donnell -- I -- 68

Kennedy had refused to do. We could have had the tax bill any time we wanted it.

M: On the same terms that Mr. Johnson got it, you mean?

O: Oh, yes. But, you see, the deal was, as I understood it--

(Interruption)

M: You were talking about his preoccupation with politics and I was getting to his political expertise, if any. Was he a good politician? Did he handle national patronage intelligently in your opinion? I get the impression sometimes in talking to people that he maybe didn't and certainly later on, the charges would be rather hard that he let the Democratic National Committee deteriorate, atrophy.

O: All I can say is that in my opinion he was the worst politician I've ever seen in my life, just unbelievably bad. Mainly he didn't know anything about it, and when he said he didn't know anything about the North he didn't know anything about the North. When I was there, I think within reason he trusted me, as long as I'd discuss appointments with him. The senators had gotten a little more strength now than they had before in the appointment of judges and so on, but he really didn't move much patronage around. That's a very overrated thing anyway.

But as far as the political aspects of it, the legislative thing, as I said, the budget thing was very significant of how Lyndon really operated. Kermit Gordon was then head of the economic advisers, and the reason we had held back on the tax bill was because of the decision really, the figures I can't be held to, but in total

O'Donnell -- I -- 69

input into the economy we needed something like 317-310 billion dollars. That was the judgment of government spending and whatever was necessary, and that was really what would keep us going at the present rate of growth. To cut the budget didn't make any sense; if we were cutting taxes to get this much money thrust into the economy and then cut your budget back, you were neutralizing it. So that's why we wouldn't go along with it. We had it anyway. It was just a matter of they were holding it up until they got it worked out properly.

You know the southerners were trying to hold it up because they wanted to get the civil rights bill on the floor before the tax bill and they'd have filibustered the civil rights bill and keep the tax bill as far away as they possibly could. So that was their angle. They were just holding out for civil rights. There was no economic interest in it at all. The thrust of it had already been felt in the economy. The business people knew it was coming, so therefore they had already spent it. The economy was going like a son-of-a-gun at that time. So he just gave in to Harry Byrd. Out of it Harry Byrd got an appointment of a guy named Guest to Ireland; while I'm standing there, he appointed him to Ireland. He got what he wanted. The President wrote a letter saying he'd keep the budget down under a 100 billion dollars. That's what our argument had been. We thought it should have been around \$106 or \$107 [billion]. So Byrd just won it.

O'Donnell -- I -- 70

After it was over the press, because they were all scared of Goldwater, wrote "what a great legislative victory!"

In the civil rights bill I don't think there's any question that no one else could have gotten it but Lyndon Johnson, because the southerners caved in on it because they had a southern president for the first time in their life.

M: Even then the House had already passed it.

O: Yes, but they weren't about to filibuster it and they went through the motions because I think in the aftermath of an assassination the country wouldn't have stood for a filibuster. I think they knew it. And Lyndon said to them very coldly, "You've got a southern president and if you want to blow him out of the water, go right ahead and do it, but you boys will never see another one again. We're friends on the q.t. Would you rather have me administering the civil rights bill, or do you want to have Nixon or Scranton? You have to make up your mind."

The only bill that was passed in all the period of time that we couldn't get was the grain bill. We had lost it the year before by two votes. Lyndon Johnson got it because the Texas delegation, which had voted twenty to two against it, voted twenty-two to nothing for it to take care--and he put it right on them just exactly like that. There's a very interesting part of Lyndon Johnson, what his political position was. The Illinois delegation unanimously--that's why I laugh when they start talking about Richard J. Daley on civil rights--refused to vote for the [grain]

O'Donnell -- I -- 71

bill. That's eleven votes. So this is my bailiwick, and he called me. He said, "You've got to talk to those Illinois people. Everybody else has talked to them."

M: This is on civil rights?

O: No, civil rights is not passed now, it's in committee. This is on grain feed, which means nothing to the state of Illinois. We're at a meeting. And I said, "The only one that can talk to them is Mayor Daley, and the only one that can talk to Mayor Daley is you." He said, "Well, get the Speaker."

So he [the Speaker] got on the phone and Daley blistered him like you've never heard--I mean the Speaker. He's gray when you look at him anyway, but he was ashen. He couldn't get his mouth open. Then the President got on and he blistered the President. Then I got on. He said, "I just told them, Kenny, we're sick of voting for bills to take care of the southern farmers. You've got a civil rights bill in there and I told the President and I told the Speaker I don't care who the hell calls me, until they get that civil rights bill out we're not voting for another bill. I've instructed my delegation I want that civil rights bill. I'm sick of this regional stuff. We take care of them and they do nothing for us."

So I went out to Chicago and I finally talked Daley into doing it. The President called me in the Pan-Am Building out there; he was looking for me and he got Daley by mistake. Daley said, "Well, I'm going to do this one for Ken O'Donnell, that's all. Period."

O'Donnell -- I -- 72

I'm not doing it for you, Mr. President, you'd better get it very clear." We were having a few drinks, he laughed like hell and put the phone down and said, "I scared him out of ten years' growth." But anyway that's how they got that bill. We would not have gotten that bill.

M: Your stock went up some at that point, too.

O: Oh yes, I'm in great shape now. That's what he did it for, you know. So anyway this legislative stuff was just--all of it would have passed. Medicaid was one vote away the time before, and it was on its way again. But politically, all this stuff about him on the Hill, he was inept on the Hill. He had lived off Sam Rayburn, I'll just tell you right now. He didn't know anybody in the House of Representatives if they didn't come from Texas. He didn't even know their names.

For example, when they were going to close the naval bases, the moment that he was picking was the worst possible moment in the world. They tried to do it when President Kennedy was there and he said to them, "I've got one bill on my desk to raise unemployment compensation and another one to fire the guy so they can go over and get more money out of that." He was talking to McNamara, "Did you ever stop and figure that it would probably cost more money to fire 26,000 guys than to keep them on the job? Put that in your computers and come back with that!"

So Johnson then was putting out the lights, pulling the ships up that had never gone out yet, and closing Camp David and all these austerity things, which were just plain ridiculous.

O'Donnell -- I -- 73

So now he got to the naval bases and we're sitting in there one day in a congressional meeting. He said, "I just saved"--an infinitesimal amount--"5 million dollars in a budget of 100 billion," and rather triumphantly looks around at the congressional leadership and they're looking at him. He said, "Yep, Bob McNamara just talked to me. He's going to close nine naval bases and it'll save 5.7 million dollars." John McCormack was sitting beside me smoking a big cigar, and he said, "Where are you going to close them?" "Boston." He blew the smoke in my face. He's looking at me as much as to say, "Did you have anything to do with this?" "Philadelphia." Of course Bill Green is only one of the three men on the Ways and Means Committee which has now got the Medicaid bill in there. "San Francisco and Brooklyn," which has got seven congressmen, Democrats. John Rooney is chairman of all the appropriations committees.

He went all through it, and he's as gleeful as a kid with a new toy. So we went back into the White House--this is December now because it's just before Bill Green was in the hospital dying--and the President said, "Yes, that's going to be good." And I said, "Oh yes, it's going to be wonderful." He said, "Well, are you upset about Boston?" I said, "No, I'm not upset about Boston, but, you know Congressman O'Neill--" "Who's he?" I said, "Well, he's a member of the Rules Committee which has been eight to seven"--any vote we ever had we won it by eight to seven. I said, "I just talked to him on the telephone." This doesn't happen to be true,

O'Donnell -- I -- 74

what I'm saying to him now but I knew it would happen anyway. I said, "He just told me he's not going to be able to vote on any more rules." He said, "Why's that?" I said, "It's not McCormack's district you're closing, you know, it's O'Neill's. Charlestown Naval Yard is in O'Neill's district, not McCormack's. He told me he was going to be so busy trying to get jobs for the people unemployed in his district that he's never going to be able to get over to that side of the Capitol for the rest of the session." He said, "What does that mean?" I said, "That means you'll never get a piece of legislation on the floor of the House of Representatives as long as he's there."

M: You're having to explain this to the allegedly master politician?

O: Yes. He said, "Jeez, I never thought of that. And I said, "And Bill Green is the key vote on Ways and Means. You know he's in the hospital right now?" He said, "Get him on the phone." He called McNamara up and said, "Cancel that right now." And he cancelled the whole bloody thing, if you'll recall. He cancelled everything--"I just can't afford that stuff."

M: So he did learn?

O: Oh, yes. He was mad at McNamara then. He said, "Why didn't you tell me that?" Of course McNamara said, "I didn't know that either." That's not my job, that's your job--that's what he was saying to him. So he cancelled the whole thing.

But he would always call Sam Rayburn, I'm sure, when he was majority leader and said, "Sam, what are you doing?" And Sam would



O'Donnell -- I -- 75

give him an answer, so he didn't go over and meet these guys. He'd never done that. When he was vice president, he had no reason to do it. So he really didn't know any of these people--who really was running what up there. I'm sure if he ever did he talked to the chairman of the committee if he was interested particularly in something, but he really had very little knowledge of the workings of the House of Representatives. The Senate, he knew like the back of his hand, but the House, no.

But the political stuff just had him--that's all he thought about through to the convention. Then obviously he's in the campaign.

M: Did he make an effort to get to know the city Democratic leaders in the North that he hadn't know before, or did he use you and other people as his emissaries mostly?

O: He used me totally. As soon as the convention was over I went over to the committee. Then we started on the schedule, which I did, on what he was going to do. He was very difficult to schedule, I might add. He was awfully good with me. Now the other guys, Valenti and those guys, he treated them awful. But he knew I could leave tomorrow morning and he can't treat me awful. If I'd stayed in 1965 he'd have been treating me awful, but at this moment I'm the leader of the band. But we did all the TV stuff. Bill Moyers and I did almost all the television stuff, and Valenti with the advertising agency. We did the schedule.

If I said it, it was right. They used to laugh like heck. You know, it could be the most ridiculous [thing]. Why he went to Columbus

O'Donnell -- I -- 76

instead of Dayton didn't really make any sense to anybody. Half of this is grab-bag stuff in politics anyway. But if I said it, he'd go anywhere I said to the point where it just became humorous. All he'd say was, "What did Kenny say?" Except for a few congressional things that he had to go to of friends. I never had any argument with him in the campaign. They talk about how difficult he was in the campaign--no problems at all.

M: This was at a time when the press was saying Kenny O'Donnell was the chief antagonist of the Kennedy loyalists.

O: Yes. No problem at all. You go to any of the Johnson people, no problem at all. Whenever they had a fight with the President, they used to call me and say, "Will you come over and tell him you think he ought to do it," and he'd do it. He figured I had some magic wand. You know, the fact of the matter is he couldn't understand how Jack Kennedy got elected president over him, and so I think in his own mind he said, "It must be those guys around him who are geniuses, so therefore they must know what they're talking about. So whatever they say I'll do, because I know my guys are all stiffs." It was a source of some humor to us.

Once the schedule was all done--that is, the campaign--once you've got your advertising done and the schedule done, that is the campaign. He would go around--all you ever heard from him was that he was complaining that he hadn't seen any stickers, it was just like a guy running for the House of Representatives. "They don't have stickers here. They don't--" He used to do the silliest things in the world.

O'Donnell -- I -- 77

The only other thing that was ever of any moment--he couldn't lose; he couldn't lose but he ran like he would want to set the world's record. He spent money that was just crazy. I used to tell him, "You're just crazy. It's your money, but you don't have to have it against Barry Goldwater. You don't need to spend that kind of money." And I was going to say, "You're no star on television, and the more you're put on television the less you're doing yourself any good, in fact."

But he wasn't difficult to deal with. We had some humorous things that he'd do. He'd do crazy things.

M: What do you mean, like not following the script of speeches?

O: Oh, no. He'd be late everywhere because he'd want to--he was so surprised when he'd get big crowds. You know, it was the same old thing when he went to California and came back. He said, "Pat Brown told me I'm the most popular man that ever campaigned in California." And you'd look at him and say, "Oh, boy!" But he got good crowds, and he couldn't understand it. The poor guy probably had never had a good crowd before, of the size of these crowds. He got good crowds and he was popular as a son-of-a-gun at that time. He was getting a great press, and he was very happy with himself.

I'll just give you one incident which is a typical Lyndon. He wanted to go into Delaware to campaign against John Williams because John Williams had brought up the Baker case. And he hated John Williams which is shared by most people that I know. So I

O'Donnell -- I -- 78

said to him, "Mr. President, don't go into Delaware. In the first place, that's all anybody's going to write and you'll bring the Baker case right up again. That's all they'll be saying, that you went in there to get John Williams because of what he did you your friend Bobby Baker, and you don't need that. Talk to that after the election." No, no, he was adamant. So Walter Jenkins called me and said, "Look, he's going to go into Delaware and you might as well do it." I said, "Okay." So I schedule him. He was in New York on a Sunday. And the only way you campaign in Delaware which we did you just go to the airport and everybody in the state comes to the airport and that's it, it's all over. So on the way back from New York he was going to Washington, going back to Texas. I said, "Well, just have them stop at the airport for a noontime rally and that's it, but don't have him say anything about [Williams]. Don't attack Williams, just talk about the Democratic Party."

He [Walter] called me back in about an hour and said, "He can't go on a Sunday." He said, "You fellows up North don't understand it, but we don't campaign--the President is a very devout man and he never campaigns on Sunday." I said, "Look, don't be ridiculous now. In the first place, I know it isn't so. Secondly, it's okay with me. I don't think he ought to go there anyway." So he said, "No, he will go right back to the Ranch." He went back to the Ranch and we scheduled it at another time.

You know where he was on that Sunday? He has two rules: that he will not campaign on Sunday and that he will not campaign in an

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 79

opponent's state. So that Sunday he flew from the Ranch to Phoenix, Arizona, Goldwater's hometown, and the New York Times carries a funny story. He landed to go to church, he was going to church.

M: Going to church in Phoenix?

O: Going to church, yes. He got off the plane. I picked up the Times the next day, it was the funniest story I ever read, and if it hadn't been for Goldwater, they'd have just murdered him. He had a bull horn, he made nineteen speeches on the way from the airport to the church; he arrived two hours late, the minister's standing out in front of the church, the congregation is standing there, and at the last stop as he's going around the corner, he's got a bull horn and he's standing in the car and he yells out, "Sorry, I've got to go now, folks, I'm late for church." He goes in and he goes to church.

So I called Walter and said, "That's not campaigning on Sunday, is that what you told me, Walter? What are you going to do?"

M: It was during that campaign that the Walter Jenkins trouble came up. Were you involved with Mr. Johnson in his reaction to that at all?

O: I was involved in it all the way. It was a very strange thing in which personally I think the poor kid got framed.

M: That has been hinted at.

O: I looked into it pretty thoroughly. He's a great guy. It came to me--I was sitting in the national committee office and John Bailey came in and said, "They've picked up Walter Jenkins on a homosexual

O'Donnell -- I -- 80

charge." And I said, "If it's anybody else in the world, it's not Walter Jenkins. It could be me or it could be somebody else, but it's not Walter Jenkins. I don't believe it, and that's propaganda." The Republicans had that dirty movie going, and they had all this lousy stuff they were stacking up. So I paid no attention to it.

And then I was in the Mayflower Hotel lobby and Bailey came in and handed me the teletype, and I went home. I called the Secret Service. Now the rule is that they call me immediately if anybody got arrested. When Eisenhower was here, they called Sherman Adams. For forty years in Washington they've called the guy who's in charge of the Secret Service--that's me. Jerry Bane would have called me. The police call Jerry, Jerry calls me. I called Jerry Bane. I said: "Jerry, I've got the story that Walter Jenkins is in the pokey. How could that happen without me knowing about it?" And he said, "I've never heard of it." Now, Jerry Bane is in charge of the White House detail. He said, "Kenny, in all my years in Washington I've never heard of this." Now he has been there since about 1937.

So Jerry went down to the station. A couple of agents went down and sure enough it had been Walter Jenkins. It's just automatic, when a guy comes in with a White House pass they call the Secret Service. They have never, never violated that rule, which means this is a pretty fishy performance. Secondly, it had come out not from the police station but from the Republican National Committee, who called several times over there and said, "How come you haven't notified anybody?"

O'Donnell -- I -- 81

M: Called the police station?

O: Yes. I made a full investigation of it afterwards. I had the FBI do it. And I'll just tell you that was the fishiest performance I ever saw in my life. It just has never happened, that they wouldn't call the fellow who held my position.

M: But there's no incriminating connection that you know of between--?

O: I think you could have proved it. I talked to the Washington police, too, I've got some friends over there. And every one of them was convinced it was a frame, every one of them!

M: It's very important, because it seems to me that Lyndon Johnson really never replaced Walter Jenkins.

O: Oh no. I then get a call to get down to the White House by Bill Moyers. So Bill Moyers and myself, I was at Dick Maguire's house, who is a great pal of Walter's, and we went down to the White House. There was Abe Fortas and there was Deke DeLoach, who is the number-two man in the FBI now, who was a Texan and had been Lyndon Johnson's liaison. We were debating what to do about it. Lyndon was then up in New York. He didn't know what the heck--nobody knew what to do about it. So Fortas and Clifford had gone to see the newspapers, which was a stupid thing to do, to see if they could kill it. That's what blew up the whole thing probably. But Walter was then very, very sick in the hospital.

Lady Bird stood up like a champion. She said, "I'm going to make a statement for Walter Jenkins, I don't care what the President says."



O'Donnell -- I -- 82

M: Which is unusual for her.

O: Oh, yes. But she was terrific, she was terrific! But anyway, what happened, happened. I talked to Walter afterwards and I said, "I think I could almost prove it." He said he had just had enough of it, "I don't want to bring it up and review it again when you've got six kids. To hell with it, I'm going home." I'm just as convinced as I sit here.

Anyway, he lost Walter Jenkins, he lost the pinwheel. Because no matter what he did--it's the same as I was with John Kennedy. He might get mad at me, but he always knew what I was saying was for his benefit. I may be wrong and I might be stupid, but you're not working for anybody else but him, and that's the only fellow in the world that he knows--he knows that Walter Jenkins never drew a breath that he didn't think first of Lyndon Johnson, so he always had confidence in somebody. Once he left, he really had no confidence in anybody of that kind of a nature. I'm sure outside of his wife he didn't trust a single soul in Washington. You can't be going around investigating a guy after he gives you a sentence, and that's the way his mind operated. That was a real devastating blow to the United States of America, not Lyndon Johnson.

M: What about Lady Bird? You had a high opinion of her in that regard, do you think she was generally a steadying and important substantive influence on him? In other words, did he talk to her about issues and so on?

O'Donnell -- I -- 83

O: I don't think so. I think the poor lady worried herself to death about him, trying to keep him physically--he had had a bad heart attack--to keep him sort of calmed down. She agreed with everything he ever said. Their relationship I don't know much about. She's rather quiet, and it's a rather odd relationship--I don't know what it is. He didn't treat her a hell of a lot better than he did the staff. He'd scream at her in front of me who am a total outsider, which I thought was rather silly. He accused her of working for Goldwater one day while I was there, but this was Lyndon. He's up and down.

For example, he came to me on a train trip, she was going to go on the train. He wouldn't let them go on the train trip until they talked to me. Now, I have no more interest in women in politics, because I think they give you more trouble and I've got enough aggravation of my own. And there were some good guys working that knew as much about it as I knew about it. But by God, no, until that's cleared with Kenny O'Donnell--the poor lady has been working on it for three months herself with her own staff and she knows what she wants to do. She finally called me one Sunday and said, "Unless you come down here," I came down and started to listen to it--you know, I'm not even listening. They're three months into it, I don't want to have to change it now. So I'm just listening and going through the motions. Out comes Lyndon, and I've got to do the train trip, then he went through the whole schedule with her and complained about every single stop. And they had done a lot of work on it. It was

O'Donnell -- I -- 84

a good job. You can't get off the train, it isn't like once you get on it you're going to go places. And it doesn't make any difference whether you don't like it or not, but that's the way the tracks run. But that was a strange. . . .

The only other part of the campaign that I think was of any significance--there are two parts. Number one, which is coming back to haunt him, is the Vietnam thing.

M: Was that even considered much? Was that just crept into the speeches without much consideration at the time?

O: No. You see, what had happened Vietnam had become pretty hot now. Tonkin Gulf has now come, which again the poor guy is maligned about--Senator Fulbright is not correct--but it's not his fault, nobody had ever told him the truth. I was there when the thing broke. Lyndon Johnson no more wanted Vietnam in his pocket than he wanted anything in the world. The military may have told some fibs, I don't know. But he took it as a test, and he and I talked about it that night, of whether he has got any guts or not, that's all. They're just testing him, why would you do something like that that doesn't make any sense? A provocation which has no military significance to it. They're going to test him to see if he has got enough backbone, or whether in a political campaign he dared to do anything about it, and then they'd go further maybe next time. So he asked for the resolution and then they retaliated, but it was perfectly on the up and up--there was no thought of troops,

O'Donnell -- I -- 85

no nothing. But Dick Goodwin was writing his stuff on Vietnam. I'm as sure as I'm sitting here Lyndon Johnson was as sincere as he could possible be about Vietnam and getting out of there. That comes really to fruition in 1964 and then in early 1965 when the military situation changed rather drastically. But I think he was as straight as a string on his speeches. He gets a little flamboyant and he says things maybe a little more than he should have, but basically that's what he meant. I know that. I talked to him about it many, many times. I was totally for getting out of Vietnam totally from 1961 on, and he and I used to talk about it. There was no problem on that until late in 1964.

But the only other significant thing in the campaign was his Bobby situation again. They tried to shaft Bobby in every conceivable fashion. He didn't want him in that United States Senate, and this is where I performed somewhat of a function. He couldn't shaft Bobby without me knowing about it, and I wasn't about to let him. And he couldn't afford to have me resign in the middle of the campaign because he was shafting Bobby and go up and work for Bobby, so I've kind of got him in a position, too. We put our advance men, and I brought them all in from Massachusetts, and they were all Lyndon Johnson's advance men in New York. They were also Bobby Kennedy's advance men in New York, because strangely enough, the very community that really had supported John Kennedy was anti-Robert Kennedy. The Jewish liberals, the Democrats for Keating was composed totally of what now is the McCarthy group probably. The

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 86

Negroes where you wouldn't believe, but our Negro fellows all went up and made an analysis and said that Negroes liked Johnson better than Kennedy and he needed Johnson. It's a strange thing how people switch around. So Bobby could not be disassociated from Johnson. Johnson didn't want to have Bobby anywhere near him because he figured he was in New York without any question, and he wanted Bobby dumped. So we had to work the thing out ourselves to make sure that Bobby was there and that Johnson was there. Ed [Edwin] Weisl and the Johnson people, who one must realize are the 1 per cent, and John Kennedy had 99 per cent of New York and Lyndon had 1 per cent, so that now the 1 per cent were running the 99 per cent because the minute Johnson won Weisl became national committeeman and now he's the Johnson man and the other guy has got to work with him. He was savoring every second of it. He hated Joe Kennedy, not Bobby--

M: This was Ed Weisl.

O: Eddie Weisl, Sr., yes. So it was a day-by-day proposition. Lyndon would call me and say, "Why am I spending so much time in New York?" At the end Bobby started to comment, that at the beginning Bobby was in serious trouble.

One of the last occasions we had, my brother was one of the advance men and another fellow named Matt Ryan who both could lick six wildcats apiece, both about 220 pounds. Good pals, he's the D.A. up in Springfield. Eddie Weisl called me one day--Jr. now, he's in charge of the campaign--he said, "That brother and this fellow Ryan are threatening to throw me out the window. I'm in

O'Donnell -- I -- 87

fear. I've got the door locked. Will you call them and tell them, because I won't schedule a stop in Brooklyn on the schedule--I cancelled it." And he had called the President, he got him in Denver, Colorado, or some place and told him to cancel it--that it was all for Bobby Kennedy--and the President said cancel it. "You call O'Donnell and tell him I don't want any more of that. Cancel it. I've got enough of New York."

So about ten minutes later the President called me and said, "I don't want to go to Brooklyn again." I said, "I don't think you ought to go to Brooklyn again. I've already cancelled it anyway." He said, "Why not?" I said, "Because I think Bobby's much better off now alone. Did you see the latest Daily News poll? "No, what?" I said, "It shows Bobby winning 56-57 per cent, and I think he's better off alone without you because people think you're drawing the crowd when it's really him." Silence on the end of the phone. He said, "I think I'd better go to Booklyn." You bet your life he showed up at Brooklyn.

M: Perfect psychology.

O: But anyway, that was a constant, constant contest.

Well, the election is over. He went down to the Ranch and I was at my desk in the White House and he called me on the phone, and this is another Lyndon. First he told me he and I were going to pick a whole new cabinet. This was when he'd had a few pokes. I laughed and he laughed. Now he called me up on the phone and said, "Kenny, we've got to pick an attorney general." Katzenbach was then

O'Donnell -- I -- 88

acting attorney general. I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, tell you what. I'm not going to pick that fellow Katzenbach. Before you get mad--I don't even care, Katzenbach doesn't interest me--I want to tell you why. You know the Senate is a very difficult place, a lot to learn up there, and Bobby has never been up there. There's no sense in him holding two jobs at the same time. So therefore I think I'd better put somebody else in the Attorney General's Office because Katzenbach would be reporting to Bobby every night. Therefore, you get me a list of five fellows and send them down to the Ranch, and you and I'll talk about it and we'll pick an attorney general." I said, "Yes, okay." That's the last I ever heard of it, because that would be the five fellows that wouldn't get the job.

M: He didn't know Katzenbach either, I think, to think that he would be reporting in every day.

O: Yes. But he figured if he worked for Bobby, he was going to be the Kennedy loyalist in some strange bond. He couldn't quite understand how the Kennedy people all stuck together, they all worked together and that none of them made any money. That just positively stunned him. Lyndon being Lyndon is, how much do you pay him, what it would be--that's all his judgment was. He said to me once on Dick Maguire--he called Dick in. Dick was then treasurer of the committee and really good money raiser and Lyndon had nobody who knew any of these New York people. So we were riding up to Bill Green's funeral when he said to me, "What about that Maguire? Is he a little crazy?" I said, "Why?" He said, "I had him in yesterday to ask him to stay



O'Donnell -- I -- 89

on as treasurer, I really need him. And he said to me, 'I'll stay if Ken O'Donnell does, but if he leaves I leave with him.' What's the matter with that guy? What does he want? He's a lawyer, isn't he? Maybe I can get him some clients down in Texas, some oil clients."

I said, "Mr. President, he doesn't want clients. He has got plenty of clients. He was making more money in Boston than he could possibly handle." He said, "Well, what did he come down for?" I said, "To work for Jack Kennedy." "You guys are real funny guys, really funny guys up there." But this is Lyndon.

M: It was a foregone conclusion then that after the election occurred that you would leave? Did he make any effort to keep that from happening?

O: Well, I didn't talk to him. That was the last conversation in which the implication was quite clear that I'm not going to leave.

Then in December the Vietnam thing began. And if I ever had any thought of staying that was the end of me, because I knew I'd have a fight with him the next morning because I thought they were--

M: In December, now what. . . ?

O: In December they had the first inkling that if they didn't do something in Vietnam, that the government was going to collapse, and that's when they were first making the decision they were going to intervene.

M: But no hard decision as to timing and so on at that time, or is there?

O: I think there's a pretty hard decision, yes. They stepped up the air attacks and they began to get the troops ready to go in. It

O'Donnell -- I -- 90

was very clear just from what I saw that they were going to go, but he still was at the Ranch most of the time, and it was conversations I wouldn't know anything about. By January it was very clear they're gone, so the situation was very clear that he'd either have to send troops in or the government was going to fall, for which I was for the government falling and the military was for sending troops in. Not that anybody cared what I was for anyway.

But he came back then in January. I had already resigned now, I gave him a letter of resignation the year before. So finally I couldn't get any answer out of him, I wasn't going into the office at the time. I had resigned mentally myself, and now I'm looking for a job. I couldn't get any answer out of him whatsoever. So finally I called Bill Moyers, and I said, "Bill, just give the President a message for me. If he doesn't announce my resignation, then I'm going to announce my resignation. Will you just inform him that you know what--I'm out of work the day I resign, and I haven't got any money, and you know what? No one can hire you until you don't have a job, and they don't know you don't have a job till they read in the paper you're out of work, then maybe somebody will come offer me a job. That's the way it is. So you just tell the President that if he doesn't announce it, I'm going to announce it. I'm not trying to be fresh about it, I have no problems. I'm going home, I've already made my arrangements." So I got a call back in about an hour. "The President will see you tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

O'Donnell -- I -- 91

I went in at ten o'clock in the morning, and he was so mad he couldn't even talk. He said, "You've made up your mind?" I said, "Yes, sir, I'm going back to Boston." So he said, "I'll accept it. I'll announce it this afternoon. Goodbye. And take Dave Powers with you, by the way." As he said, no one ever leaves Lyndon Johnson. So I walked out, and that's the last I've ever seen or heard from him.

M: Is that right? No further contact after that? You got in politics yourself here a couple of years later. Did he get involved in that, did his people get involved in that at all, either for or against you?

O: He doesn't have any people. When I came up here in 1966 after he won against Goldwater he thought he had the world by the tail. He didn't care about anybody then. That's when he started really to go off base. Up till then he'd been playing it carefully, and he'd listen. Now he was the king of the world. If you start to trace his downfall, it begins right in 1965 when he thinks he has got everything going. He had tremendous majorities in the Congress of the United States; he told all the congressmen to go to hell. Their embitterness--he's the worst handler of Congress in the world, the worst! He ended up with guys like Wilbur Mills who just couldn't stand him. He never talked to them. "I don't need you anymore." That's what he used to tell all these fellows.

In 1966 it got back to where it was when Kennedy was there. Then he needed them and he couldn't get Mother's Day through. I used

O'Donnell -- I -- 92

to go down and talk to them and they were all taking revenge, that's all. "When he didn't need us, he treated us just like we were dirt. And he was the president and the speaker, and the majority leader and everything else." Told Fulbright he wouldn't invite him to the White House anymore. Fulbright is saying, "I don't even want to go. I'd like to go out with my friends. That's work. I've been there five hundred times." You know, childish stuff. He just lost his--

M: And mainly over Vietnam, do you think, and that increasingly became the point on which he judged everything and everybody and every issue and so on?

O: No, I don't think at the beginning. You see, at the beginning the Congress thing was the big thing. Now he got through an awful lot of legislation in 1965 which, as I always say, he would have voted against every single one of them when he was a senator himself, but he now became a great liberal. That's when he was going to go down in history as the great liberal. He didn't need the congressmen because their committees were now--he had the Ways and Means that was thirteen to twelve; now it was fifteen to ten. He didn't need Wilbur Mills. He had the votes in the committee himself. So now he stops talking to them. And Vietnam is not that hot at that moment.

M: That's right.

O: It just starts to heat up in 1964.

M: So his downfall really dates before Vietnam.

O'Donnell -- I -- 93

O: He lost his credibility. He lost the Congress, and then the people began to judge him not versus Barry Goldwater, but perhaps to some degree versus John Kennedy. That began to embitter him, but then that's when the social stuff starts to come up--the Kennedy, those Georgetown--

M: This late?

O: This is when he starts, yes. In 1964 he never mentioned it, because there were no Kennedy people.

M: Were most of his fears then imaginary, or was there really a certain amount of fire in the Georgetown bit that Johnson suspected so greatly?

O: They are snobs, he wasn't totally wrong in the Eastern Establishment bit, but he kept playing into their hands. What they said first was because they were jealous, nobody liked the fact that Perle Mesta was back in business. You have a social Georgetown crowd, and then all of a sudden you've got Miller or whatever her name is coming in, and Liz Carpenter, who's about as crude as you can possibly get. She didn't go much for that crowd, and she was yelling around and telling people off. They rode pretty high on the hog in that 1965 year, not the President as much as the people around him. And not the people in the White House. The people around the people who were in the White House. So there was some friction that developed. But that isn't the Kennedy crowd anyway, that wasn't Jack Kennedy's crowd. I mean, they'd like to think they were, but there was no Kennedy crowd really. That's the most exaggerated game that there is in the world. The Kennedy crowd was the guys that were in the White House, and they'd all gone home.

O'Donnell -- I -- 94

M: They weren't even around.

O: They weren't even around. They couldn't be interested in Lyndon Johnson. Ken O'Donnell was interested in Ken O'Donnell, and I'm running for my life up here, and I don't care anything about Lyndon Johnson.

M: But he wasn't vindictive toward you in your political activities here?

O: No. He could not have been if he wanted to be, but he made no efforts whatsoever. As I say, his staff couldn't be friendlier with me. They're too busy to be fooling around anyway. We had no problems. And the fellows who were up here that were appointed by John Kennedy had no problems with anybody in the government, and he showed no evidence of any.

M: What about 1968 finally? Did he, again, make any efforts to get involved in opposition to Robert Kennedy's candidacy after he himself withdrew? Did he do anything to oppose Robert Kennedy?

O: He did anything there was in the world. Really, the downfall of Lyndon Johnson began in 1966 when he came back from Manila and cancelled all those political engagements. Then we got murdered. That embittered everybody because he had told fibs to everybody. John McCormack is sitting here waiting for him to campaign for his nephew, and they're building a scaffolding down by the post office and I'm planning a rally. I'm sitting with John McCormack, and he gets a call from Larry O'Brien saying the President is not coming. And he said the President says, "I never said I was coming. Who

O'Donnell -- I -- 95

said I was?" McCormack said, "He said it to me." John McCormack, the speaker. He just shook his head and that's the end of Lyndon Johnson with John McCormack. He cancelled on Dick Daley. So now you've given a guy your word, and that's the end of the ball game as far as they're concerned.

M: Not only not do it, but then denied that you ever said you would.

O: Say they're all liars. You know, you don't call John McCormack a liar too easily, he's a little upset about that.

M: Yes, particularly John McCormack.

O: But now it starts. The Vietnamese thing now gets totally out of hand. But he's still going to be nominated. They got into a lot of problems up here with us in 1967. Then we're picking our delegation. This is the first time Lyndon starts to get petty, but even then I think it was Marvin Watson. They told them they couldn't put me on the delegation because I was speaking out very forcefully against Vietnam, and it was getting a little play in the paper, not much, you know, but a Kennedy aide, and I suppose that griped them.

So they filed the delegation, and the chairman gets a call from Marvin Watson saying "there are three guys we don't want on the delegation. O'Donnell and Adam Yarmolinsky and Ken Galbraith. Unless they'll say they're going to vote for me at the convention." So I get a call from Senator Kennedy's office who said, "They're not going to put you on the delegation unless you say you'll vote for Johnson at the convention." I said, "Who's



O'Donnell -- I -- 96

they?' "Watson and--." I said, "Well, would you give them a message for me? I don't care who you give it to. I never knew that anybody from Texas was picking the Massachusetts delegation before, and I'll bet you Dick Daley doesn't submit his delegation. I don't care about Ken Galbraith. Ken Galbraith supported a Republican in the last election and Adam Yarmolinsky is not registered, so they shouldn't be on it. But I happen to have been in Democratic politics here for a long, long period of time, and you know what? I can win a slate on that just like nothing! I'm in Speaker McCormack's district and he has already told me I can be on his slate if I want. And if I don't, I'll run and I'll win. So you tell them to go straight to hell for me." I ended up on the delegation.

He thought I'd be for Bobby. Now Bobby is not going to run at that time, so it didn't make any difference. It was just a matter of they were so scared--again, the conspiratorial nature of Lyndon and Marvin is unbelievable. Everything was a plot. Everything! And things are going from bad to worse, and he's in real trouble, and then Gene McCarthy gets into it in New Hampshire. The game's all over after New Hampshire.

Then he and Bobby had a couple of fights, and Bobby came back from Paris that time. That was a real bitter, bitter fight. He'd been murdering Bobby privately all over town, but this was a head-to-head confrontation. Bobby has no more intention of running for president than I did, only because he thinks he can't win.

O'Donnell -- I -- 97

M: February, 1967, very early.

O: Yes. So they have a big fight because it's all a plot and that severs their relationship totally. Then you come along with McCarthy running. Bobby still has no intention of running, but McCarthy is now a stalking horse for Kennedy. People used to go by the White House and tell me that the conversation would last about one minute about the subject and fifty-nine minutes on Bob Kennedy, what a no-good, s.o.b. he was. He just lost all proportion. He just couldn't stand up to it now.

Then he withdrew. I was with Jim Rowe. Jim Rowe had just left the White House. Bob [Robert] Burkhardt called me a week ahead of time and said, "Is Bobby going to run?" I said, "No. I take him at his word, he said no." He said, "Well, then I'm going to Wisconsin." He's the chairman of the state committee in New Jersey. "I'm going to Wisconsin and work for Johnson then. But I just wanted to make sure you fellows know. If Bobby's going to run I'll be with Bobby." So he went out to Wisconsin the week before he pulled out. Jim Rowe was in the White House working on the speech and left with Johnson as a candidate. Burkhardt called me two days before and said, "He's in the worst shape of anybody I've ever seen in my life. It's unbelievable. He's really going to get clobbered."

So that night he gave the speech Rowe left the White House at five o'clock that night with Johnson a candidate for president and heard it ten minutes after the show, they all got their call from Marvin Watson saying, "The President is withdrawing." So this stuff

O'Donnell -- I -- 98

that he had it in his pocket all the time, he was always going to resign. Poor Larry O'Brien was out there that night making a speech about nervous Nellies, and Orville Freeman was out there calling Fulbright names, "all these communist appeasers." The toughest speeches written by Larry O'Brien, who knew as much about Vietnam as a plant does, written obviously by somebody and they're reading them off. He was with George Meany the Friday night before, and it was the first time in the history of the AFL-CIO that they endorsed a candidate before a convention. It's not even legal under their rules. He gave the greatest speech and got the greatest ovation at the AFL-CIO and the next day he withdrew. He withdrew when he got the poll from Wisconsin, that's when he withdrew.

M: Then what about afterwards? Then did he really stay out, or did he really remain a presence, anti-Bobby--?

O: Now he's for Humphrey. So Humphrey inherited whatever--Johnson wouldn't really have to do anything. He inherited the labor people, and all the people that were for Johnson switched to Humphrey, with the exception of the Daleys and those guys who then took a neutral stance until after the primaries were over. But he did every bloody thing possible to stop Bobby, which I don't blame him for. Bobby was his mortal enemy and Hubert's his vice president. He did nothing that you could call improper, and it didn't really make any difference. Bobby's running in the primary so there's not much you can do about it. But whatever weight the White House could lean on, they leaned on all over the country. Matt McCloskey, who had

O'Donnell -- 1 -- 99

been the treasurer before Dick Maguire--I talked to him on the telephone in Jim Tate's office, Jim Tate got him on the phone. And he said, "Now that the President is out of it, no problem at all. We'll be with Bobby."

Two days later Matt McCloskey and I had an appointment in Washington, and Matt went over to the White House and I've never seen him since. That's a contractor. I think he had some problems with the federal government at the time over here at the Veterans Administration Hospital, which had been solved to Matt's satisfaction, so that's what he was doing during that period of time. They were leaning on everybody they could get their hands on.

M: There were quite a few of those.

O: Oh, yes, the President of the United States, he's still in power until next January.

M: At the convention you got involved in the peace plank fight. Was Mr. Johnson's presence strong there? Did he orchestrate that convention like he had the previous one?

O: Oh, yes, he ran that. The only problem he had was us. And he couldn't do a darned thing about it. We were all elected, and we planned it all anyway. This was not done one afternoon. We had agreed we'd all go on the platform committee if we could. I was elected to the platform committee and Jack Gilligan was elected to the platform committee and Bill Clark was elected to the platform committee and Phil Burton. So we all went down there with the very purpose of getting a peace plank, and which very frankly I

O'Donnell -- I -- 100

thought would help Hubert Humphrey. Humphrey had come to me a month before. Jim Rowe asked me to come to Washington and asked me to manage Humphrey's campaign. This is after Bobby's gone. I told him then "I can't do that, because I'm going to be opposed and he's got to support the administration while I'm going to be kicking their brains out in Chicago. I can't be playing two sides at once. After it's over, Humphrey is obviously going to be nominated, and I'll do whatever I can for him." But I refused it. So they were well alarmed that there was going to be a fight. I frankly think that Humphrey, if he had adopted it, would be president of the United States today, and that was part of the reason I was doing it. He and I are great friends, but either he or McCarthy could run with ease on a peace plank.

Anyway, we had a lot of meetings on it and we finally arrived and Fred Dutton wrote the plank, and we went out to fight. We had a hell of a fight with Hale Boggs. Hale was carrying Lyndon's water and nobody else's. If anybody ever had minutes at those meetings, I mean there were fist fights--

M: This was the platform committee?

O: This is the executive committee of the platform committee that wrote the platform, which is twenty members. That was murder. I got on it by total accident. We decided first we were going to give them the signal the first day of the meeting. Each one of us grabbed a microphone and started to quarrel with the chairman about the procedures because we all figured they were going to walk in the

O'Donnell -- I -- 101

Friday before the convention and hand us the plank, and you're gone! So we started arguing about procedures. Boggs got furious, and finally I got up and said, "Mr. Chairman, could I have a copy of the draft the staff is now working on--or could all the members of the committee?" He said, "There are no drafts." I said, "Mr. Chairman, I've worked with you for five years, and you're the finest chairman of a congressional committee I ever met and I can't believe that you don't have anybody working on what is going to go into the platform. I know how meticulous you are, and I just don't believe it. We're all elected by the people in our states to represent them on this committee and I think we have a right to see what the staff that works for us is doing." He got furious. He turned around and said, "Look, Kenny. You're on the drafting committee and you'll see all the drafts yourself." I said, "Thank you very much." I sat down.

We were riding on the plane. Lyndon called him and gave him hell, said: "Why did you put that son-of-a-bitch on the drafting committee for? He'll cause more trouble. You'll get out there and they're going to think he knows something. We know he doesn't, but he was in the White House for five years and they're going to think that when he speaks--he's not one of the McCarthy kooks."

So Boggs said to me, "I wouldn't have put you on in a million years, but I was mad." They refused to put Gilligan on, they wouldn't put Clark on, but they were stuck with me. So we fought all through the thing.

O'Donnell -- I -- 102

M: That was a cooperative effort between the Kennedy and McCarthy and unaligned.

O: We got together and agreed. The McCarthy people were great. They wanted to attack Johnson, and I told them very frankly that I would not participate in an attack on the President; that it made no sense talking about yesterday. We were trying to get a platform that somebody could run on, which is Gene McCarthy or anybody else who emerges from this convention. "Let's talk about what we're going to do after the convention. If you people persist in putting in attacks on Johnson, none of us are going to go along with you and then they're going to win easy, and there will be no argument. Then it's all over. We all get up and make a silly speech and that's it. If we stick together we've got some clout."

So Blair Clark was there and Blair said, "I can't speak"--Wayne Morse was there--"for my principal but I will go back and see Senator McCarthy. I totally agree with you and we're unanimous. That's the way we ought to do it. But I don't speak for Senator McCarthy." That's the last I ever heard of him but they went along totally with us. We wrote a joint statement, and they were most cooperative. They were terrific in the meetings, and we worked very harmoniously together, and every vote was just about the same in the committee.

But other than that, "crime in the streets" was about the most outrageous thing ever written. It had to be written by somebody from Biloxi, Mississippi. It was just outrageous. We had a terrible



O'Donnell -- I -- 103

fight over that. And the day that Hale Boggs got called back to Washington--Boggs was very cooperative frankly, it was a good committee, probably the best platform committee and the best platform--we went over every single line on every page. Phil [Philip H.] Hoff was the governor of Vermont. We went over everything and we gave them a fight on every single thing. But they gave in on about everything because they were waiting for the big crunch, and then they wanted to have us give in on the peace plank. We were getting emissaries from Humphrey all the time. Humphrey's man on the committee was Wilson Wyatt. It's amazing the stuff, particularly what the southerners gave in on just because they were told to, so we could negotiate a compromise.

Then the Czechoslovakian invasion came. Then we went to Chicago the next day for the final meetings. Boggs gets a call from the White House, came back in and cleared the room, announced that he was called back to the White House for a very, very serious staff meeting. Then he called me out and said, "Kenny, you've been in the big leagues on this stuff now, let me just tell you. We're in real trouble. I just got a call and the Russians are maneuvering near the Roumanian border and near the Yugoslavian border." I said, "Hell, they can't get near the Yugoslavian border, there are countries in between them, so don't go too far on it." He said, "Well, we think Roumania is going to be invaded. That's what we're going back for, for a joint meeting of the NSC and the congressional leadership."

O'Donnell -- I -- 104

So he flew back to Washington. While he was gone we put the Kerner Commission in by a ten to nine vote. He was hysterical when he got back, said, "You dirty son-of-a-b, the minute I turn my back--" I said, "I can't help it, the chairwoman brought it up." Ella Grasso. Anyway, he still doesn't want to fight about that.

Then he clears the room again and said, "I just want to say this. I just left. It's very serious, Russian troops, Roumania--there may be a war. Also we have every reason to believe that the Viet Cong is starting a very serious offensive within the next day or two. And it would seem to me this committee ought to think very seriously about not tying the President's hands at this moment and perhaps leave foreign policy where it belongs."

We just keep looking out the window. We go on. So then we walk out again and he said, "Do you want to have a drink?" I said, "Sure." He said, "You ought to withdraw that peace plank." I said, "Mr. Chairman, that peace plank stays right where it is." I'd been through this con before, you know. "We've got nothing to do with Czechoslovakia, which has nothing to do with what happened with the Viet Cong. You know what? If we've got these problems in Europe, we ought to get out of Vietnam right now and not wait. This peace plank is not good enough, because we ought to get those troops over where they belong. If we're going to go to war with the Russians we've got troubles. I'm not afraid of the Vietnamese but I'm scared stiff of the Russians."

O'Donnell -- I -- 105

So he just shook his head and we had not one second of debate on Vietnam, not one second. Came out the next day and the chairman said, "Well, as minds are all made up, there's no sense in--you have a minority report, file it." And we had a full debate of the committee, closed, and then brought it to the floor.

But Fred Harris and all the others--Johnson was on the phone every fifteen minutes. He was so mad at that television show, that Hale Boggs let us go on TV and maddest at me because he said, "He makes it legitimate because he hasn't got a candidate, and the other guys are all supporting either McGovern or McCarthy, and they put him on. I want to see all those long-haired kooks that I can find and say they're a bunch of nuts. Don't put him on because they think he's an organization guy."

M: That's why you were effective. You and Roger Hilsman, earlier, had been effective for the same reason. Not involved.

O: Yes. But Boggs I saw the other day, he said he really got the heat terrible. Hubert wanted to accept it, no question in my mind Hubert wanted to accept the peace plank.

M: He was just told he couldn't do it.

O: Yes. We were there two weeks, in Washington. One week and five days they were struggling for a compromise. Wilson Wyatt talked to me every single day, there's no question they wanted to move.

M: Humphrey was really trapped that badly? He could not go against Johnson's dictate on that?

O'Donnell -- I -- 106

O: Oh, yes. Hubert's not the kind of fellow that gets into a fight like that. Hubert would be president of the United States if he had gotten into a fight like that and said, "I'm leader of the party now." The day he walked out of that convention he should have said, "I adopt the. . . ." He tried to get there in every possible way he could, and the more he wriggled, the worse he looked. People just had to begin to say, "Gee, he's a vacillator. Do you want him president of the United States? He can't move."

M: His friends began to say that?

O: Yes. I mean Lyndon Johnson--I'm not totally unsympathetic to him. He didn't want Hubert Humphrey to be president of the United States and I told Hubert Humphrey that. After Hubert Humphrey said in the one speech, "We're going to start to withdraw troops" and Johnson flew to New Orleans--do you remember that one?--took over the American Legion. Now he's already refuted that speech to say there are not going to be any troops withdrawn. He made a fool out of Humphrey. This is the moment when Humphrey should have said, "I'm the candidate for president. Maybe Lyndon Johnson isn't going to pull them out, but I'll pull them out the day I'm elected president of the United States." And he'd have been elected so fast. They'd have said he was his own man and he has got some courage. But people said, "I don't want him president." His own friends. You're looking at him and say, "What's going to happen when we get in a real tough tussle? He's going to just sort of be fooling around." It's a bad image.

O'Donnell -- I -- 107

M: Was there any fear that Johnson himself might get back into it under certain circumstances?

O: I think it appears--I read Teddy White's book the other day--that some of the Humphrey people were nervous, but nobody else. Because if he'd come into that convention, they'd have booed him right off the floor. He didn't want any part--he wanted to come to the convention desperately, but that was a tough convention. That was a bitter, bitter convention. They weren't happy with Humphrey and they sure weren't happy--they didn't like McCarthy, and McGovern didn't mean anything. They just were looking for any horse they could find, but they were a very unhappy crowd.

M: Did Johnson insinuate himself at all into the brief movement for Edward Kennedy?

O: No, because I don't think it ever was legitimate. Mayor Daley got mad at me because I didn't tell him about it, and I'd never heard of it. I had talked to Senator Kennedy once in all the time I was out there, and on the peace plank--to have him call the Massachusetts delegation, which I don't have any control over, to make sure they went along with me. They'd listen to him, but they wouldn't listen to me. That's the only conversation I ever had. He told me about his conversation with Daley. I just said, "You'd better think Senator Kennedy and not somebody else here, because I just know privately he'd have been murdered if he went on that floor." Because labor. . . . When you start saying, "Is he qualified to be president," it's a great name, but today you can't run the

O'Donnell -- I -- 108

name. You can run him for one minute, they're mad at everybody and they're saying "Who can I get?" Somebody's saying "Grab Ted Kennedy. He's a good-looking kid." That lasts for about twenty-four hours. Then Nixon's saying, "He is a kid," and you're gone.

M: You've been most helpful and cooperative. I don't want to cut you off. Are there any other areas in which you think you ought to add on here? This is an open-ended chance to say something for some time from now.

O: No. I tell you that in my judgment--I know about as much about Lyndon Johnson because I'm objective about him--I think if he had not lost Walter Jenkins, history would have written a different story about the man. I think he won that election so big, if you go through his staff you'll find every one of them left him. They all became nobodies, and he made them all nobodies. And you just can't run the government that way. He really didn't know anything about politics in this United States of America, and he lived in total fear of a Kennedy, because I suppose the imprint of getting shellacked once he never got rid of. Nobody ever dared enough to be frank with him, and I'm going to do something on this, too, in a column for Esquire.

All these guys are standing around there, including Clark Clifford. Why didn't they say those things when he was there, when it was quite obvious a year and a half ago we were on the wrong course? Everybody knew it.

O'Donnell -- I -- 109

M: Could his friends just not talk to him? Was that the reason perhaps?

O: I don't think he ever stopped talking.

M: Never listened?

O: I think he's so darned insecure, he really knows so little about what he's talking about. You know this idea of reading all the stuff at night. He reads the FBI reports he gets from J. Edgar Hoover to find out who's chasing what girl. I used to say to him that he knew more about people's personal lives than he did--that night reading is just a lot of malarkey! He is not very well informed on a lot of things that go on, particularly in the foreign area--he just didn't like it. On the domestic stuff, he'd have some information. But the foreign, he just didn't like it. He didn't like foreigners. He'd go to a cabinet meeting. . . . But where were the McNamaras and the Cliffords? Isn't the country more important than Lyndon Johnson? Why didn't they stand up then, not when he's out, and say, "We never really agreed with him"?

He and Mansfield split just because Mansfield would tell him off. He hated Mike Mansfield, just despised him.

M: Mansfield was one of the only ones who said in 1964 "You'd better not go. You ought not get involved."

O: Mansfield in 1961 had a fight with John Kennedy about getting out of there totally right "here and now." He went around the world in 1962 at the request of President Kennedy, and he wrote a memorandum. If ever anyone's impression on what history was about on what was going to happen in Vietnam if we continued our involvement



O'Donnell -- I -- 110

in there and how inevitable it was going to be to send troops, he couldn't have written it better. And he told Lyndon Johnson every single day. He didn't tell him in the way Fulbright told him. Fulbright antagonized him. Of course he had antagonized me because Fulbright just gets on the same subject and harps and harps. But he got mad at Johnson because Johnson insulted him personally. Then what was just a learned treatise became embitterment now, which was personal. But Mansfield just kept telling him, "You're wrong. Don't listen to those fellows." The more he told him the madder-- Now you've cut off all communications with the only guy that really is the most knowledgeable guy about Vietnam probably in the country with the exception of scholars.

M: The first thing you know you don't hear anything but unanimous advice, then it's easy to say, "I told him."

O: We've got to go back and talk about troops. I had one question to ask Dean Rusk. I demanded that they bring him. We went to see Hale Boggs and I said, "Look. We're sitting here and we are the Democratic Party for today. You have the Secretary of Labor come in and you have the Secretary of Agriculture come in, and the only thing we're really interested in in the country is Vietnam. I'm going to insist publicly that the Secretary of State come and testify, not some clerk down there."

And Boggs said, "Do you want him? I'll get him right now. I'll call him. He's out in a boat on the Potomac." And Boggs demanded that they bring him. He came and that's the day of the

O'Donnell -- I -- 111

invasion. I asked that one question of Secretary Rusk, I was going to say, "Mr. Secretary, I was there. If you had known in 1965 that today you and I'd be standing here talking and that 35,000 Americans would be dead, we'd have spent about 41 billion dollars and we'd have about a million Americans committed to a war in the little country of Vietnam, would you have made the same recommendations then?" And I don't think there's any answer to that.

M: Did he answer?

O: He left, he said the Czechoslovakian--we didn't continue the questioning.

M: He didn't answer you before he left.

O: He just announced--they had known about the invasion for three hours, he was not going to be subjected to any questioning. He was on national television so he walked up to the chairman said, "The Russians just invaded Czechoslovakia." They'd just invaded them three hours before that. He just didn't want to be questioned, and I don't blame him. It was a nice, cute move.

M: Thank you again so much. I appreciate all your time.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE  
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Kenneth P. O'Donnell

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, Justine O'Donnell of Boston, Massachusetts, 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 on July 23, 1969 in Boston, Massachusetts and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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

(2) The tape recording shall not be available for use by researchers for fifteen years.

(3) During my lifetime, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter, the copyright in the transcript shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript without my express consent in each case.

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

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

Justine O'Donnell  
Donor

January 25, 1982  
Date

D. M. H. H. H.  
Archivist of the United States

February 12, 1982  
Date