INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT S. ALLEN

INTERVIEWER: STEPHEN GOODELL

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G: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Sharon Allen, who is an author, reporter, and who has had a long, and I think, distinguished career. I'd like to begin by introducing you and providing for the tape, for the record, some background information on yourself. If you want to provide any additional details, please feel free.

You were born in Kentucky, in Latonia. Is that the way you pronounce it?

A: Latonia, it's pronounced Latonia--Latonia, Kentucky.

G: You were a student at the University of Wisconsin in 1919-1923. You were an honor graduate of the United States Cavalry School in Fort Riley, Kansas. I guess that was 1922. You attended the University of Munich in Germany and George Washington University and that would have been the years 1923-24, and later, 1927 and 1928. You are also a graduate of the Command and General Staff College, 1949-43 (sic). You began as a reporter for the Capital Times in Madison, Wisconsin in 1919, and successively you have worked for the Wisconsin State Journal, the Milwaukee Journal, the United Press Association, Christian Science Monitor, the International News Service and as Washington correspondent of the Philadelphia Record. You were co-author of the "Daily Washington Merry-Go-Round," a syndicated column, 1932 to '42, when you were called to active duty.

A: Well, let me interrupt here. I originated and conceived the idea of the "Washington Merry-Go-Round" book from which the column grew and I conceived that idea, too. I wrote the book. I wrote about 60-65 percent of the first book. I was the one who also conceived the title, "Washington Merry-Go-Round."

G: How did you happen to--?

A: That grew out of a series of articles I wrote anonymously for the old American Mercury under H. L. Menken. Henry wanted some other things. He really was the godfather of the book. He suggested, "When you get all these things together, you talk to me, and we'll get out a book." I wrote some of the additional pieces he wanted, some of which appeared in the Merry-Go-Round. It was out of that the book grew. Menken had no thought about the title, I was the one who conceived that.

It was from that book and my dismissal by the Monitor for writing the book that the Merry-Go-Round column was conceived. Mr. Hoover, who was then President, sent word to the Monitor that I was personna non grata around the White House. Of course, nowadays that would be occasion for a raise--during Mr. Johnson's time. The Monitor asked me if I wrote the book. I said I was one of the authors. I was dismissed peremptorily, out of hand. I got notice of it on a Saturday morning just as I was about to go on my vacation. It was typical of those sanctimonious people.

It was out of that dismissal that the column evolved. I did free-lance work and various things. I finally went to work then for the INS, and I would wind up every week with a lot of odds and ends. I got to putting them together in a piece which went over very big. It was a once-a-week column.

George Holmes, a University of Wisconsin man, gave me the job. It was this once-a-week piece, which consisted of anecdotes and incidents that the Hearst papers went for in a big way, which is quite common now, but in those days it was unusual.

I got to doing it twice a week, and then I got in a jam with Mr. William Randolph Hearst. I wrote another piece for Mercury about William Knuckles Doak, Secretary of Labor, which was titled "Greasy Bill" because he was a very slovenly person. You could tell from his vest what he'd had for breakfast the last week or so. Doak took violent exception to the piece and as he was in the process of doing some favors for Mr. Hearst--and that's a long story--I was fired.

So I picked up from there and proposed a daily column. By that time Pearson, who'd collaborated on the book, had been discharged by the Baltimore Sun for writing a chapter in the second Merry-Go-Round, called "More Merry-Go-Round" about Pat (Patrick Jay) Hurley, then Secretary of War, and his social pretentions. Hurley's wife was the daughter of an admiral who was, I think, the father-in-law or great friend or something of Mr. Patterson, then publisher of the Sun. So Pearson joined me in starting the column called "Washington Merry-Go-Round", growing out of that one I did for the INS.

In addition we both got jobs. I was offered a job with the Philadelphia Record which had started a small bureau here, and Pearson got a connection with HAVAS, the French agency, for which he covered South American affairs. We were young and full of vim and vigor and we carried those jobs

and did a radio broadcast once a week on Sunday night. I also did magazine pieces and lectures and one thing and another. I now look back in awe and unbelief on the amount of work I did in those times. Youth makes a difference.

G: Would you say you were in the tradition of the Mercury then?

A: Yes, very definitely in the tradition of the Mercury. Those original pieces which I wrote anonymously, because I was then with the Monitor, the first one titled "Egg Charlie," was about Hoover's Vice President Charles Curtis, who claimed to have some Indian blood, Potawatomi, Kansas Indians. Curtis had a set formula for making a speech. It was always the same speech all through the campaign.

G: Like Nixon's--

A: Well yes, it was a set harangue. In those days there was much talk about tariff. The audience usually got bored and some would leave. Curtis in an effort to hold the crowd would yell "And what about eggs!" Then he would tell how he had saved the American egg industry by barring the importation of Chinese frozen or ossified eggs or something like that. I forget what it was, but the Chinese had an age-old process of calcifying or preserving eggs. Curtis' bellow would roar out suddenly, "And what about eggs!" and then he'd tell his story.

A grand newsman in those days, long dead and forgotten, was Lemuel Spears, a New York Times correspondent. Lem Spears was one of the first men Mr. Ochs himself hired. Lem could do no wrong as far as Mr. Ochs was concerned. Lem's quite a story himself. He had a penchant for drinking. A lot of old-timers did. It was Lem who hung the title of Egg Charlie on Curtis, which I appropriated. That was the first of the pieces I did for

the Mercury. It led the magazine that month, to my great pride and joy, although I couldn't say anything about it.

G: We seem to have lost the appellations of that sort to political figures today.

A: Yes, we have. For instance, Ev Dirksen in those days would have been nicknamed something like Gooey Ev. But they don't hang nicknames on them now. They are a different breed of newsmen. I don't say that they're not as good, just a different type. They don't go in for colorful characterizations. Where there is a lot of what we used to call muckracking and expose, it's less colorful, less ebullient, less flamboyant.

G: Let me begin by asking you when it was that you first met Lyndon Johnson.

A: My recollection of meeting Lyndon Johnson--Lyndon, as I familiarly called him until he went into the White House--was at the National Youth Administration at Aubrey Williams' office. NYA was set up after the WPA was beginning to phase out. Williams, who had been Harry Hopkins' right-hand man, was made head of NYA. I think Mrs. Johnson had a lot to do with NYA and Williams was on good terms with her. She was the great humanitarian and he was too and they were very concerned about youth. The youth problems in those days were the same as they are now only happily of a different type. I met Lyndon, my recollection is, in Aubrey's office--a tall, gangling Texan, who was the NYA regional director in Texas.

Anyway Lyndon was planning to run for Congress and Aubrey was trying to persuade him to stay on. He was dynamic and bustling and hustling and a go-getter. Aubrey said to me, "Tell him to stay with NYA." I said, "I can't tell him that, Aubrey, because you know and I know NYA is under attack and it's just a matter of time when it's going to be phased out.

If he's got a good shot at the House, he should run!" And he did, and won.

G: Apparently one of the issues that he harped on in that campaign was the Supreme Court packing case.

A: I don't recall his campaign. The one recollection I have that stands out in my mind of Lyndon's career in the House was an episode that occurred in 1938. Lyndon, of course, got to be very close to Sam Rayburn.

You mentioned the court packing plan, which dominated the session in '37 and '38. That was all in the Senate. This incident was after that plan was washed down the drain through a compromise--a device to get rid of the dead wood on the Court, by offering the opportunity to retire. Until that time there was no retirement system. On the federal bench you stayed until you either expired or quit. It was Senator Borah who worked out this strategem. Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes was in on it. I know that during that fight they worked closely together, although very secretly. Hughes outwardly kept his hands off the struggle, as he should have. But he and Brandeis and, to a lesser extent, Oliver Wendell Holmes, were trying to find a solution. They recognized that there was a situation, that the Court was acting as a log jam on essential legislation and that bottleneck had to be broken. Hughes was no New Dealer in any sense; still he was not reactionary and an Old Guarder as (Willis) Van Devanter and others were--McReynolds, for example. They were just deadheads. They put their foot down and said, "That's all, we'll kill this, come hell or high water." So this strategem was worked out of providing a retirement system for federal judges. They could retire after fifteen years on the bench at the age of sixty-five, or ten years at the age of seventy.

G: Wouldn't that have made Hughes retire?

A: Yes, but it wasn't mandatory. It was entirely voluntary. It offered them the opportunity. Up to that time there was no alternative. The result was that there was just scores, if not hundreds, of antiquated and senile federal judges. In the history of the court, when we wrote The Nine Old Men, I discovered instances of judges who were moribund, actual cadavers, walking derelicts. This provided an opening and it broke the log jam. Van Devanter quickly quit. I scored a big scoop through Borah on the retirement of this judge. That's another story. It was after this issue was won by this device with the covert connivance of the Vice President.

G: Garner.

A: John Nance Garner. He was in on this. It was a bipartisan operation and left a lot of scars. It was after the 1936 landslide, the history-making landslide in which Roosevelt carried everything but two states. The Democrats had a monumental majority in the Senate. But there was this big swing back, as always happens, and it hit very hard because the court packing plan had given the opposition, not only Republican but a lot of conservative Democrats, the opportunity to wade into the Roosevelt Administration, as they had not been able to up to then.

G: Yes, I was going to say parenthetically, to digress a minute, I've done some reading on that business of the court and made a histroigraphical study at one point. It's very interesting the number of books and articles that were published accusing Roosevelt in terms of this particular tactic of being dictatorial and fascist--

A: Well the word "fascist" wasn't so common. There was a lot of talk about

communism. Communism was all over the place in those days. That was the big scare. There wasn't so much said about fascists.

G: Well, they were implying that Roosevelt--

A: That he was a dictator. The party was badly scarred and there had been the huge landslide in 1936 that carried in a lot of people who were just peripheral hangers-on. They were carried in on Roosevelt's coat tails. You couldn't lose any bets in that election. I won what was then a considerable sum of money betting-taking and making bets that Roosevelt would carry New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois. Pennsylvania had never gone Democratic; neither had Philadelphia. I won five hundred-odd dollars at big odds that the Democrats would carry Philadelphia, which was the first time since the Civil War. Those were the sort of things that happened. You just couldn't lose. A lot of people, just for the ride, and won.

In the early fall of 1938 a very serious need arose to save the House. It was clearly apparent there was going to be a big shakeout. The big problem was to avert too big a shakeout. Somewhere around the middle of September I discovered, I have no recollection how I found out, but I suddenly discovered that Lyndon Johnson was up here. It could have been Aubrey Williams or Tom Corcoran. Someone told me, "Lyndon's here." I learned he was here and where he was holed up. Lyndon had come up, and gotten a little office in the Munsey Building on E Street near 14th, next to the National Theater. I think it was on the ninth floor, one of the upper floors. It's an old office building, small and narrow, and I located Lyndon there. He had a little office. As I remember it was a one-room office.

He didn't tell me this, but I got the information down from various

sources that he had come up with a campaign fund of a hundred or more thousand dollars--could have been a hundred or a hundred and fifty thousand. Whatever it was, in those days it was a sizable amount. Now that's what they'd spend in one district alone, and not a big one. But he set up shop in that office, and was contacting Democratic candidates for the House, incumbents, who were in trouble and needed money. He was sending that out. He had set up his own National Democratic Committee. That committee was floundering around and not doing very much and Lyndon, in effect, set up his own. His money undoubtedly came from oil sources. I never dug into the source. When I caught up with Lyndon he made it very clear this was all very confidential and that's the way I kept it until after the election. He was in and out of the office. I think he had someone there, a secretary who took telephone calls, while he made flying trips here and there. He was being a one-man national committee, and was financing a lot of desperate House fights.

G: Did it matter who these people were?

A: Oh yes, unquestionably it mattered. I don't know how the choice was made but presumably anyone who was a Democratic incumbent and who was in need got help. I'm sure Lyndon knew who was in trouble because the election was being widely reported. There was no war. The war problem had not yet arisen. Hitler was threatening and fuming and grandstanding and posturing, but the nation was domestically focused. This was the first election since the great landslide--the historic 1936 runaway victory. There was the ferocious struggle over the court packing plan. So no one had any trouble, especially a smart politician like Lyndon, bright, young and keen, spotting who was in trouble.

Also undoubtedly the word went out that Lyndon could help. Who he helped and who he didn't help I don't know. Undoubtedly there was some criteria and I'm sure that one was their stand on the oil depletion allowance! This was undoubtedly oil money. That's where it came from. Exactly how much it was I don't know. It could have been a hundred, two hundred thousand or more. I wrote nothing about it at the time. No one wrote anything about it.

G: But he knew you knew about it.

A: Oh yes. I knew about it and as far as I know no other newsman knew about it.

G: And Johnson knew you knew about it?

A: Yes. I used to go there and see him every few days. I was telling him what I knew, and he told me about this race and that race and so forth. Once Lyndon knew I was aware of what was going on, his interest was to keep me from writing anything. I was very willing to cooperate because I was eager to help in any way I could.

And his efforts paid off. The Democrats lost a big chunk of the House, forty seats or more. I don't remember exactly what it was, but the Democrats retained control of the House by a fair margin, enough to give them elbow room. It was after that, after the election, that I wrote the story of this one-man national committee who had done a lot to save the House. I didn't go into specifics as to who he had helped and what seats he had won or helped win. It was amusing to me that a year or so ago when Drew Pearson, who didn't know Johnson at that time and was decidedly unfriendly to him, and at a time when he used to refer to Lyndon as "Lying Down Johnson," pulled out my column and reprinted it. Pearson claimed

inferentially that he had a hand in the writing of the column, although as I said he not only knew nothing about the operation, he did not know Lyndon personally. Years later, when Lyndon became President, they became palsy-walsy. Of course Pearson had a daughter-in-law on the White House staff, Bess Clements Abell. Also he had a son or stepson, I'm never quite sure exactly what Abell was, but Pearson got him a job in the Post Office department. First, he planted him as an assistant to the Postmaster (General). Then when Lyndon became President, one of the first things he did, within a matter of a month, was to make Tyler--a young guy around thirty--assistant postmaster general. Tyler was about as equipped to be assistant postmaster general as I am to fly a jet. I've been in a jet, but I am not a pilot.

Pearson pulled out this column which he had nothing to do with and cited it as an instance of Lyndon's astuteness. Just what the occasion was I don't know. It was either before or after the President withdrew, but Pearson said, "My one-time partner Bob Allen and I wrote this." It was entirely my style, which is distinctly different from Pearson's, who is ungrammatical, dull and dreary in the stuff he writes. I say that frankly because I told it to him many times when we were together. So I'm not saying anything behind his back. But that column was in my rather somewhat exuberant style. That was an Allen piece, clearly and unmistakably. We were collaborating on the Merry-Go-Round column, but we did different things and wrote differently. Pearson was entirely out of the congressional orbit. He still is. One of the guards on the Hill mentioned the other day that he had once seen Pearson with Wright Patman and said, "That was the first

and only time I ever saw him up here."

G: Pearson had a limited and a measured pace.

A: Yes, a very measured pace. I remember an incident years ago before the war. He had occasion to come up to the Senate. It was something involving South America and he was covering the floor debate. He sat in the gallery and kept asking me, "Who is that," and I'd say, "That's Borah. Don't you know Borah? Everybody knows Borah." "Who's that?" "That's Tom Reed," or "Jim Reed," or this one or that one. He knew none of them, absolutely none. I finally exclaimed, "Good heavens! You read about these senators you see their pictures in the paper!" Well, he just didn't know them. His whole orientation, his whole interest was society and diplomatic. But he resurrected this twenty-year old column and horned himself in on it.

G: May I interrupt a moment, was there any feedback after the campaign and the election and after you had published that article about Johnson? It didn't matter at that point, I guess.

A: No, there was no feedback. There wasn't anything dishonest or dishonorable or discreditable about it. Undoubtedly there was some eyebrow-raising about where the money came from and there probably was some of the so-called "lefties" or "out-and-outers" who said the oil people were buying themselves some insurance. But there was no feedback about it. There couldn't have been, because it was a perfectly legitimate operation. It was within the bounds of political propriety. There is a limitation on the amount that can be contributed to any one campaign, but I'm sure no one got more than $5,000. I think the usual contribution was two or three thousand dollars, maybe five thousand dollars occasionally, because five thousand dollars in those days went quite far. Without knowing any details

I would guess he was spotting the money in rural areas, sections of the Middle West and areas in the Southern States. He was helping those people with a few thousand dollars that would go a long distance.

Those were the days before TV advertising, which is costly and expensive. What little advertising was done was in newspapers and posters. Those were still the days of campaigning by train and auto. There were no helicopters. There were planes of course, but their use was exceptional.

G: While he was in the House, before he went to the Senate, were there any highlights that you have in your own recollections, the way he operated, etc.?

A: Nothing that stands out particularly. I don't recall him as being in the forefront of any particular legislative battle in the House. The incident I just related stands out because to me it epitomizes Lyndon Johnson's genius or aptitude in the political arena. That was where he made his reputation. That's where he came to the fore. It was his great forte. He was a great political manipulator and mover and shaker. Some have characterized him as a wheeler-dealer. Well, he's more than just that. I always conceive a wheeler-dealer as the late and unlamented Senator Kerr from Oklahoma. There was a man who was grubby and shoddy. Lyndon wasn't above engaging in chicanery on occasion, but not in the same sense as Kerr. He was inherently crude and crass. That characteristic summed him up. He would see a need, an urgency, what had to be done and he did it. That was a relatively small operation at a time and under circumstances where one man could make himself felt. Lyndon could very well have spent a lot more money but he was functioning in a way he functioned best and he got results.

In the legislative field, I don't recall anything in the House or Senate where he stood out particularly. He was for some years Democratic leader in the Senate--after Alben Barkley died. I know in the first civil rights struggle he was not particularly a champion of civil rights, but nothing stands out in my mind or recollections of anything in particular.

G: Were you covering the Congress at this time--while he was in the Senate?

A: Yes. But my scope had broadened quite a bit. It was after the war and I had started my own column and had gone far more into foreign affairs. Prior to the war I concerned myself little with foreign affairs, primarily because they weren't too much to the fore. That was Pearson's specialty. I covered politics, labor, Congress, largely the domestic scene. When I came back and started my own column in '49, I covered everything.

Lyndon as floor leader in the Senate, nothing stands out particularly. He and Sam Rayburn dominated the scene legislatively. They were not obstructive as far as the Eisenhower Administration went. On the initial civil rights measures they broke the first filibuster, but I don't recall just what role Lyndon played. I don't think he was in the forefront of either the filibuster or the effort to break it. He was sort of betwixt and between. I'm under the impression he wasn't for the legislation but may have wound up voting for it. I don't recall.

G: A good deal has been written about the Johnson treatment etc.

A: That does come to mind when he was Senate leader around late 1959 and early 1960 when the race between him and Kennedy got underway. There was quite a bit of backstage muttering about Johnson arm-twisting. Bobby Baker was his right-hand man and Bobby undoubtedly was as crass and crude as they come. He was a sort of miniature Bob Kerr. Baker was as much,

and I'd say in some ways more, Bob Kerr's handyman as he was Lyndon's. He was officially Lyndon's assistant but personally and in other ways, financially, Bob Kerr's minion. Bobby was crass and crude about it. If he wanted something he just said, "We want" or "Lyndon wants." He invoked Lyndon a great deal more than Lyndon was aware of.

I remember one senator who was very, very indignant about Baker's bushwhacking. He was a Kennedy man, and is still in the Senate. He was young then and now he's a committee chairman, a Westerner, and he was for Jack Kennedy and they were putting the squeeze on him, or trying to, and he was furious about it. He told off Bobby, and according to his account, in a very vehement manner. Bobby just shrugged it off. He wasn't beholden to this senator and that was that. He had nothing to lose; he knew that if Lyndon didn't make it, he would still be a senator, presumably floor leader.

Another episode I recall also illustrates what I am talking about. It occurred after Lyndon went to the White House. Hubert Humphrey became assistant floor leader and the man who really got things done there in the Senate. Mike Mansfield is a fine person, mild and considerate, and all too often apathetic. He seemed willing to drift along. So when Lyndon wanted things done and pushed and hit hard, Humphrey, the Whip, the assistant floor leader, was the one Lyndon turned to. Humphrey relished the opportunity to exercise the leadership. I was quite close to Humphrey; saw him a lot more than Lyndon when he was floor leader because Lyndon was remote. You could get to him but he wouldn't say much. He used to hold a five-minute press conference, just before the Senate convened, around his seat in the front rows. The press would clutter around him and

ask a few questions and then the bells would ring and that was that. Once in awhile you could get to him but I couldn't be bothered, I wasn't covering spot news. I was looking for background, the story behind the story, and the story that was coming up.

Humphrey was willing to see you and to talk. He'd cooperate. He was a busy man, and it'd take a little time now and then to get in. He had an office on the third floor of the Senate wing near the elevator. Mansfield occupied that when he was the Whip for Johnson. I'd get in there--Friday afternoon was usually a good time when the Senate would quit early in the afternoon--and wait my turn to see him. He would talk very freely and fully and always on a confidential basis. If there was something I was uncertain about I'd say, "Can I use that."

He once told me of an experience which characterized the difference between Johnson and Kennedy. It's a graphic illustration of two things: first, the kind of a dynamic leader Johnson was in the White House and the way he handled relations with Congress and Kennedy's attitude and mode of operating.

Kennedy was always leaning over backwards, being conciliatory, never exerting pressure or cracking the whip. He couldn't even put through a bill to cut taxes. That's unheard of! I've been around here a long time but I never knew of Congress refusing to pass a bill to cut taxes. But that's what happened. It was Lyndon Johnson who put through that tax cutting bill that had piddled around under Kennedy for a year! It was still hanging fire when he was murdered. He proposed it the year before as part of his effort to give the economy a shot in the arm. Kennedy was trying to rev up the

the economy and that tax cut was one way of doing that.

Humphrey told me how Johnson gave him pep talks and Humphrey demonstrated saying, "He'd grab me by the lapels (to demonstrate, Humphrey grabbed me, we were both standing alongside his desk) and say, 'Now Hubert, I want you to do this and that and get going,' and with that he would kick me in the shins hard." Then Humphrey added, "Look," and he pulled up his trouser leg and sure enough, he had some scars there. He had a couple of scars on his shin where Lyndon had kicked him and said "get going now."

Jack Kennedy would have had no more thought of doing that to Humphrey than I would have. That was the difference between the two. Lyndon knew Congress, he was part of Congress; Jack had been in Congress, but never really a true part of it. Teddy is somewhat different. He is more or less becoming part of the establishment, but not while his brother Bobby was alive. Bobby and Jack were in Congress but not of Congress. Jack had been in the House and in the Senate, but he was never of Congress. He was there and he worked at it, but not in the sense of Hubert Humphrey or Lyndon Johnson. They were part of the system. Lyndon talked their language. They knew he was one of them. Kennedy never was. There was a downright timidity, a restraint, a hesitation about him in dealing with Congress. He was always placating, trying to find some conciliatory approach, although he threw numerous advanced programs at them in his first year. There was a period when these position papers came forth like a cat spews kittens. Fine for the record, but they never got anywhere. Actually little of consequence was done during his tenure.

Johnson, on the other hand, was full of vim and vigor and push and drive

and vehemence. As long as he could function in the domestic arena where he could get things, get to grips with things, get his hands on things, and literally get his hands on the people who did things, he was all right. He was in his milieu. He was operating. It was the foreign arena that undid him, with his natural trait of secretiveness and--well, I'm not sure just how to characterize it--obtuseness perhaps, and then the tragedy of Viet Nam. After all it was Dulles who really started it all and Kennedy who sent the troops in. When Kennedy took office there were only a few hundred non-coms and officers. They were really instructors. They did no fighting. It was during Kennedy's regime that the 25,000 combat troops were sent there and plans were underway to double that number. Johnson was in the position where he had to fish or cut bait. He felt he couldn't pull out.

G: Can I take you back--you were suggesting by the two examples that you gave some of his qualities of leadership, his aggressiveness and other techniques that he would use. Did you have personal contacts with him other than in an official or business capacity? I mean, did you see him socially or did you see him outside the Senate?

A: Outside the Senate?

G: Yes.

A: Yes, I saw him outside the Senate socially, not frequently. Mrs. Allen was with Scripps Howard. You're going to see her?

G: We did call her.

A: We had social contacts with the Johnsons, as much as we went in for. We didn't gad about. When he was Vice President, I had some surgery and it took longer than expected. While convalescing I got a get-well letter from Lyndon. I answered, thanking him, and got a letter back that jarred me to

my eyebrows. It said, "Get up and start doing things. Why are you lying around and feeling sorry for yourself? Let's have some ideas. You're lying around doing nothing, so you've got some time to think. Why don't you give me some good ideas about things?"

At first I was sore and then I thought, "Well, he's right," so I started sending him ideas. On one occasion I wrote him that there was considerable muttering among newspaper people that they no longer saw him or were able to get to him. "You've got a new house (this place he bought from Mrs. Mesta)," I wrote. "Why don't you start having a series of social gatherings; invite them out, about a dozen or so at a time and their wives in the evening? They will appreciate it and you will profit from it." I got a very effusive reply. Wonderful idea. Liz Carpenter called me up. She was then working for him.

G: Oh yes. What year was this?

A: It was when he was Vice President, must have been '63. Liz told me, "It's a fine idea and we're going to have a party and want you and Ruth to be in the first group." It so happened I couldn't go, because I had an out-of-town lecture engagement. We did go to another party later. Labor Secretary Goldberg was there, and Lyndon went swimming. Betty Beal was there and other newspaper people and I remember sitting at a table with Mrs. Johnson. Ruth sat with Lyndon. Mrs. Goldberg and their son were at my table. The son, who was a pompous ass, talked endlessly about himself. He was in school and was solving all the problems of the world.

After Lyndon was in the White House we had virtually no social contacts. I was invited on one occasion to a luncheon for the then Prime Minister of

Australia, and Ruth was invited to a dinner Mrs. Johnson gave for women doers.

G: Would this have been Prime Minister Holt?

A: No, it was Menzies. Jim Rowe was there. He had once been Lyndon's campaign manager, I think in '60. Herman Talmadge was there. I remember his surprising me very much. We were waiting downstairs to be ushered upstairs and there were some Negroes, well dressed and obviously not just run of the mine blacks. Talmadge walked over, introduced himself, stuck out his hand, and shook hands with them. That was long before things were what they are now and before the enactment of the advanced civil rights laws and court decisions. The incident struck me very forcefully. Senator Cooper was there. He was at our table.

G: Let me ask you, you mentioned when he was in the Senate that press people--that you yourself never really consulted with Johnson. A great deal has been said about Johnson's relation with the press, particularly after he became President, that he had bad relations with the press. Do you have any perceptions about this?

A: When Johnson was elected Vice President, he wanted to play a role in the Senate, but the Senate would have none of it; that is, the Democrats would not. He wanted to be named chairman of the Democratic caucus, and they refused. He also wanted to exercise an active role, but they turned him down. After that Lyndon didn't attempt to exert any controls because he just couldn't. They gave him no heed. He had had it. He was never personally popular. He was respected and regarded as astute and capable. But he was no Sam Rayburn. There was genuine affection for Sam in the

in the House. Lyndon's relations in the Senate were never on that basis.

In the White House, he operated from strength all the time. He was a strong man, and in many ways that was his undoing. That and his strange penchant for secretiveness. It was a common story, that if he was thinking of appointing someone and it leaked out, that was the end of that man's prospects. When Lyndon was Vice President I'd see him occasionally, but I made no attempt to cultivate him because I had to cover a wide field. I was branching out into foreign affairs more than I had before and I found that he just wouldn't communicate. He was just closed-mouthed. So I didn't bother to see him. If that was his way, that was his business.

There were some who had different ties. Cecil Dixon, once with the AP and I think a fellow Texan, was close to him. I assume he talked freely to Cecil. Maybe he did to Bill White, although there was a time when Bill would not forgive him for running with Kennedy. White was violently anti-Kennedy. I remember after the Los Angeles convention running into Bill up in the Senate press gallery and to my astonishment he said, "It may be necessary to vote for Nixon." I was astonished at Bill's indignation at Lyndon, but when Johnson went into the White House Bill became one of his most ardent defenders. Johnson may have had to curry Pearson's favor all the time--"What have you done for me lately?"--but not Bill. Bill White didn't operate on that basis.

G: How about with Joseph Alsop?

A: Their relations were up and down. Joe is a hawk of hawks, and as long as Johnson went down the line on Viet Nam, Joe went down the line with him. Joe delves into the domestic arena every now and then just to keep his foot

in, so he can claim he's covering domestic as well as foreign affairs. But his specialty is foreign affairs, and particularly the war. He has the best contacts in town in the CIA and in various other intelligence quarters. That's where he makes his mark and that's where he concentrates.

G: Did the White House sometimes not to manage news, but to encourage columnists and analysis to go in a particular direction, through a leak of information curry favor of various columnists??

A: The Nixon Administration does that consistently. They have "backgrounders," as we call them. There was one the other day about casualties. It's either Kissinger or somebody else who gives backgrounders. To my knowledge Johnson didn't do it regularly, perhaps once a month. You'd think a man as experienced as he was would go in for that sort of thing, but he didn't. I guess it was due to his pronounced secretiveness.

They did feed stuff to a few favorites, but that wasn't very smart. There were a lot of people here in this town who weren't particularly pro-Johnson. But they went out of their way to cultivate these people, and in one way or another feed them stuff. It could have been done more effectively and far more astutely and successfully. One reason was Johnson's exceedingly poor judgment in press secretaries. Until he got George Christian he had a succession of disasters as press secretaries. George Reedy was brow-beaten and subservient, not too bright to begin with. He treated George atrociously, and George was at fault for allowing himself to be treated that way. He should have slammed him right back and told him to go to hell. George finally reached a point where he couldn't take it any longer, and quit. Moyers was just a schemer and a climber. He used Johnson;

worked his way into Johnson's good graces and then maneuvered and connived and always pushing Moyers and not the President. Moyers--he was disliked and distrusted by the working newsmen.

A: Yes. I considered him a sanctimonious and supercilious schemer. He's demonstrated that since leaving the White House. Liz Carpenter, in an ostensibly jocular way, did a murderous job on Moyers before the Women's National Press Club in a speech. She cut Moyers to ribbons, all in a good-natured way, presumably, but all the press people there knew what was going on and just loved it.

Lyndon finally got Christian but I guess it was too late. Christian did a good job, but things were over the brink by then.

G: This scheming Moyers did, do you know if this had anything to do with his leaving?

A: I don't recall just what had to do with his leaving. I think it could well have been that the President became aware that Moyers was promoting Moyers and not the President's interest. It was a common quip--"wonder what Moyers is running for?" He was mentioned for various things. He was going to run for this or that; he was going to be this and that. He finally landed a publisher's job or whatever it was on Newsday. He's done nothing since he's been there. He knows about as much about running a paper as I do about flying a jet. As a matter of fact,, he'd been far from a success in anything he'd done. The Kennedys got his measure quickly and moved him around. He was moved around from one to another.

G: He wanted the Peace Corps.

A: Yes. He and Richard Goodwin, who in a way is very similar--scheming,

devious, conniving, a climber and in my book a mercenary on the left. I think Moyers was mercenary. I felt he was using Johnson.

G: Apparently he was not then trusted by the press?

A: I would say generally not. I don't think the newsmen trusted him. Of course, they tied him up with Johnson and Johnson's credibility began falling apart after '64.

G: What was the reason for this?

A: A combination of things. For one thing, the inadequate and incompetent or the undesirable press men he had, and then his own shortcomings; his secretiveness, his blundering, his inexplicable faux pas. The thing that comes to mind of lifting that little dog up by his ears. That was grotesque. Little things that accumulated.

G: So it was sort of a combination or pattern, an accumulation of things that begin to work themselves out in such a way that a pattern does develop. If such and such was the case here, then such and such is probably the case here too.

A: And everything was aggravated and exaggerated and intensified by the war. The frustrations and the despairs.

G: Of course, there were some outright denials which were later proved to be the case.

A: That's right. Also he was taking the rap for the great distrust and dislike that developed for McNamara.

G: I'm sorry--what do you mean by that? Distrust on the part of whom?

A: On the part of the newsmen and Congress and I think the public. The F-111 raised a lot of questions of credibility and reliability and trustworthiness

and honesty. Then those statements, "We're going to pull out by next December" etc. They were utterly inane and uncalled for. That's what they were hoping but it didn't materialize.

I'd say the President's difficulties basically got down to the war. That intensified everything. Other failures and failings might have been held against him but they wouldn't have accumulated or bloomed into a fierce resentment and rage and dislike and distrust. Most dislike and distrust and lack of credibility might not have developed if it hadn't been for the war. If he had had eight years or five years or four years of the relative international peace that prevailed during the Eisenhower Administration, I think Johnson's story would have been far different. There wouldn't have been a revolt within the Democratic party against him. I think his reelection, his running for reelection in '68 would have been a foregone conclusion. He wouldn't have been challenged, because the man who challenged him, Gene McCarthy, was an utter fraud. He is one of the biggest hoaxes in American public life. He had been in Congress twenty-two years, ten in the House and twelve in the Senate, and not one single line of any kind of legislation was to his credit. Not a word! Nothing! How do you do that? How do you stay in Congress twenty-two years and do nothing? McCarthy didn't discover the war until he decided to run for President. He voted for the Tonkin Resolution. He is worse than a hoax. He is a sanctimonious hypocrite and dissembler. There's even some doubt about his integrity and honesty. Bob Kerr had him in his pocket. Every time he needed his vote he had it--time and again. He is disliked and distrusted in the Senate Finance Committee. They think he's devious as they come.

G: Of course the impression that he gave--

A: Oh, yes. Clean Gene! Clean-Up Gene! I call him Mack the Knife! No doubt about it. He is a circuitous and devious operator. He's always wielding the hatchet in a sly malicious way he has. Personally I am always wary of these Holy Rollers, these Holier-Than-Thou guys, and he's one of them.

G: It seemed to me that McCarthy as it turned out, or I should say as it really began, was not really considered very seriously by Johnson and his advisers in the White House and that it was always the fear of Robert Kennedy entering.

A: Yes, that's right. That was Bobby's great tactical error. If he'd gotten into the race before New Hampshire, it would have been a very different story.

Bobby was tricky and sly and devious, too. He was always under wraps as to just what he should do or could do. There is no question he wanted to run. No doubt about it. And in the end he did run. He decided to do that when McCarthy didn't win in New Hampshire, despite the general feeling that he did. He got only--

G: 42 percent.

A: Yes! And Johnson supporters won in a write-in. You had to write in their names. It was after that that Bobby got hot and decided to get into the fray. I'm not sure that he'd have won the nomination or he could have been elected. I think Humphrey was probably the strongest candidate the Democrats could have put in the race. That's evidenced by the fact that despite everything he carried--all the millstones around his neck--he came within .4 of 1 percent of winning. Out of some 65,000,000 votes he was licked by about 500,000.

If McCarthy had played the game square Humphrey might have defeated Nixon. McCarthy is through as far as Minnesota is concerned, as far as staying in the Senate is concerned. If he'd come out vigorously two weeks in the middle of October, it could have made the difference. Humphrey feels that way. He told me that himself.

G: I'd just like to ask for your general assessment of what you thought, having known Johnson, and having covered him as a newspaperman and having had some contact with him personally, have you seen any changes in the man in terms of the successive offices that he's held?

A: Oh, yes. I think he grew. No question about that. I saw changes in him. I feel that he grew and also, at the same time, unhappily and to his misfortune, some of his inherent shortcomings and defects became pronounced. His close-mouthedness, his secretiveness, his trickiness, or whatever you want to call it, that may be part of Texas politics and his upbringing in it, but it became a very marked trait. That is curious because Roosevelt, whom he watched intimately and knew quite well, had those qualities. FDR could be just as circuitous as they come. He could play a very tricky and devious game. But there was a magnanimity about the man, there was an inherent superiority. Maybe it was due to his ailment, of being nailed down to one place. Whatever it was he was open-hearted, he won your admiration, your personal affection.

I never disliked Lyndon, but I never liked him. I never got enthusiastic about him or close to him the way I did, for instance, to Sam Rayburn.

G: Apparently Johnson wanted people to like him.

A: Yes, that's right. He wanted you to like him and he wanted people to admire him. I respected him and in a way I admired him, but at the same time things that he did and things he resorted to, I just couldn't understand. I couldn't figure out why he'd do such things; why he would go out of his way to put himself in those positions. One thing that cost him a lot of press respect and consideration was his going out of his way to court Pearson. They despised Pearson. Newsmen just couldn't figure that out, because they'd ask why Johnson buckled to him. I didn't know. I was as confused as the others were. I suppose Bess Abell was responsible for it, but every time the White House lists would come out there was Pearson on it. That always produced snorts of derision through the news corps, especially among the guys covering the White House.

G: Would you care to offer for this tape a sort of final assessment that you'd like to make about Johnson?

A: I think history will be much kinder to Johnson than when he went out. It was the same with Mr. Truman. Mr. Truman went out in a blaze of rage and abuse and disapproval--and in some measure scandal. Now he's a beloved figure; "little Harry" had a lot of guts and was a man of character and strength and forcefulness; nobody shoved him around and so forth. I'm sure that ten years from now they'll be saying pretty much the same thing about Johnson.

At the same time Johnson had qualities and traits that were not Mr. Truman's drawbacks. Truman cut it clean with all newsmen. Nobody was courted and there were no favorites; there were no sycophants; and there were no pets. That's one thing that was held though against Johnson. But

I think that historically he'll certainly be rated as one of the strong presidents, a president who made notable breakthroughs and won achievements in the domestic field.

In the foreign arena, only time will tell. I think time will be very much to his credit and to his repute and esteem for fighting this thankless and costly and grievous struggle in Viet Nam. I think time will give him a big accolade for that. But it has been costly and overshadowed completely the many things he undertook at home and what he accomplished. For instance the OEO, the antipoverty program, it was berated and denounced and smeared from stem to stern. Well, so was WPA and so was PWA, and AAA and the other New Deal rescue and emergency measures. Now they're acclaimed. They saved the country. They saved the economy. Just what has OEO saved, I'm not sure, but it was an effort to do something, the first in our history. And there are other things he did domestically.

G: But for the present, Viet Nam overshadows them all.

A: For the present Viet Nam overshadows everything, yes. Unless Nixon can buy himself a truce or a cease-fire or a settlement of some kind, it's going to overshadow everything he does at home. Of course, he's not doing very much domestically.

G: I don't know that he's done anything.

A: No, he hasn't done anything yet, and apparently has no intention of doing anything unles s it is something like turning the postal service over to a corporation or something like that. He's making no innovations.

G: I wonder if an historical analogy can be made between Roosevelt and Johnson in the sense that so much of Roosevelt's programs--as historians assess them, they make the point that Eisenhower never really turned back the

New Deal. He didn't repudiate it. In fact, in some instances he had to extend it. By the same token, that was true of many of the Great Society programs. There was no campaign to turn them back, except some of OEO's programs, maybe Johnson's successor in the same sense will have to continue.

A: No question about it. And in the same way it can be said that Johnson is very definitely in the line of succession of Roosevelt. He was a New Dealer of this day and was trying to do what the New Deal did under current circumstances and problems and conditions. He was extending the New Deal. He was trying to bring it up-to-date. I think history will ordain him on that basis. These Nixon people won't turn back the clock. They can't. The country wouldn't let them. In their muddle-headed way they are trying to do what Johnson would have undoubtedly tried to do if he had gotten another term--to amplify, to expand, to develop, to build on the ground that had been laid. Take HUD, the Housing agency--all Romney has come up with is something to carry on where the Johnson program left off.

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ROBERT S. ALLEN
1292 NATIONAL PRESS BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004

~~30 EAST 42ND STREET~~
~~NEW YORK, N. Y. 10017~~
TELEPHONE (212) 682-5560

July 19, 1971

Dear Mr. Frantz:

Enclosed is the corrected and revised transcript of my discussion with Mr. Goodell. If any difficulty is encountered in deciphering my script, please let me know and I will clear up the matter.

I would appreciate a copy of the completed transcript.

Cordially,

Robert S. Allen

Enc.

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