INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 17, 1972

INTERVIEWEE: CLIFFORD ALEXANDER

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mr. Alexander's office in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: Mr. Alexander, what did you do with Ralph Dungan?

A: My major job related to personnel.

F: Did he name you or did the President name you?

A: No, no. The President did. There was another reason besides--

F: How did he get hold of you for this?

A: I don't know. I guess I was there. (Laughter)

F: That's a good reason. You mean he saw you in the hall one day?

A: He saw me in the hall one day, grabbed me by the nape of the neck. (Laughter) No, what happened was I guess he had talked to Mac [McGeorge] Bundy who I did work for, and whoever he checked with.

There was a strong desire to have me involved in the politics as well. That is not appropriate obviously on the National Security Council staff. So I did involve myself with domestic activities relating to blacks and activities relating to--

F: Were you a little bit of a head-hunter in this?

A: A little bit, yes. Trying to identify people to put into the files later turning into the machine under John Macy [Civil Service Commission chairman]. But you know the great problem with that is when

they say they can't find qualified blacks because the machine didn't show them any, when they didn't put any in the machine in the first place.

F: All of that "garbage in, garbage out" business--there wasn't any going in?

A: That's right, none going in. Then shortly after that I went to work with a lawyer's kind of title and the responsibilities broadened somewhat. We dealt a good deal in the creation of civil rights legislation, bringing people in and having meetings.

F: Before we leave this, were Dungan's relations with Johnson, so far as you could tell, happy ones? Or did he kind of have a holdover he couldn't transfer?

A: I think they couldn't have been too bad or he wouldn't have been appointed to the ambassadorship that he wanted, which was Chile.

F: Chile was where he wanted to go?

A: That's where he wanted to go. As you know, I think he was involved, collaterally with the National Security Council, in that area at one stage. I can't remember any friction, nor was I necessarily that close to Ralph that he would have confided in me that there was anything. It was clear he was not the top staff person sitting around the White House in those days.

F: Go ahead with your own chronology.

A: Then I worked with Lee White, and had really worked with him too while I was theoretically, I guess the title was deputy special assistant. And with Lee the primary area was rights legislation--how this

administration could know what the feelings and attitudes of blacks around the country were. It meant trying to do some of that on my own, trying to direct the staff to do a good deal of it, [and] trying to get out to the bureaucracy their responsibility about it.

F: Did you move around in the country a good bit, or were you pretty well based right here?

A: I moved around some. I wouldn't say a good bit. At a later stage I did help plan trips for White House staff people to various black communities.

F: Do you have a sort of an automatic grapevine? Does the word get out that there's a fellow in the White House who's looking, and do you start getting fed about people? Because obviously you're not going to know everyone in Seattle that ought to be contacted.

A: That's true. The word does get out, and I used the good offices of Louis Martin, who was then at the [Democratic] National Committee. The two of us worked, always, very closely together. His contacts were greater than mine, and through him we made others. But there was an attempt to encourage the thought of creating new ideas for developing contact, not only by Johnson, but by people in the Cabinet and other government officials with a number of blacks, to get them started rather than speculating on what the blacks were thinking, or what programs were necessary, so that they'd have an input.

F: You weren't operating on any quota basis? You were just trying to find people where you could?

A: No. No "X" number for a given part of the country, nothing like

that. As many as was possible. Now finding them, as you know, is one thing; getting the bureaucracy to move on them is quite another, even when you've got the President behind you on it. And that was disappointing. We made certain things that would be considered important strides forward but--

F: Are certain departments much more lily-white than others?

A: Yes, they certainly are.

F: Do they have a rationale for it, or do they just operate that way?

A: They operate that way. Sometimes their verbalisms on the top are different. The Agriculture Department was always quite lily-white. It stayed that way with a great deal of resistance, and I think a great deal of harm, to the black communities around the country in terms of their programs. The Defense Department was quite lily-white. Anytime we could get a secretary of defense to focus on it, the words were "we believe in God, motherhood, and country, and blacks," but appointments did not reflect that. That was perhaps the area of severest neglect really--in Defense. You never had an assistant secretary, a deputy assistant secretary. If you look at the upper level jobs, you had just a small, small smattering of blacks.

F: Could you make an argument out of the outsize percentage of blacks that were in the service?

A: Yes. Arguments were made, and actions were taken. At one time--I just don't know the time on this--I know at least one occasion where President Johnson spent the better part of a Cabinet meeting expressing what his desires were. There were various and sundry

pledges, but not the kind of performance--

F: Nothing moving.

A: There was some, but there wasn't the kind of performance that one would hope for, particularly when you had a President like this that was continually interspersing into what he had to say the importance of bringing equal opportunity to the blacks in the country. To have the top man say this and have his colleagues and alleged employees not carry it out was most disappointing.

We had, too, progress in some areas. I guess the Labor Department, as a Cabinet agency, had the best overall record in employment. You had a lot of other talk. I know in the Civil Service Commission I had many an argument trying to get them to do better. Here was the agency in government that was responsible, and this was something I objected to--that they had the responsibility--but lost that one. But they were responsible for discrimination in the federal government. They were the appeal agency, and they were the agency, under the Executive Order 11-246 specifically, to keep tabs on how other agencies were doing to develop programs. Now they had not a black commissioner; they had not a black in all of their supergrades--GS 18s, 17s, 16s. And this was the agency in charge. So if I were sitting in the Post Office, for an example, and somebody came to me, and I already had an assistant postmaster general and some people at upper level jobs, and he was telling me that I ought to be better, it would fall on deaf ears. But where it was of even greater importance, I think, was when that agency, as it did, had the responsibility

to develop programs and plans, it just didn't have the credibility to make it stick.

And it spread beyond just the Cabinet departments. One area that was then, and is still, a grave, grave problem in terms of the utilization of blacks, and empathy with problems of minorities, and its separateness from the government as a whole, are the administrative agencies. You have the NLRB, the FTC, and the FCC, just to name the three most prominent ones that set policies that relate so much to us. Again, you look at their upper level employment, and it is lily-white. And most of that still persists today.

It was, again, the responsibility of the Civil Service Commission to do something about it, and this responsibility they couldn't carry out well. They didn't have the proper attitude themselves, nor had they exhibited the proper kinds of approaches.

One thing I tried to do then--and it has been adopted later and I had a better opportunity to utilize it later--was the setting of goals and timetables to get the government--and obviously this would apply in the private sector as well--to treat the utilization and the finding and employment of minorities as a business problem rather than a problem they handled on Brotherhood Week. When one approaches it that way, I think what they have to do, as they'd face any other business problem, is set a given target and a goal, if you will, in such and such a grade or grades that they will seek to achieve by such and such a time. Then they utilize all the mechanisms at their disposal to go out and identify because in the long run, you can

give them a few names but they have the people and the manpower to go out and look and find. If they don't use that technique, then the old technique of just talking to their friends and those who work there, all of whom at the top are white, will not automatically spew out the minority people for given positions. This reaching out is such a difficult and important thing. And it's still true in government today, of course.

F: When you became Johnson's associate special counsel, what did this do to your duties?

A: There were a few other duties added, I think, as is true of most of the people on his personal staff. They didn't have just one niche. I also had the responsibility of reviewing all of the pardons that were sent over from the Justice Department. I think I had the good fortune at one stage President Johnson pardoned more people than any president had in one year--over four hundred in that given year. There was a large backlog that he had received. The process was that it would come through the pardons attorney to the Attorney General with a certain recommendation. Then I would review it and make recommendations to him in that field. And he would act finally on a given pardon.

I also had, for a time, physical fitness, which was something that took up some little bit of time. We were trying to encourage the nation to get out and do various and sundry things to keep themselves fit. Stan Musial worked on that with me.

F: Was there enough going on that I ought to see Musial, aside from the

fact that he's my hero?

A: I found him a delightful man to work with. We didn't have too much contact. Obviously, this was a volunteer position for him. But when he came in and in the talks that we had, he was really very nice--just a very gentle, decent man, a very modest man. I'm an opposite of you because I used to be a Brooklyn Dodger fan; I had hateful respect for the great Stan when he'd come in there.

F: I used to see him against Brooklyn occasionally, and it always seemed to me he saved his best days for Brooklyn.

A: Yes, it was something. But he was obviously a good kind of symbol for that.

Other than that activity, I used to look out for what one might describe as the misuse of the President's name. That was more lawyering than anything else. If somebody wanted to put out LBJ Barbecue Sauce, and generally use the good offices of the President--

F: What do you do where they go ahead?

A: When they go ahead you make a good threatening lawyer's letter. They can obviously realize that any president isn't about to end up in court suing them. The statutes don't give the president an awful lot of protection in this area related to criminal penalties.

F: Do you have a really large number of people who would like to capitalize on the name?

A: You do. And various administrations take different kinds of attitudes. His was pretty strict about not letting it be used. And, of course, it was pretty much in my judgment or Lee White's or Harry

McPherson's, later. If somebody were to say "President Johnson said we have to spend more money to stimulate our economy in 'X' refrigerator company"--and we had one case like this--"the President's program is that we've got to get out here and spend"--to oversimplify it, "come on in and buy such-and-such," he felt that this was the kind of thing that he didn't want. But the more particular ones were those that really imposed or implied that the President was somehow supporting them, or by the casual observer they would say there's a Johnson-authorized or a Johnson-connected product. The Better Business Bureau worked very closely with us on this kind of thing and was very, very good about it.

Too, we set up a number of meetings between the President and a variety of blacks from around the country--some who would be construed as leaders; others who would not. But the point of this was to see to it that he got firsthand some of the opinions. I have personally been of the view that I can think of and read and talk to and interpret some of what black thought is, but it's a disservice to your principal if he's president of the United States, not to let him get firsthand [opinions].

F: But it still filters through you?

A: Exactly. There was enough of that anyway. We had a number of meetings, many of which, of course, he stimulated because his was not a passive interest in this field by any means.

F: Did he seem to be comfortable in those meetings?

A: Oh, God, yes. I may have a bias because I helped set them up, but

you ask anybody who was in them. You ask the [civil] rights leaders of the day--those whom the larger meetings usually geared around. And the timing of the meetings is important, too. I think it helps explain his interest. He didn't just have a meeting the day after he sent up a piece of legislation that might affect blacks. He had it well before, often so that there could be a real input, besides the input that he encouraged others to get from black leadership.

F: Did you feel that these sort of guided him around the edges, or did you feel that some of them maybe had a direct impact on the way legislation was shaped?

A: I think probably guided around the edges. I think one of the problems that many of the organizations faced is that they didn't have enough money to get enough staff to know in great detail the specificity that was required in legislation. Again, those who supply the information are equipped with just a good deal of information. But those edges could be rather large ones, and I think were. In the 1964 Act, which was obviously of greatest moment, the thrust and the pressure, if you will, kept equal employment in as a part of that bill. There was talk, and plenty of talk, of keeping it out. I think it helped, obviously, a good deal in many of the principal appointments. Because as many, let's say, of the [civil] rights organizations' leaders continually stressed Cabinet positions and the Supreme Court, and so forth.

But there were other kinds of things that I think helped a great deal. One--and this in a sense is blooming today--[was] the black

elected officials that Louis Martin and I brought in and he saw and members of the Cabinet saw. They brought in a new kind, an interesting kind, of freshness and a different kind of leadership, if you will. It was not in conflict with the civil rights organizations; but here were people elected by other people who had to go back, and they brought that kind of insight. On the whole, those blacks were far better qualified than the cross section of white leadership you would find, because there were so few outlets, and there still are, for black elected people.

A second category that you wouldn't put in the [civil] rights category that he met with were people like the Deltas or the National Bar Association--the Deltas being a black female professional sorority. I remember him having a meeting of two and a half hours or so with them. It was going to be a sort of courtesy call. Well, the women in that room--

F: Lots of courtesy.

A: Yes, a lot of courtesy there. They knew an awful lot about OEO programs, and I think through those meetings new programs probably got stimulated. What he would do was: he would have at those meetings, if he didn't have a Cabinet official, one of us might convey the word on to such and such an official that this was an idea that came up that he seemed interested in. But what that did was bring to him firsthand [from] someone who, from their community experience or sometimes people who held jobs in these fields what the problems were they were having in administering: was it a financial problem, an

administrative one, or the community was unresponsive, or it was just a load of crap, such and such a program. This group met with him at least on a couple of long occasions. In fact, I think he has met with them down at the Ranch since he has been out of the presidency.

The National Bar Association, which is the black bar group, met several times. I encouraged him, and he did go speak to them once when he was here in Washington. They wanted to talk to him about an agenda that, I must admit, I got him to up. He came in, and they wanted to talk about black judges generally; they wanted to talk about black judges in the South; they wanted to talk about, to the best of my recollection, blacks in the federal government. I thought it was important to expand that agenda and for the President of the United States to sit not just with the black bar, but with a couple of leaders of the white bar, to talk about employment in law firms; to talk about other forms of participation of blacks; blacks trained as lawyers in community activity that white lawyers, members of the bar, are considered so eminent in. It wasn't hard to convince him, because he, I think, has a strong interest. He could have been a hell of a damn fine lawyer himself; he knew an awful lot of law anyway. But he saw the role the lawyer played in communities.

So we had a good long meeting. And Gary [Gerald Alden] Gesell I remember was there.

F: Who is Gary Gesell?

A: He is presently a judge here in the District of Columbia. He was

then a partner in Covington and Burling, and [he] was an official in the ABA and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. They had a couple of representatives.

And the conversation covered all of those areas, and I think some fruits were born from that. The National Bar Association developed a program--and the government later got into this area--of the training of black lawyers. The CLEO [Council for Legal Educational Opportunity] Program, I think, grew out of this kind of meeting.

One great disappointment in my time there was we never appointed a black judge for the South. We let the senators there hold this up. There was always something wrong with whoever was supposed to be considered.

F: Did you feel out some with the [senators]?

A: Yes, there were a couple. I found the excuses to be insufficient, but they were given weight, unfortunately. That still pertains today.

F: Did they get past the Attorney General's screenings, or did they ever get that far?

A: They got that far, but it gets a little mushy there as to how it just died.

F: I was thinking both Katzenbach and Clark would have gone down the line.

A: I think they would have gone down the line. I think they both had a greater responsibility than they exercised, not to just go down the

line, but just as we talked about, setting a target for themselves. That should have been high, high priority business. Anyone who has talked to any blacks from the South knows how important the negative image of a federal courtroom is; that they see no court reporters; they see no judges. Is justice to be dispensed in such a setting? They also know obviously that locally they are far more likely to get judges if there end up being some federal judges; that the breakthroughs should logically have started at the federal level. But they still haven't [started] today. There isn't a black judge sitting in the Deep South today, although there have been a few breakthroughs at the local level. But that shouldn't have been. We should have pushed and insisted on that, and the great arm-twister should have twisted these arms and gotten it done. But anyway, that was one thing.

There was other talk about the participation of black lawyers in the government. This was a problem that I think sort of has a double-edge to it. There were a number of black lawyers in government at the time. The low percentage of black lawyers in the country --1.2 per cent of all lawyers are black. You have a situation where so few are in the private sector. If you look at where lawyers are, many of them are either practicing or more likely not practicing and holding these administrative positions. That has to do, of course, with some discrimination on the outside. Within the law firms you didn't have the number of [black] lawyers that you ought to.

He was most informed and most forceful in meetings like this, but this again was another kind of group that he would meet with. I

know one time there was a tour of the White House. A friend of mine was a principal of a school in Harlem that had a 75 per cent black and about a 20 per cent Puerto Rican population. They wanted to meet the President. So I thought I'd ask him. He came in and met them in the Cabinet Room and talked to them awhile. That doesn't change a man's view, but it does give him a feel for a different kind of crosscut of people.

He met with a number of individuals. He counselled a good deal with Whitney [Young] and with Roy Wilkins--I think those two more than anyone else. That was something I wouldn't be involved in. He'd pick up the phone, I'm sure, to them on many occasions and ask directly what their thoughts were. His relationship with Martin King was a more formal one. I don't think there was any love lost, unfortunately, and I think that was a sad thing from all points of view.

F: Did you get the feeling--I suppose this is subjective rather than factual--that J. Edgar Hoover did poison the well there?

A: Yes, absolutely, there's no question about it. And it was sinful that he did.

F: On purpose?

A: I don't know. For whatever reason, he was in on it. But you know, there were attorneys general, who were alleged liberals, who were culpable, if you will, in this kind of situation. It just shouldn't have been.

I always found that Martin [King] would deal . . . he was very,

in a sense, race conscious in a positive way. He knew his protocol. He'd deal with the President. He'd deal with me. Very often he'd deal with higher whites on the staff. And many of my other nameless black leaders either were flattered or wanted to deal with a white on the assumption that that would be a better way to go at the problem; that this person would have a little higher ranking and be a little closer to "the Man." But Martin was most supportive in that kind of thing.

I think the President also called and talked to Mr. [A. Phillip] Randolph.

F: I've rather gathered from all of this that Randolph, Wilkins, and Young were personal friends with him. I mean, that he really felt a closeness to them.

A: Yes, that is certainly true. They did business as well as socialize. They were all there together many times at various things like this, as well as taking on missions for him.

I remember Whitney Young went to Vietnam and did a very significant kind of report. You see, in the offshoots of these continuing kinds of relationships are other things. When Whitney came back, and the three of us sat there, he talked to the President about the importance of getting black generals in high level offices. You know, with this kind of thrust we finally got another one, other

than the [Benjamin O.] Davis son and father. And Whitney's line to him, which was splendid, was "B. O. Davis, Sr. was a general; his son B. O. Davis, Jr., was a general. Now, unfortunately, B. O. Davis, Jr., doesn't have any sons, so it looks like there aren't going to be any black generals unless you reach out and find one." So that got Johnson into the business of dealing with the Joint Chiefs on that.

F: You're going to run out of generals named Davis.

A: That's right. Then, too, we could get him to do things--and this is by no means a complete list, it's from immediate recall--to go up to OIC [Opportunities Industrialization Center] and see firsthand in Philadelphia, which he did, how that operation worked. This was a unique kind of thing that Reverand Leon Sullivan still runs, and runs well. But you have a participation from various levels in the society. You've got labor money; you've got foundation money, and business money, and government money. And they train people to take on real jobs. It's training across-the-board so you can understand the written word better, so that you can handle the machine better, so that you are prepared employees. What Johnson did was go up to Philadelphia and give that some real exposure, and it was his trip for that reason. He went up there for that. He went through the center; made a speech; went and saw people working on the machines; saw the whole things. [He] spent a good deal of time looking at this job training facility, went through the basement of it where there

were operations of some sorts of training on machines going on, [and] talked to people.

But, of course, what he was doing was using the presidency to highlight this important kind of development. This affected a great number of blacks in the country.

F: Your impact was more than local then when you do that kind of specific?

A: Exactly. As any president does anytime he goes out of the White House, you're going to get national attention, and obviously he knew that. But he would take the better part of the day to do that kind of thing, which is important. He made the speeches, too--two Howard [University] speeches are perhaps most noted. And I guess part of my responsibility was to have some input on those, which I did I think.

I think, too, a responsibility I felt was the education, if you want to be a little presumptuous, of my colleagues in the White House to get them to have a clear understanding of where they ought to look in their given fields of responsibility. One doesn't get an opportunity to spend half a day with the president every day, so you try to figure out who are the composite numbers that are going to be spending that time having an impact. And I think from those who are considered conservative on the staff to others who would be labeled as liberals, I tried to develop and maintain a good relationship with them so that I could plug for whatever I felt was an important kind of program for our folks.

F: Without getting in too deeply into personalities, and without any sort of judgment at all, Marvin Watson fits the southern WASP prototype. Was he an obstacle in any way?

A: No, he was not. Marvin and I disagreed on a number of things.

F: I would expect that.

A: But Marvin was always available to talk. He was always an ally, I must say, in trying to push various parts of the bureaucracy to hire more minorities--much more so than some of the nameless alleged liberals in those bureaucracies. I think Marvin's basic interest was to service his boss and to do what his boss thought, whatever he happened to think of it. But I always found him to be someone I could talk to and deal with as man-to-man, and no bullshit. I would not have dealt with him otherwise if there had to be a different kind of relationship. I would give him very high marks, which I don't think is generally known, on what he did do in terms of trying to push this. Because coming from me, as a lesser light and not someone who was close and old-line Johnson, was one thing. But if I thought somebody else could do it better, it was just fine with me to have them make the call over to such and such an agency. And Marvin did those things.

We had some arguments of clearances for a civil rights conference that was held. I didn't think the FBI ought to be involved in that activity, and it was and came down. So I just had to keep arguing specific cases. That's demeaning, but I felt that was the process we had to go through to get the kind of people that ought to be there there.

F: Were there some real vetoes?

A: No, there really weren't. But the fact that there were arguments was a bad thing. There were people left out, but not for whatever . . .

F: You've always got to draw lines.

A: That's right. I think that relates to something else. The meetings with the [civil] rights leadership included the full range. A couple of times they didn't want to come--and didn't. But you had, at the time John Lewis of SNCC; you had Floyd McKissick of CORE. I remember one time Floyd didn't want to come, as he was at odds, but he was invited to the small meetings with organizational heads--

F: Did you run into a feeling with some of the more militant people that they might be compromised if they came in?

A: I think so. I think, too, you had the problem of the posture they had to maintain for their constituency. You also had the problem that at times our communications weren't as good as they should have been with them. You also had a few hustlers in the act. All those factors combined. I, at times, met, myself, with a number of people who would be considered militant--though not in external meetings--just trying to get their views. And I think those were relatively successful. Those views were passed on, too. I don't think there was the kind of understanding by the President of what the new views were, the reasons for them, as there could have been.

F: One thing I wanted to ask you was: was he, in pushing for some of these acts, moved onto another plateau and raising a whole batch of

new hopes, some of which weren't realized; but nonetheless, he did then in a sense open a new set of problems? Did he realize why this had happened, or did he expect to sort of find the solutions of problems?

A: I can't imagine that he didn't realize about the hopes that he was raising because a number of his, some racist, some just reactionary, colleagues in the Senate would have told him, "That's exactly what you're doing." And he didn't exactly lose touch with all of them during his presidency. I think that the argument, and usually it's made in a political sense against him, and a substantive sense, that "you raise those hopes, and therefore you shouldn't do it," is just not the way that a democracy ought to work. If you want to stay in a rut, then maybe we ought to go back to the seventeenth century and not have any freedom here at all.

F: Keep them prostrate to face the King.

A: Right. (Laughter) But as attention is given to an area, voices come up; and the media that has done an abominable job of covering black affairs and what goes on started all of a sudden to discover voices. Sometimes they just made up the first black that they saw on the street corner; sometimes the voices might have been valid. But those were sometimes quite strident voices. Any black American, if he or she is honest with you, can't be content with the nature of this society; can't be content with white institutions that have put a noose around us. That's the fact, and it is a fact that has to be faced if you're going to change the institution.

Johnson, far more often than not, faced those facts, but I don't think it hit his ear too well at times when he heard it said a certain way. But in many senses it was the fault of us who could get to his ear and say it the right way, for not making it as clear as possible. I think this is true, unfortunately, of some of those [civil] rights leaders he was close to; that they often placated him rather than saying to him--I mean not just saying to him, "Look, you ought to get this bill passed," but saying, "Understand this mood a little bit better and understand that it didn't start today when you saw it on channel 7, but it has been here."

F: And "nobody is going to be grateful to you, Mr. President, for doing something that your predecessors should have done"?

A: "Maybe they didn't; and you can talk to people and compare yourself, and you'll come out awfully well in the comparison, but that's your ultimate responsibility. You've been preached to, and I have, about a lawful society with equality, and that's what you're doing. You're doing your job. It's your responsibility to do that." I imagine he felt somewhat ambivalent. I don't think it slowed him down in many of the programs, but I think at least a small part of that responsibility has to go to--oh, I'll say one name--to a Roy Wilkins, who should have been a little tougher and firmer and not so much in yesteryear. Now I don't mean that . . . Roy obviously has the personal [relationship] and can say how he feels such and such a black feels or they're out of line in such and such a program. But the special kind of relationship that you have should be a vehicle for moving a man along.

That's where you provide your greatest service, not just saying, "Add Title 18 to the bill," because there are going to be others who will do that and think about that, and raise that.

F: How did you get associated as deputy counsel with Harry McPherson? Was this a break, or was this just kind of sliding in?

A: I guess they wanted to give me a little bit more money, so they gave me another title. (Laughter) There was such an easy relationship with Lee, and then Harry, and we'd worked together before Harry was special counsel. Our working relationship, I don't think changed one bit. I think the President was giving me some kind of recognition, and it was nice. I got a few more thousand dollars along with the recognition.

F: I've kind of picked up the feeling that Harry was one of the earlier people who wanted to change the Vietnam direction on the White House staff. Does that hold up?

A: I guess it does hold up some. What people say to themselves and what they say to the person who could change it--it's wonderful to sit around at parties and talk about what we ought to be doing. But if you're in a position to do it--whether in fact he sat down with Johnson very early on and said, "You ought to change that," I don't know. I would think that there are a lot of latter day heroes who claim or imply that that's what they did. I think he had a strong impact on the President because he wrote speeches in that area.

F: He could at least blunt some things.

A: That's right. But think of what he was working against! You have all the impact from the National Security Council; all that flows through the machinery from State, Treasury, Defense, CIA.

F: Pentagon.

A: The Pentagon. Now here's one speech writer, one staff person, who has basically other areas of responsibility. I think we all were insulated.

I've heard so much more. As an example, in 1967 when I went up to run EEOC, when you're out of there people are guarded in their descriptions to you. There were several people who felt back in the middle sixties, myself included, that if too much attention was given by those who needed other programs to this and to kicking him over on this that we would end up not having the facilities. Because the black movement has never had the financial kind of facilities and therefore can't hire as much as it should to push those programs. If you're going to spend it over here, you're just worse off, plus people in the peace movement, many of whom are noted for their use of blacks for whatever end they wanted to see.

Now all of this covered unfortunately the basic issue. Plus having read stuff that came from Defense and State, they couldn't have convinced me that it was a civil war. They convinced me we were God's chosen people saving someone's hope for self-determination. That was the mood of the time. And I think that was shared pretty much by everybody in the White House.

F: Were you seriously considering for lieutenant governor up in New York in 1966, or is that just a rumor that got out?

A: Actually, the lieutenant governor was rumor. Then I was actually asked to run for attorney general in New York. I told the President about it and told him I didn't want to put him in a spot. He pretty much told me, "You make your judgment, and I'm with you whatever you do." I made my judgment within twenty-four hours, and told him that I would be there [at the White House]. I happened to have [a picture from that occasion]; it's one of those lucky flukes, I didn't even know there was a photographer around for something else. I was just talking to him, and we were standing by the ticker, and there's this great smiling photo of the two of us when I told him this. I did not know that. But it is true that I was asked to run for attorney general. That was a firm offer that I declined.

F: You decided you liked what you were doing better?

A: That was one reason. Also I do not approach politics [that way]. If I ever do end up running for anything which gets less and less likely as the years go by, I'm not in it for an exercise. And it would have frankly been an exercise. I couldn't have had enough money to take on a popular incumbent like [Louis J.] Lefkowitz. To have dropped his margin from a million to four or five hundred thousand is not my idea of how one spends one's life. And for that and that I was enjoying what I was doing, I didn't do it.

F: Did the White House Conference on Civil Rights go off in good shape? I know some of the obvious disenchantments that took place. But from a man who was really in the middle of it. . . .

A: It went off, I think, incredibly well. I think the document that came out of it, if people read it, they'll see about everything that was in the Kerner Commission a few years before. They'll see, if enough people had paid attention to it, a number of programs that could have been instituted that would have made this country much closer to whole than it is today. I don't think people have ever recognized this. It was certainly an excellent cross-section of all of the minority community, the business community, and to a lesser extent but certainly a broad cross section of that. I think we provided a vehicle for people to talk out their problems.

We did not provide a vehicle for Pat Moynihan, and that's what most of the press criticism related to, Pat having many, many press contacts. The point of that conference was not to discuss whether the black households are female-headed and whether that's instable or not. We had hoped the conference would be pragmatic; that we'd get some real programs off the board. It was my hope, certainly, that we'd have business there who would change some of their judgments about minority hiring as a result of some direct contact. We had the Machiavellian scheme of putting them in contact with minority people so that they no longer could say, "We don't know where to go, we don't know where to look to." Now

some of that may have paid off. That's the kind of thing you can never really judge.

The Vietnam issue came up. Floyd McKissick brought that up. It was voted down by ten to one in various panels. It is, and was, a relevant issue, but the thought was that this was not basically the purpose of the discussions we wanted to have here. It was how can this country move ahead on a variety of fields as far as minorities were concerned.

The general understanding and follow-up on the conference that we tried was not nearly as effective as it ought to have been. I think a lot of that had to do with the coverage of the conference. As with other conferences, the noise and the highlights were what came out.

Again, the conference itself, and if one takes the trouble to read through a hundred some-odd pages of recommendations, they're awfully goddamned good. And those that have been put into effect worked. There were things like guaranteed annual income that were discussed in some detail then. It was not an idea that sprang full-blown after Moynihan joined Nixon in 1969.

It was, again, a focusing--the positive aspect of it, of the country and the media, whether one liked the kind of focus-- on minority leadership and minority people generally. We worked out ways to get people who could not afford to come in without everybody knowing it. We got tickets to them. So they came with the same pride and dignity as the millionaire businessman. They

had the same kind of room. You didn't have: "Well, we'd love to have some representation of the poor, but the poor can't afford to come and represent themselves," [or] you know a big hoopla, and a lot of talk about, "We'll bring them in." It was just done--very quietly, and done.

We had an interesting and efficient staff that I think did really a very good job--a bunch of very sensitive white and black people who worked hard and long and well on it. We had some awfully close moments. I am credited with one saving solution that I now forget. We had some big thing--Ben Heineman and I worked out some kind of formula for something or other. Everybody was there, and everybody was tense and wanted this thing to come off, not for the sake of having the conference, but for the importance of getting these ideas out. The process was there was the early planning session, which was not a great one. We saw it on the White House staff, and we structured it and brought in a different caliber of person. We got Ben Heineman and Mr. [A. Philip] Randolph.

F: You got along fairly well with Heineman?

A: Oh, yes. We got ourselves a hell of a staff. But more importantly, the planning council for the conference that met several times here included the most respected, in every sense of the word--the militants, conservatives, black leadership, small number about twenty-five; a couple of the top religious people; a couple of the top business people. They sat there and hammered through papers

on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays and just worked and worked and worked. Martin King and Roy Wilkins and Father Ted [Theodore Hesburgh], Leon Higginbotham, who is a federal judge--all of the names had an interesting and significant kind of contribution. Then they hired consultants in various fields. They had men who really knew a given area in some detail--not only to just write a paper, but to come and present to that group in an open discussion what ought to be in this section--be it police-community relations, economic security, or housing, or education.

What it meant was we crystallized down to a few broad areas, which made it a workable three-day conference. And then, too, I think we had the best ideas going into the conference. We had at least narrowed it enough so that there was a working agenda for people to talk to. I think we had twenty-six hundred people. If you bring that number of people to Washington without any forum, you're not going to get anything out of the other end.

And those various topics, that were discussed and eventually passed by overwhelming majorities and voted on by the people individually there, were considered. There was time for consideration--not what we would want, obviously, with the number, but we broke down into ten or twelve different sections, and each had a chance to consider the various subjects that came out. Like all conferences, though, too many of those reports are on somebody's desk and filed away some place. And too little is done to bring them off.

I think the President reacted variously to it. He was overjoyed when it happened, and he did beautifully when he addressed it. He met with people there. He was not happy in certain periods as it was going on. He also, by the way--and I think this indicates the interest that he continually had--met with the council a couple of times. I think it was a couple, there was at least one long meeting that he had with them. There was one time after, but there were a couple of times before, I think. I'm just not sure of my facts in this. But he met at least once before and once after with the council. So it wasn't just a president saying, "Go have a conference on this." Then you forget about it, and then [he] comes and maybe gives an address, which he did. One had the advantage of his thought, but again, he had another input from people who were concerned with the minority community.

F: With a president who specializes in one-page memos, he's not going to read a long report. What do you do to see that he gets the nuggets out of that?

A: I guess we briefed him some on it. I just forget whether we gave him two or three pages on it. He did, of course, have the advantage of having conferred before on it; and then, I believe there was a formal receiving of the report and a meeting with at least some of the council people.

F: Was it fairly free flowing? It wasn't White House directed?

A: I think the meetings themselves must have been. I was the

White House liaison, and I couldn't conceivably have gotten to half the sessions because there were twelve or so going on. I think what we did was administer it as best we could, and I think we did pretty well on that. It was, in a sense, structured in that we made some choices of people to come, but there was intent to include rather than exclude in that. We made a conscious attempt to avoid having it a discussion totally of the black family, because that's just nonconstructive. I think sensible, rational people can come to that conclusion. Blacks came to that conclusion. I think there was more black input, when you looked at the staff--Bob Holman, Ed Sylvester, [Walter E.] Fauntroy, others who were high up in the planning of it--than there had ever been in any White House meeting. I always remembered meetings that whites planned to consider black affairs, but this had considerable input. I was the White House liaison, and though I didn't have a staff title, it was in a sense the overall coordinator of the thing. Whites worked well, had their input, had their say and so forth during the whole time.

I think it was a rather unique kind of event. Boy, anyone who worked on it closely--Ed, Walter, Berl Bernhard, Ben Heineman--knows how much went into it. People really did sweat an awful lot. Again, the purpose wasn't just to get it over with. I'm sure the President regretted it once he called it, but once he had it I think he felt a little better about it.

F: I wonder if that isn't a sort of way of life for him, that he accepts these ideas with real enthusiasm and then cools on them afterwards and wonders why he got into it.

A: I think it's his [way], and any politician who has something indefinite in his future that can affect his future is certainly uneasy. Certainly Lyndon Johnson was known for hyperbole. He'd express his concerns a little harsher than many would. But when he came over to give that speech, the reaction, the spontaneity of it, was just incredible.

F: This was genuine.

A: Oh God, yes! When you see today the hatred and antipathy that goes on toward the presidency witnin the black community, and when you saw that, there's all the difference in the world. But that meant you see, he couldn't, after two years of his presidency, show up there and get that. He had been talking to many of these people in these various kinds of segments that I've touched on. He'd seen them personally. He'd had his people talk to them; people representing him talked to them. Louis [Martin] talked to them in a political context.

A: Some of them did actually feel they were greeting an old friend.

F: Absolutely. And some, in fact, were old friends. There are several that really go back pretty far. I remember one meeting, I forget what this one was--he had a number of blacks at the White House for some event. And he grabbed the black Texas delegation--I didn't even know about this--and they went upstairs; and they

carried on, I'm sure, on Texas politics and sundry other things. Andy [M.J.] Anderson, I guess, was one of his close friends from there. But these were ten or twelve people, and they knew him; and just as he would with any other group that he was interested in from Texas, they went and did their thing.

When he appointed me head of the EEOC, I had had no idea how I was going to be sworn in. Then one day I forget whether he told me or Marvin or who, but it was, "I'm going to swear you in here. I want to do it, and I want to have it in the East Room. We've got now about twenty-four hours; we are going to do it tomorrow." I said: "Who do you want there? Who do you want to get?" He said, "It's up to you."

I don't know how we got them together, but I still have pictures to prove it. We had that place packed to the rafters with three or four or five hundred people from all over the country. We got people from as far as you could get them by the time we got it out. We got Alabama and many parts of the South--Texas I believe; somebody did get in from Texas--New York had a boatload coming in; Mississippi. And some of these were my personal friends.

(Interruption)

F: You said most of them were your friends.

A: But I would guess a good half of the blacks Lyndon Johnson knew--there were about a quarter white--because he had met them as elected officials or . . .

They had a White House dinner, another whole input that we had.

I had worked a lot with the social office to get blacks into those White House dinners where they could go and use that. Anyway, they wanted to. But they obviously met somebody, had a good time, and so forth. But he had seen many of them that we had included in these White House dinners or major receptions. Blacks were in and out of "their" White House, and they were in some contact, maybe just peripheral, but maybe with some substance, with the President. So they were on his mind by presence, and by the ideas they had supplied him, and so forth. At that session it was sort of like a family thing.

F: Kind of a dinner on the grounds.

A: Yes. Oh, gosh, my son who was just about to be three the next day was running around, and we got some great pictures of him with the President picking him up.

F: Acting like a three-year-old.

A: Acting just like a three-year-old, interrupting his daddy's acceptance speech. It was just a joyous occasion.

People like Duke Ellington. I remember calling Duke. My wife's father is his doctor, an old-time friend. Duke was then at the Rainbow Room in New York. I called him and said--this was late in the afternoon--that the next day at one o'clock I was going to be sworn in. He said, "Well, tell me, is there a plane coming down to Washington after three in the morning?" I said, "No, Duke. The shuttle stops at twelve." He said, "Well, I'll be up till about five or six." Because he writes music after

he leaves. But sure enough, there he was. He got on an eleven o'clock shuttle and came on down. But he had been in and out of the White House on several occasions, not with the fanfare the way Nixon used his birthday, but the man had been a guest at dinner, a performer. And then he was considered a friend of the President's, and I'm sure would tell you the same thing.

I think that's a little bit of difference. Sure, there was use of blacks in the political sense, but there was a much deeper kind of relationship that he had, and that I hope continues to have.

F: Did Bess Abell sort of contact you when she was setting up a guest list?

A: Yes.

F: And say, "Now, look, here's who's coming and the kind of thing we're having, and who fits that?"

A: That's right. Well, she wouldn't even say [that]. She'd just tell me who was coming and "Have you got some names?" That I kept very quiet, because you know how many people want to get to White House dinners.

F: Oh, Lord, you could have become a full-time social secretary yourself.

A: Exactly.

F: Well, we'll let you go for right now.

A: Okay.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and end of Interview II]

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June 30, 1983

Professor Michael L. Gillette
Chief of Acquisitions and
Oral History Programs
The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library
Austin, Texas 78705

Dear Professor Gillette:

Thank you for your letter of June 21, 1983. I have not had the time necessary for a thorough review of the transcript of my oral recollections. I have found certain inaccuracies in those parts I did review.

I do however want you to grant permission for you to utilize my recollections. I would appreciate your informing anyone reviewing the material that I have not reviewed the material.

With best wishes.

Sincerely,

Clifford L. Alexander Jr.

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Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Clifford L. Alexander, Jr

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, Clifford L. Alexander, Jr. of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of personal interviews conducted on November 1, 1971, February 17, 1972, and June 4, 1973 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

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(2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.

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