INTERVIEW I

DATE: January, 1970

INTERVIEWEE: ELIE ABEL

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: His office in Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

A: The point I tried to make when your girl called was that my personal acquaintance with Lyndon Johnson was limited. I knew him only slightly. I had not covered the Hill in the days when he was majority leader, although obviously everybody in town knew him.

M: You were overseas, I suppose, most of the time.

A: Much of the time, I was. I was in and out, but I never got to know him terribly well. I did know him some as vice president, not very closely, again, so I hesitate somehow to pose as an authority. There may be times when you ask me questions that I'll have to say, "Look, I don't know. I can't answer."

M: That's perfectly all right. There are times when Secretary of State Rusk says, "Look, I don't know."

Did you ever travel with him when he was vice president?

A: No, I did not. I went with him as president on the trip to Manila and the Far East in 1966, I guess it was.

M: This is the only time you traveled actually in the press party.

A: Right.

M: Did you get the impression on that occasion, this was when he was meeting with the chiefs of state of all the Asian states in Manila, that his style that the press and correspondents made quite a lot of sometimes was

a real negative factor in his personal diplomacy, that it really did hurt him in his relations with these other people?

A: No, I wouldn't have said that. I mean, his style by that time was to me a reasonably familiar commodity. No, I wouldn't have said that. I think his style hurt him with some kinds of people, but many of them were Americans.

A couple of days before Adlai Stevenson died in London, when he was involved in a British television program and I was just watching, sitting there, he was being pressed pretty hard about Vietnam and at that time the Dominican Republic, and it was fairly obvious that he was not in sympathy with the Administration's approach on either the Dominican Republic or at that time Vietnam. I remember asking him privately about this afterwards at a little supper we had, and he said in effect that, "We mustn't allow our distaste for a man's style to govern our total reaction to him. Obviously Johnson and I are not people who talk in the same way and discuss problems in the same way, and I'm perfectly willing in private to discuss misgivings about a particular course of policy that is his," but he said he was always on guard against allowing his personal distaste for some of things Johnson said and the way he said them to get in the way of his feeling about the issues. I think that's easier to say than to do. Clearly, a good many people did respond one way or another in a very personal vein to Johnson, some for him, some against him. Adlai was, I think, stating a kind of unattainable goal in human relations.

M: Easy to shoot for, though. Did you observe on that Manila trip any of the symptoms of what was reported on some other trips, the rebel yell in the Taj Mahal syndrome, this type thing?

A: No. It was the trip in which he went to Vietnam and used what I considered an unfortunate expression about bringing back that coonskin and nailing it to the wall.

M: No one ever wrote that, did they?

A: No, I think it must have been reported.

M: It was reported, but that was extemporaneous Johnson.

A: That was authentic LBJ, I'm sure, talking to the GI's. I didn't think that that was very helpful to his cause or ours, but it was the authentic man. You know, he did tend, I think, to a kind of hyperbole when he got away from home. I thought his early reference to President Diem as the Churchill of Southeast Asia reflected less careful thought perhaps than might have gone into that kind of comparison.

M: Did he spend a lot of time in personal camaraderie with the press on trips like that, long monologues or late night discussions, this type of thing?

A: Not in my presence. I think he may have with some of the regular White House correspondents who were with him all the time. I was then based in London, and I picked them up in Manila and went with them the rest of the way, including all the way back to the United States. But much of the time I was traveling on a press plane separate from his own, and so we would see him at the stops but not in between. Much of the time we were flying, it was a very long trip.

M: Any noticeable business regarding his demand for the personal comforts that sometimes got reported?

A: No.

M: His brand of scotch, his length of bed?

A: I've heard all those stories, but I can't vouch for any of them from personal experience.

M: So as far as you were concerned, on that trip at least, his personal diplomacy was not discreditable.

A: No. As I say, my one great regret I suppose was wishing that he hadn't said what he said about the coonskin.

M: Do you think that reporters sometimes who were subjected to such unpredictability of his schedules let that anger or displeasure show through in their stories?

A: I would hate to think that that was so. Now, I was never a White House correspondent, with him or any other president. I know many of them, and I know that some of them used to get damned irritated about his mystifications. He'd never tell you, even on an off-the-record basis, a day in advance that maybe he'd be going on a trip. Newspapermen are human, they have wives and children, and if they're going to go off on a trip to the Far East they'd like a chance to pack a bag, you know, that kind of thing. There's no doubt some of them had a chip on their shoulder about this kind of thing. Not having been one of them there's no point in my talking about it, because what I'd give you is second-hand and I have no doubt that you've talked to people of this kind directly.

M: You have written, I suppose, the definitive account of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a fine piece of work. Johnson appears only briefly in that story. Is that your judgment, that his role was a very subsidiary one, a very small one?

A: I think it was, yes. That book was the product of a lot of very careful research. I must have talked to a hundred people at length, and his name

was hardly ever mentioned. There was one incident mentioned to me by a member of the Kennedy family after the crisis which suggested that President Kennedy was somewhat displeased with Johnson's personal demeanor during the crisis. I didn't use it in the book because I couldn't check it out, and it seemed to me that this person was perhaps trying to be mischievous. On the other hand, maybe this person was just so tired and so bitter and so unhappy that he couldn't be fair, so I left it out.

M: But Johnson did, I think you say, attend some of the important meetings.

A: Oh, yes.

M: Did he attend the really important meetings, the crucial meetings?

A: This was a peculiar crisis in that the crucial meetings were on the whole not attended by the President and some of them not by the Vice President either. As you may know, the so-called executive committee was a peculiar Kennedy construction; it was not the National Security Council. It was in effect an ad hoc kind of subcommittee of the council.

M: Actually created for that crisis, wasn't it?

A: On the first day that he heard the Missiles were in Cuba he dictated to McGeorge Bundy a list of names, people he wanted to sit in on these discussions, and that eventually came to be known as the executive committee. Now there were people in that who ex officio would not have been in it, or shouldn't have been in it, but they were people whom Kennedy had a personal relationship with or whose judgment he valued, for example, Roswell Gilpatric, the deputy secretary of defense. McNamara was surely in it, but Kennedy wanted Ros in there, too. By the same token he wanted [Douglas] Dillon in there, although it was not really a Treasury Department matter.

Presidents differ greatly. Kennedy was not a great believer in the cabinet as a kind of collective repository of human wisdom. I remember him saying in my presence, "What's the point of dragging in the Postmaster General or the Secretary of the Interior to discuss some esoteric question about Soviet nuclear weaponry? They don't know anything about it; they can't contribute anything to the decision. All they can do is maybe leak ill-informed information all over town, so let's just forget about them." And that was very much the way he worked. I don't have a copy of the book here, at least not of the American edition, I have it in French and Italian I think, but Johnson certainly did sit in on a certain number of the meetings and some important ones. He did not by common account play a very dominating role.

M: But he wasn't excluded purposely.

A: No. I don't think Johnson in the Kennedy period, when he was very much the vice president, played more of a role than he allowed Hubert Humphrey to play in his own administration. He was vice president, and being vice president is a peculiar form of human misery. The miseries of the vice presidency Johnson himself has spoken of eloquently on more than one occasion.

M: The idea that he rendered perhaps important advice to Mr. Kennedy privately, you think, is probably not true then?

A: He may have. My information at one point is that he was against the idea of the blockade, and his views became known really only after the decision had been made to go the blockade. He made known apparently to the President and to Robert Kennedy his unhappiness with the decision.

M: He called that an act of war, didn't he, when Senator Keating [suggested it]?

A: He had done it in the beginning. There he was--I suppose--technically right; blockade is one of a possible range of warlike actions. But to have said that a blockade was necessarily an act of war at that moment, with the authority of the Vice President, was not terribly helpful to the U.S. government, which at that moment was trying to find a way short of war of coming to grips with this thing. Now Johnson is not an international lawyer and he probably shouldn't have said anything about the legal aspects of it, but he did on this one occasion. In the end they went with it anyhow, and on the whole it worked. No, he had misgivings, as some others did, about whether a blockade at that stage was a tough enough action to persuade the Russians to withdraw their missiles. In the end they did withdraw them, so the debate ended at that point.

M: Did his statement in response to I think Senator Keating's call for a blockade cause any difficulties within the administration that you don't go into in the book?

A: No. I mentioned that there was a certain amount of unhappiness about "why did he have to make things more complicated by talking out of turn at that time?" But in the end when they decided this was, short of war, the most rational step to take, they did it, and I'm not sure a great many people at that moment remembered Johnson's statement or worried that much about it.

M: Going by what you said down at Airlie, you were pretty close to Robert Kennedy, using some of his notes for your book and so on. Was the enmity between Mr. Johnson and Robert Kennedy already well developed at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, pretty far along?

A: I think there was, shall we say, a lack of warmth between them. I think the enmity sharpened greatly after Johnson became president.

M: But that's not attributable to a specific issue on which they divided or a specific thing?

A: There may have been. Shortly after Jack Kennedy was killed I went to Europe for several years and was out of touch with that kind of thing. I did see Johnson once during this period on that Manila trip; I saw Robert Kennedy several times in London when he came through on trips as a senator, and we would sit and have a bull session. It was fairly clear that he was not a great admirer of LBJ. But by that time he was complaining chiefly about Vietnam, and that's out in the open.

M: Were you in London and saw a lot of Kennedy when he was coming back from Paris in February of 1967?

A: No, I saw him on his way to Paris, before he got there.

M: I'm trying to get into the mystery of whether or not he thought that was a serious peace feeler from Aubrac in Paris.

A: I couldn't tell you that. I didn't see him then. I saw him twice in London, once when he was on his way to South Africa on that trip and made a speech down there. On that occasion we had a long talk, a purely private talk, chiefly about my book The Missile Crisis and his feeling about it and his sister-in-law's feeling about it and so forth, which there's no point in going into. He also at that time asked me to read the text of a speech that had been prepared for him to deliver in South Africa and give him my opinion on it, and I did.

The second time was about a year later, I think 1966 or 1967, I can't be sure. At any rate, he had been invited to speak at the Oxford Union. On that occasion his secretary called and asked me if I'd talk

to him; he wanted to see me. We did in fact meet twice, once in London and then the following day, interestingly, at Bladon Churchyard where Winston Churchill is buried. He was staying out in the country, I think it was a Ditchley Park conference of some kind, and he was on his way to Oxford to speak at the Union and said he'd like to get my opinion on one or two things before he spoke, so would I meet him. I went out to--actually it's the churchyard of Blenheim Castle, where the Churchill family had their home, the Marlborough family. We met, and it was raining and he laid a wreath on Churchill's grave, and then we drove into Oxford from there together. He asked my opinion about young people in Britain, what would they expect him to say.

M: He didn't talk about going to Paris for the purpose of trying to get something started, the negotiations for peace?

A: No, he did not. He talked about how urgent he thought it was that we should try to get negotiations, but he wasn't the only one saying that at the time, as you know.

M: You were out of the country and perhaps in a better position to see it objectively than some that were here: how bad do you think the Kennedy loyalists and the press corps hurt Johnson in the first two or three years in their inability to see him as the president?

A: Well, I don't know how you measure that. I think it's almost impossible to apply any kind of physical scale to this. It's a matter of nuance and feeling. Most of them are professionals, and professionals do their job even when their own hearts are broken and I think most of them did. I think there are some, a few individuals who were pretty shaken up and who didn't like LBJ and who didn't try hard enough, it seems to me, to be fair. But I think they're a very small number, and I think their importance

is exaggerated. It's easy to exaggerate it if you live in Washington, D.C., and read a particular couple of papers every day. You get out in the country, I think, and away from this particular atmosphere it doesn't seem quite the same.

M: We don't get the Georgetown gossip circuits in northwest Arkansas.

A: No. For that matter, Charlie Bartlett, I think, who was probably Jack Kennedy's closest friend from young boyhood, was undoubtedly fair and professional for the most part. I haven't read every word he ever wrote, but I was not aware in his columns of any kind of personal bitterness or vendetta. There were some others who were less close to Kennedy, Mary McGrory for example. But Mary's a special case. Mary leads with her heart always. We've seen it since. I mean, she went for Gene McCarthy in a big way.

M: Some of the Georgetown group were--

A: She has kind of a woman's approach to politics. She loves people or she doesn't love them. Well, Johnson was one of the people she didn't love, that's what it came down to.

M: But this was not a conscious group of people who set out to [get Johnson]?

A: No, I don't think she could help herself, frankly. I don't know whom you mean by the Georgetown group. If you're talking about people who live in Georgetown and who are in the press, such as Rowlie Evans and Bob Novak, for example, I don't know. Joe Alsop certainly, who again was close to Kennedy, had known him longer than almost anyone, was not notoriously critical of the President or the war. And Joe is one of the central figures in the Georgetown set, so it's not all that easy to generalize. I think that some of the President's people tended to lump

all the Georgetown people together, and a good many of the offenders didn't live in Georgetown, weren't really a part of that.

M: In your particular case, did the President ever call you directly to complain about any stories you ever did on him?

A: He didn't call me directly, but his press secretary did.

M: He had somebody?

A: Yes.

M: What crime had you committed in that case?

A: This was early.

M: In Salinger's days?

A: Yes, Salinger was still there; in fact, he was the one who called me. It was the time the bombing started in 1965. I can't remember now what program it was on. But at the time of the escalation beginning the air war I had been talking with a good many professional people, intelligence people, foreign policy people, who knew a good bit about Vietnam, and many of them felt that the decision to bomb the North was not likely to win the war or end the war, that bombing the North would not win the war in the South. At that time, remember, we had no combat troops there. I did several pieces on successive nights, just examining what was the best that could be hoped for and making this point: that in all probability, if the situation in South Vietnam was as desperate as the President believed or was being told, that bombing the North was not going to be the answer, that he was going to have to send in troops. He was quite unhappy about that because in fact he did send in troops very soon thereafter, but he didn't like the idea, I gather, of people talking out of turn on this kind of thing. I never discussed it with him although I did see him once or twice.

Salinger called me at home, and it was one of those silly conversations, really, in which he obviously had not seen me on the air. He had been out to a party or something, and it was also obvious to me that the President had called him and said, "You get this bastard off my back," or something to that effect. Pierre, who knew me quite well, called me at home. I was in bed. I think I had a cold or something, and I had gone to bed early. He went through a lot of complaining and groaning, like. "What do you mean standing up in front of ten million people and calling the President a horse's ass?" I said, "I did no such thing."

M: Sounds like a quotation, almost.

A: Yes, from the President. But I very quickly established to my satisfaction that Pierre had not seen the program or read the script. So I said, "Look, Pierre, I'm ill; I'm running a fever, and there's really no point in my having a long hassle with you now. You obviously haven't seen the program. You don't know what I said. All you have is somebody else's reaction to it. I will send you the script the first thing in the morning, and you can then judge it for yourself."

So I came in here early, and I guess called my secretary in and said, "Let's quickly retype this and send it to the White House." She'd no sooner started retyping it than Pierre was on the phone, this was like 8:30 in the morning, saying, "Where's that script?" I said, "It's on its way, she's just retyping it clean so you can read it"--I sometimes mark up scripts as I go. I didn't then hear from him again, but I had reason to believe that the President registered his dissatisfaction with someone else.

M: I was going to say, did he ever go to your superiors?

AA: Yes, he did. I'm not supposed to know it to this day, but he did. I must say, to the credit of my superior at that time, Robert Kintner, who was then president of NBC and who later became a Johnson aide--he was the man to whom the displeasure was made evident, and he never to this day has mentioned it to me. This is where I think the President sometimes miscalculated.

M: Do you think the President ever went so far as to actually misstate things, lie to the press in his own behalf?

A: I think every president has told little lies to the press at times. Kennedy told a lie about having a cold and having to cancel a speech in Chicago, and there have been many others. That kind of lie doesn't worry me terribly much. I don't see how a man in public life can avoid that kind of minor misrepresentation, very often for reasons of protecting some secret or what have you.

M: It wasn't worse under Johnson?

A: No, I don't think so. It's not the lies that bother me really about presidents. Obviously nobody likes them. If you were to come in here and tell me a lie, I probably wouldn't have as good an opinion of you as I do. But it's not the lies presidents tell that worry me so much. What I have worried about is when, having taken a decision--not always perhaps a wise decision--some presidents wrap themselves in the flag at that point and say, "Anybody who criticizes me is against the United States of America." This is a bit excessive, it seems to me. But I had no very personal trouble with the President. It was clear that I was not one of his favorite correspondents and that he was not one of my favorite presidents, but we left it at that.

M: Did he play favorites among the media people?

A: I think there were some people in the White House press corps whom he got along with better than others. This is natural; it's perfectly human. I think Phil Potter he liked very well and felt close to. I think Pete Lisagor. There were some others of whom he was heard to say, "Those guys will never give me a fair break because they're Kennedy people," or, on the other hand, "They're Republicans," or something. I don't know what category he put me in. I think he knew that my friendship with Jack Kennedy went back before his presidency, and maybe that figured in his [attitude]. He never said anything to me, but he may well have had a little list in his head somewhere.

M: Did he treat newspapermen and TV men differently?

A: I saw no evidence of that. At NBC we had a number of people covering the White House over the Johnson years, and I think he got along very well, for example, with my colleague Ray Scherer, who was there much of the time but who had also been there in the Eisenhower period and part of the Kennedy period and being a professional had no difficulty getting along with any of them.

I think here sometimes the lay public tends to assume that we're all a lot more ideological and committed and passionate than in fact we are. The White House correspondent for NBC or the New York Times or the AP is expected to do as conscientious a job as he can of reporting the activities of the president and the administration. The fact that he may not have voted for a particular president or party I don't think really gets in the way.

M: Your chief contact was the State Department public affairs people. How much of the administration's difficulty came from poor press operations in

the departments, such as the State Department specifically?

A: In State, I would have guessed not all that much. It seems to me when he first took over that Robert Manning was assistant secretary for public affairs, followed by Jim Greenfield. Both did a remarkably fine job, I think, for the United States and for the administration, and who then left. At that point Dixon Donnelly [came in]. Donnelly was not what you might call an activist; he was not in direct touch with the press very much. He concerned himself more with running the affairs of the bureau, and so I can't say he did harm or good. I hardly ever saw him. The man we dealt with at that level most often, or just below, was Bob McCloskey, who is still there, and who I think is an outstanding public affairs officer.

M: So there was no problem in that period?

A: No, the problem was not with people. The problem, I think, was Vietnam. Vietnam, we all know, became the kind of issue that poisoned human relationships. I remember when I was still living in London someone we knew, I can't remember now who it was but it may have been somebody on the White House staff, called and we had dinner together, my wife and this fellow's wife and he. It may have been Harry McPherson or someone of that kind, someone who was well informed. We'd been away a long time, and I said, "Harry, how are things in Washington?" And he said, "It's a real swinging town." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Nowadays when people talk about a swinging Washington party they mean a fist fight over Vietnam."

M: Can you date this, even within several months?

A: I would think probably the autumn or sometime in 1966.

M: The reason I ask is that there's some disagreement among people who were involved closely with the policy as to when there began to be significant dissent within the administration over the Vietnam issue.

A: I'm not talking about the administration here. What I'm talking about is a typical Washington party, people in Georgetown or elsewhere, involving, as most Washington parties tend to do, a mixture of politicians, administration people, and the press. Two guys are off in a corner having a quiet drink, you think, and one of them says, "We're doing a terrible thing in Vietnam." The other one says, "We're doing the only thing that we can do in self-respect and out of our dedication to freedom," and the first thing you know these two guys who have known each other for ten years are at each other's throats. Now that is not usual Washington behavior. It may well have reflected certain arguments and disagreements within the White House, but, as I say, I was away during much of that time.

M: When did you start getting dissents from people within the government fairly frequently, expressions of discontent?

A: I didn't get very many of them during those years. I did come back several times, but once I was back in 1966, I guess, again just about this time of year. I was in Washington just for a day. No, I know when it was, it was on the return. I flew back from that Manila trip with the President's group and just got back here and spent the night in a hotel. I was supposed to go on the "Today" show the next morning, and I did. I had no sooner gotten out of the studio, which was like ten minutes to nine in the morning, when Dean Rusk's secretary called and asked if I could come and see him--urgently. So I said, "I'm going to London today." She said, "Can you fit it in before you go to the airport?" So I did.

He was upset, not with me but with the British government. He put a series of questions to me about why the British government didn't take its obligations under the SEATO Treaty more seriously. They were as much signatories of SEATO as we, and why hadn't they sent just a token detachment of troops, as they had in Korea, and so forth. I said, "Look, I can't speak for the British government. I'm an American citizen living there. I keep my eyes and ears open." He said, "Well, I want your opinion." I said, "My opinion is, the reason they don't is that they can't. There is no public support for this kind of thing." Then he got very moralistic and began to complain about how we were being left to carry water for everybody, nobody wanted to help us. I had a feeling the President had been on him about putting out more flags, and he had gotten nowhere with the British.

At one point I said to him, "Why do you ask me? You've talked to Wilson and Denis Healy and the Foreign Secretary. You've undoubtedly asked them to send troops. What sort of response do you get?" He said, "I can't discuss it, but obviously I wouldn't be asking you if I got the right kind of response." I tried to explain two things to him that I think he didn't understand, and maybe the President didn't understand: one was that the war looked quite different to many Europeans, including the British, than it did from the White House; that it looked like an effort by a major power to club a small country senseless and use disproportionate power, air power in particular. I made the point that while there were people in Britain who on the whole would defend what we had to do, they would do it generally on imperial grounds, which most

Americans were very uncomfortable with, that we had taken over their burden; that, by and large, the kind of people who supported us in Vietnam were not the kind of people that I felt very comfortable with anyhow, and that this was a political fact--you had to deal with it. I couldn't see that any prime minister of Britain at that moment could go against public opinion to that extent, and that maybe the best we could hope for was that Wilson would at least hold the line and not denounce us. And even that he was under pressure every day in the House of Commons to do.

I don't know whether I got through to him or not. I was just trying to report my observations on the actual political situation. At one point he said, "What would you do?" And I said, "I would not push on a barred door. It's pointless. You're going to get sawed off if you do. They cannot go along with this; therefore, you're just as well to stop pressing."

M: Shortly after that there was a major peace initiative that involved the British government. You were there in February, 1967. Were you in a position to see the fallout from that fairly closely in the British government?

A: It was, as you know, a misbegotten effort. It was all done in a great hurry. Nobody in the press had any very clear idea at that time what was happening. The first time I smelled a rat was on this business when Wilson, having had Kosygin down at his country house in Chequers over the weekend and apparently having talked Vietnam to him all night, then drove him home to Claridge's Hotel at eleven o'clock at night, or midnight maybe, and then at two o'clock in the morning went back to see him again. Obviously there had been either a telephone call or a message from

Washington in between about whether the bombing halt at that time was going to be extended.

The British were not very helpful to the press at that point. I think rightly they felt that their role was purely ancillary, and that while maybe there was an opportunity here, that the original information would have to come from American sources, and it didn't. I gather later on something came out in Washington, but anyway, in London we had very little information except the comings and goings and the obvious excitement.

M: Not obvious bitterness on the part of the English at being perhaps let down?

A: There was some of that, although I must say that I had occasion very soon after that to see Wilson alone once or twice, through the accident that I was at that time the president of the Association of American Correspondents in London. We were about to have our annual dinner, and I had to go to Downing Street to invite the Prime Minister. He never mentioned it to me. He talked about everything else under the sun but not that.

M: When did you come back to the United States?

A: I came back just before Christmas in 1967.

M: How much dissent in government on Vietnam did you find then when you began getting involved with the people here?

A: It was clear to me that there were a fair number of people, not at the very highest level but just below in State and Defense, who for various reasons, not all the same reasons by any means, had come around to the view that this thing had to be turned around, that we had if possible to get a

negotiation started, and that probably stopping the bombing was the best way of bringing that about.

M: Were there certain shops, certain places that this was particularly strong in Defense or State?

A: Well, I think Paul Nitze's shop, certainly, although I think his own view was somewhat misrepresented in Tim [Townsend] Hoopes' book.

M: That was what I was going toward. He makes it out that ISA was really the--

A: I think Paul Warnke, who succeeded Nitze, personally felt, as God knows anybody has a right to feel, that it was a dead loss, that we had to get off this wicket. Paul never felt that strongly about it. Paul felt, as he would tell you himself--

M: Nitze?

A: Yes. And he did tell me later, he said, "I was never one of those who felt that the war could not be won. I still think it can be won today if you fight it right."

M: Hoopes does misrepresent that then, I think, very clearly.

A: Yes. But Nitze did feel that the bombing was not doing what we had hoped it would do, and that maybe we ought to try to trade off with either a reduction of the bombing or stopping the bombing for a negotiation.

M: And there were people of similar rank in State who were also of that opinion by then? In Vietnam roles? I mean in places other than cultural and educational affairs?

A: Oh, yes, I'm not talking about people like Charles Frankel, who was not involved in this kind of thing anyhow, except in the most tangential way. I can't vouch personally for the feelings of Nick Katzenbach. I have heard second-hand that he had come to feel, earlier perhaps than some, that we ought to try in a more convincing way than we had till then

to get the bombing either stopped or the halt stretched out so that you could get a negotiation started. There were always a certain number of working level people, those who tended to know Vietnam best, who had their doubts about this thing from the very beginning. They were nearly all career people.

Someone now out of government said to me the other day, and I think it's certainly true, "If you go back and read Hoopes' book you get the impression that Phil Habib and General Dupuy and Carver of the CIA had somehow all become doves overnight." This man said, "That isn't an outright lie, but it overstates the thing in this sense--" He said he knew all three and had listened to them six months before and nine months before, and what they were saying then was, if you will, dovish, they were very skeptical about what was being accomplished on the ground. But in those days people didn't listen to them. It wasn't until TET, that very jarring experience when a lot of assumptions tightly held all these years, seemed to become shaky. Then suddenly, the reading of these men on the ground situation seemed to affect someone as bristling tough as Dean Acheson, for example. The President was very suspicious when Acheson, of all people, suggested that maybe he was being misled.

M: You mentioned earlier that you were interested in that de-escalation decision.

A: Yes.

M: The President on TV the other night came out with what apparently will be in his book the fact that the State Department had recommended the

partial halt earlier on than the final crucial hours.

A: Yes, the fourth of March, in fact.

M: That's different from Hoopes' account.

A: Yes, that's right.

M: Which one are you favoring currently?

A: Even before the President went on the air I had talked to Dean Rusk at some length, and Rusk, who is not always the most forthcoming guy, did tell me about his first suggestion to the President privately that we might try to go for a bombing halt. He dates it at March 4, which is twenty-seven days before.

(Interruption)

M: In regard to this same decision on de-escalation, the existence or nonexistence of real tension between Defense and State as between Clifford and Rusk, was that real?

A: Let us say that I've talked to both of them and they have rather different recollections, and I haven't made up my mind about it. It's going to be very hard to fit these two bits of testimony together. You might think sometimes that they're talking about two totally different crises.

M: Are you still planning to do further work on this particular subject?

A: Yes, I'm just signing a contract to do a book. It's not on this alone, but some of this material fits.

Obviously people tend to recall [things differently], I think I said this at Airlie House. You take a single event and you get six guys with different backgrounds to look at it and get them to describe it to you, and you'll get six different versions, sometimes

even differing on physical facts, numbers and times, and so forth.

I think there's always a problem with Rusk. I had a problem with Rusk, whom I'm very fond of, on the missile crisis, long before Johnson came in. On that one I remember having interviewed, I suppose, fifty people by the time I got [to Rusk]. He kept saying, "Come to me at the end. Talk to everybody else first." I finally got to him, and by this time everybody I had talked to pretty much had said, well, Rusk wasn't really very assertive; he didn't really come down hard on one side or the other; he never had any very clear recommendation. I liked him too much to just hit him in the head with that, and so I tried to persuade him to answer a few simple questions.

He kept saying, "I won't talk about that. I won't say what I advised the President to do because that's between the President and me." At the end I said, "Look, you and I are friends, I think, and I've got a hell of a problem. I want to be fair to you, but you're not letting me. You're not helping me worth a damn." I had by this time been through thousands of pages of documents and testimony and people's recollections, and there was very little evidence that Dean Rusk had ever taken a position. So I badgered him enough, and he finally said, "Come back tomorrow."

I came back "tomorrow," and he had a little piece of paper in his hand. I said, "What's that?" He said, "This was my recommendation to the President. It's perfectly true, I did not talk in the presence of the others about what I was going to say to the President. I thought I owed it to the President to tell him directly, and this is what I told

him." Then he read me this thing. It was short, one sheet of paper; I think four or five points, and it turned out to be pretty much what was decided, which was the blockade and why the blockade instead of the air strike, and so forth. But it was like pulling teeth to get him to admit that he even said anything.

Now on this one when I was up there last Thursday, he was sitting there in his old sweater and we had coffee. We got to talking about this time around and the new President, and so forth. This time he was a little more forthcoming. He told us about the first proposal to stop the bombing and how the President had said, "Get on your horse and work this up," and so forth. But I said, "How is it that so few people, even in your own department, knew that this was going on?" He said, "I wanted it that way. I felt my effectiveness as secretary of state would be destroyed if there was too much blue sky showing between the President and me." He said, "If I ever had any difference with the President, I never said so in the presence of my subordinates. I would tell him personally."

M: His philosophy of the office.

A: Yes, right.

M: When I listened to Mr. Johnson on television talk about how he didn't want to hold the office I kept thinking of your story of your conversation with Adlai Stevenson the morning before he died. Is that the kind of thing, do you think, that Johnson is doing now, that he really did talk this frequently about getting out, quitting, and so on, and it was kind of the same thing that Stevenson did so often?

A: I don't know how to weigh the story about Lady Bird having made him promise four years before. Rusk will tell you, I'm sure he has told you,

that he knew about a year before. He knew in general; he knew that the President was of a mind to make it a one-term presidency. Even he was not absolutely certain that it was going to be announced that night, as he told me. He said when he was on the plane flying out to New Zealand or wherever it wasn't until he got on the plane that he got word that the President was going to deliver the speech and that he proposed to add one or two paragraphs. Well, Rusk knew what that meant. He knew that much about what was coming. Clifford will tell you he didn't know until the President actually invited him into the room just before going on the air. So I think to that extent Rusk was privy to it.

I've talked to others, I mean people as close as Harry McPherson and Joe Califano, who swear that they'd heard him talk about the burdens of it all and they'd heard him say some pretty damning things about the job and how he'd like out. I think it was just it was just a matter of them not believing him.

M: Now they can think back and say, "Yes, I heard him say that."

A: Right. But at the time they didn't take it all that seriously. Now this is perfectly human. There are not many more political people in the world than Lyndon Johnson, and I think all of us have a picture of him as a highly political man. It just seems implausible that he would walk out on a chance to succeed himself. I think you will find that Harry, you've undoubtedly talked to him, now remembers a conversation about the middle of March with Califano and the President in which the President kind of baited them a little bit and said something about "those messages I asked you to prepare for Congress, you'd better get them ready. They may be my last." Harry, I guess, was showing disbelief in his face, and the President said, "You think I'm going to run, don't you?" Harry said, "Yes, I do." And he said, "Would you run if you were me?"

Harry said, "No, I wouldn't, but I'm not Lyndon Johnson."

M: Harry's one of the few people who would have said that.

A: Yes. It was this kind of conversation. Finally the President said, "I think you're wrong about another president not being able to get legislation through." Then he said something that he later put in different words on this program. He said, "I've gotten to the stage with the Congress where they won't do anything for me. I don't care who the next president is, whether his name is Gene McCarthy or Richard Nixon or Bobby Kennedy, any of them will do better with Congress than I, because the Congress and I are like an old man and an old lady who've lived together too long. We've been on each other's asses all this time," and so forth. I think that that was the first time that Harry began to believe that maybe it was possible, and Harry was pretty close to him.

I don't know what to think. I don't think it's as transparent as the device I mentioned about Adlai, because Adlai was a notorious debater with himself. I'd seen him do it before. He would throw something at you just to see how you would respond. He wouldn't do it with people he didn't know very well, because he wasn't really interested in their response. But if he knew you and liked you, he would say something of this kind just to see what kind of response he'd get, whether you agreed or disagreed. And for a politician it may not be a bad device. How else do you know how people will respond to your actions? My guess is that the idea of not running had been in Johnson's mind before. I'm not sure that it was quite as hard a decision as he has tried to make it appear now.

M: He remembers it that way now.

A: Right.

M: Are there any anecdotes or stories that you'd like to add? I don't want to cut you off, but I don't want to dominate your time either. You've been helpful.

A: There's one thing I remember, which is kind of sad. It goes back to an earlier period when he was vice president. As I've indicated, I was never a very close friend of his, I never knew him all that well. But once, in I guess the first year of the Kennedy presidency, in 1961 it must have been, a group of us, mainly commentators and columnists, not hard-news reporters, were invited to the Vice President's Capitol Hill office out of the blue, no visible reason. Oh no, I know what it was. He had just returned from his first trip to Southeast Asia. We just got a call, saying would we come and have lunch. Bill White was there and Roscoe Drummond and a number of people like that, and I guess Eric Sevareid and I on the broadcast side.

We had, I remember, hamburgers--a hamburger and ice cream, which was fine. He gave us a run-down of his trip, and he was very much impressed with the size of the crowds. He had a lot of blown-up photographs of crowds in Delhi, crowds in Karachi, crowds in the street. I was somewhat less impressed than he because I had lived in that part of the world, and I had seen similar crowds out for lesser dignitaries.

M: For changing a tire.

A: It's one of those things. Crowds in India don't really mean a goddamned thing. Only Americans imagine they do. Indians live in crowds, it's their natural habitat. It's as if people don't have

homes to go to, they just sort of squat in the dirt, surrounded by eleven thousand other people. At any rate, I'd been around too long to get very much worked up about this, one way or the other. I listened.

And then at the end he asked each of us to stop, he had a kind of receiving line, and he'd press our hand as we went out. He said something to me that struck me as rather poignant at the time. He pressed my hand and said, "Why don't you come and see me some time? I know some things." I read it as a kind of confession that he felt he'd been consigned to the dustbin of history somehow, that people weren't paying much attention to him. We were not close friends, and he was in effect saying to me, "Why don't you come around? I'd like to get to know you better, and I might even be of some help to you." I thought of it later when he came to be president and suddenly the whole world was around him.

M: Yes, he wasn't ignored then.

A: No. But I think there was that.

M: Thank you very much for your time. We appreciate it so much.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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