INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH ALSOP

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

May 28, 1969

M: Let's begin by just identifying you, sir. You're Joseph Alsop, a syndicated columnist at the present time and author of numerous books, and you've been doing this same type work for long enough to watch Mr. Johnson's rise over a fairly long period of time. Did you have a close acquaintance with him in his Senatorial years of any kind?

A: I knew him very well when he was in the Senate and in the House.

M: That is, after 1948? Did you cover him particularly closely on any policy issues that stick in your mind in those days?

A: Well, yes, of course. In my lifetime the Congress has mattered less and less with each decade, but it still mattered a lot when he was Senate leader particularly, and I used to follow his activities as Senate leader with great closeness. Indeed it was when he was Senate leader that he and I became fairly close friends--insofar as a newspaper man is ever a close friend to a politician.

M: Socially, as well as in the sense of business in this case?

A: Yes, in some degree socially.

M: What about his press relations in those days? I seem to recall they were very good. Is that your recollection?

A: They were very good in the sense that he was much admired, but he was perfectly hopeless with the press.

M: You mean the way he handled the individual reporters?

A: Well, it was very curious. When I first knew him, he was quite accessible

and you could see him easily. He used to come to breakfast here [Mr. Alsop's home] and talk about the situation of different pieces of legislation in a very down-to-earth way and, in short, give you the kind of data that you want if you're a newspaperman, and do so easily and naturally and above all let you see the workings of his own mind rather openly. It didn't last very long. I always thought myself that he concluded that he was too naturally loquacious and couldn't afford to talk in that way without some danger of the kind of self-revelation that he probably didn't want. At any rate, really after only a year or two, that kind of contact with him ceased entirely. And after that you could see him in one of two ways: you could see him, so to speak, socially, not about a particular subject, but when he felt relaxed and would talk generally--he was one of the best talkers and, what almost nobody knows, one of the funniest talkers I've ever known. He can be funny without being more than occasionally malicious for two hours on end.

M: Almost always before a small group, though.

A: Always, yes. When you talk about specific press relations, it used to drive me round the bend because I liked him and admired him very much--he had every reason to trust me--and I'd go and see him wanting to know something. And he'd seize me, so to speak, and give me a lecture about one or two or three different columns he wanted me to write, all of them perfectly impossible. And that would take up anywhere to fifty-five minutes of an hour's appointment. And you'd finally get a chance to ask the question that was really on your mind in the last five or ten minutes. And I used to tell him, "For God's sake, try to stop doing my work," and just stick to his work, which was essentially giving me the straw to make my bricks. He ought to have known, because I admired him and had always

written about him in a very friendly way--thought he was doing a first-rate job--that whatever bricks I made would be friendly and helpful. But he could not resist the temptation to try and make the bricks himself.

M: Did he ever lecture you on columns you had already written?

A: Oh, yes, you'd have all that. And on columns I hadn't written. It was extraordinary; it was obsessive! And really rather close as we were, I couldn't do anything about it.

M: Certainly for reporters who were not so close, it would have been more obvious, perhaps.

A: Yes, I think so probably. Most of the men covering the Senate in those days were pretty close to him. Of course I didn't cover the Senate as a regular thing. But it always struck me as very, very curious because he'd have gained so much more by going back to the other formula; he'd have saved himself so much time. To descend from the sublime to the ridiculous--he'd have saved me so much time, and the obsessiveness with which he tried to tell you how to do your own job always bothered you a little. I told him more than once, "For God's sake, let me do my job and you do your job! All I want to do is talk to you about your job, not my job!"

M: Was it fairly common--you mentioned your closeness to him--did a lot of the people who covered him closely and were close friends of his in the Senate days linger on as close friends into the Presidential years as well? Is that where he made his friendships, and perhaps his enemies, too?

A: Yes, I suppose so. I don't think he had a great many close friends in the press when he was President. There was always Bill White, who was essentially a member of the court. Then until the crunch began in Viet Nam, I was very close to him, partly because of the vice-presidential nomination.

M: Are you saying that you ceased being close after the crunch in Viet Nam?

A: Oh, he got very, very, very angry with me.

M: With you?

A: Oh, furious! Absolutely furious!

M: You couldn't have supported him more closely, just from reading your column--

A: That is incorrect. That is quite incorrect. You see, the position was deteriorating very rapidly in 1964. I think I made a great mistake myself. It takes a long time in my business to learn the things to avoid. It was a campaign year. I thought Goldwater would be a total disaster, as he would have been. In the campaign the President said things about Viet Nam which were quite needless to win--I mean quite needless to beat Goldwater--and it seemed to me very dangerous. And I think I should have called him on them, so that in some sense it was my fault. At any rate I didn't call him on them because I said to myself, "Oh, well, what people say in political campaigns generally has very little relationship to what they do when they have to make responsible decisions." And like everybody else I supported him very actively.

And so the end of the first period of our relationship was rather funny. As you probably know, Phil Graham and I had gone to President Kennedy at the critical moment in Los Angeles, to urge him to put Mr. Johnson on the ticket. And this was thought to have had some influence on the decision--in my opinion, it had about the influence of a feather in the balance--but it was a very narrow balance. Bobby Kennedy always used to blame me for making Johnson President after his brother had been killed. That was a ludicrous exaggeration.

M: While you're on that subject, is the famous Graham memorandum that was published in Teddy White's second book fairly accurate as far as your recollection is concerned?

A: I haven't read it recently. There's one thing that's left out of it, and that is that Phil at that time did not know the President very well, and it was I who suggested that we go to him.

M: To Kennedy or to Johnson?

A: To Kennedy. And we went up to that lunatic room--he'd left orders with Evelyn Lincoln that if I wanted to see him I was to be admitted--and I asked Evelyn to let Phil and me see him. And I made Phil do the talking, or the main talking, because he was better at that sort of thing than I. The only important thing I did, but it has some bearing on history, I suppose, was to make a kind of preface--to say briefly that we'd come to recommend him putting Johnson on the ticket; that I felt very strongly about it because Senator [Stuart] Symington [D-Mo.] and the other people who were being talked about, as I remember I recall, were "too shallow puddles to dive into." That it was very dangerous to have a shallow, weak man as Vice President because you never knew what would happen. Johnson, as President Kennedy had often said to me, was the <u>other</u> big man in the Democratic party. <u>But</u>, and this is the important part of it, I wanted to beg him not to offer the place to Johnson simply as a gesture with the expectation that it would be refused, because I was firmly persuaded that it would be accepted.

M: Had you talked to Johnson about this?

A: No, I hadn't said a word to Johnson. It's a very funny story actually. And of course if I had talked to Johnson, he would have told me he wouldn't have accepted. But I had talked to Senator Herman Talmadge, who is one of the half-dozen wisest men I know--this was a very funny conversation actually. I called him up in a perfectly routine way to find out what his private telephone number was going to be at Los Angeles. And he said, in that

funny southern voice of his, "I ain't going to Los Angeles, Joe." And I said, "Well, my God, Herman, you're one of Lyndon Johnson's chief supporters. You're by far the best strategist he has, and you're not going to Los Angeles?" "No," he said, "I'm not going to Los Angeles because I know exactly what's going to happen at Los Angeles." I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, Kennedy is going to be nominated on the first ballot by a thousand votes, and then he's going to offer the vice presidency to Lyndon Johnson; and Lyndon Johnson is going to take it. And I just don't want to be there to see that, so I'm going off to the Great Dismal Swamp for a few days hunting." And I said to Herman, "You cannot tell me that Johnson will take the vice presidency. It's unimaginable!" He said, "He'll do it. You wait and see. I know him better than you do." And I said, "Well, you do know him better than I do. Are you really sure that this is what will occur?" "Absolutely sure. That's why I'm going to the Great Dismal Swamp!"

One of the distinguishing marks of a good newspaperman, in my judgment, is always to believe the experts. And Johnson is a very mysterious man. I'd never been able to predict him really accurately. I'd found over the years that Herman Talmadge had always predicted him with great accuracy, so I believed Herman Talmadge.

M: That was your so-called authority?

A: Yes, the best authority you could get. And so I went to Los Angeles, believing that Johnson would accept the nomination if it were offered to him. And I told President Kennedy, please, please, please not to offer it unless he genuinely wanted Johnson as vice president! And President Kennedy signified in the clearest manner agreement and understanding. So I have never for one instant believed that he did it merely as a gesture,

with the expectation that it would be refused. I think he may have told some people that to keep them quiet, but he was far too shrewd a man--I had told him about Herman Talmadge and he knew just as well as I did that Herman understood Johnson and had predicted Johnson better than anybody else. And he had just as much respect--more respect for expert advice than I do.

And after this short exordium, I turned the meeting over, so to say, to Phil; and Phil made a more normal kind of plea along the lines you would expect, about uniting the party and about the importance of having a second big man on the ticket. And the President seemed to be quite impressed; he said to keep in touch. And Phil, who was a great, great operator, then took over, and I bowed out; because I don't believe that it's a newspaperman's job to be a political operator. And so the rest of it I don't know about, or at least I only knew because Phil and I worked very closely and he told me what he was doing all the time.

Phil was a great man whom I miss every day to this day. And it's the greatest tragedy for this country that he had the nervous flaw that destroyed him.

At any rate, going back to what we were talking about, President Johnson was well aware of this episode. More or less in memory of it, he asked Kay Graham and my wife and me to Lady Bird's and his thirtieth anniversary, which fell a few days after the 1964 election. It wasn't a very good party. I remember I sat between Mrs. Justice [Tom] Clark and Mrs. Scooter Miller, which is not my ideal seat at table. About the only people there who amused me at all except for Kay and the President and Lady Bird, whom I admire extravagantly, were the Abe Fortases, funnily enough. At any rate, the President was already very full of Viet Nam, and we talked about it.

M: This is 1964? After his election?

A: Yes. Just after his election. And meanwhile, having made this mistake and feeling very strongly about the matter, I concentrated my attention post-election on the Vietnamese problem, which was obviously the biggest problem facing the President. And I knew everyone in the government very well. It isn't hard to know everybody very well if you're known to be a friend of the President's. And they spoke to me with great frankness. Virtually everybody in the government except for George Ball was in favor of a strong policy. Particularly in favor were Mr. [Robert S.] McNamara and Mac [McGeorge] Bundy, and they were also very close friends as they are, thank God, to this day! I saw them all the time; I saw everybody all the time. And I began writing a series of columns, saying in effect that Johnson would either have to step up to bat or accept defeat. And these began to make him very angry. The culmination came when I wrote a column about George Ball's activity. Johnson was using Ball as a kind of advocatus diaboli, and I had heard about a paper that Ball had prepared which I attacked. I don't mind saying now the person who told me about it was Mike Forrestal, who was working for Bundy. Forrestal is now opposed to the commitment in Viet Nam; he was passionately in favor of it in those days. He says now that he was against engaging American troops--this is quite untrue!

M: There are a number of people like that, I think.

A: Well, I should think there were quite a number. I don't have very much admiration for them. And this paper was supposed to be secret, and there was a frightful row when the President exploded and everybody was told not to see me ever again. And it never bothered me; I mean, it was something I'd been through before. It bothered me even less because I had already decided to go out to Viet Nam.

M: Was this your first trip back since the fifties now?

A: Oh, no, no.

M: You were there frequently in the fifties.

A: I had been frequently. And when I got there, I found exactly the kind of deliquescent situation that I had expected. It was obvious that the whole thing was coming apart at the seams. And the President was insisting on a straight "cart before the horse" policy. He constantly told everyone; he told me, "You give me a stable government, and I'll do something about the military situation."

Well, any damned fool could see that you couldn't conceivably get a stable government <u>until</u> you did something about the military situation. He had the cart completely before the horse! And so I wrote very strongly about the matter.

And I suppose the piece that upset him most, which I think was written after I got back from Viet Nam before Christmas--probably toward the end of December--was the column which I slugged "Johnson's defeat!"

M: He wouldn't like that from the very beginning.

A: And I put it in quotes because he was not very gracefully telling everyone at that time that this was, so to say, a world he'd never made; that he'd inherited this mess from President Kennedy; that it was all President Kennedy's fault, not his fault; and that if we encountered disaster there it would be Kennedy's disaster, not his disaster. And I said this was historically and in every other way wholly inaccurate, which it was. And that he as President of the United States still had exactly the same options that President Kennedy would have had, and it was up to him to avoid defeat if defeat was to be avoided.

It was awfully funny in those days. He was seeing Walter Lippmann all the time. And he wasn't seeing me at all. I was stricken from the list in the most complete manner. And Bill Moyers subsequently told me that he was more angry with me than with anyone in Washington, which is more or less par for the course if you're a newspaperman, or used to be, because he thought I was "limiting his options," and that's the language that Moyers used. Well, there again, you can't trust Moyers.

M: You mean, you can't trust Moyers on Johnson or Moyers in his official role?

A: You always have to bear in mind with Moyers that he was brought up as a Baptist clergyman and reads Machiavelli as his bedside reading. I found out belatedly. And that's what Moyers said.

M: Was this important in Moyers' press secretaryship? Did this really hurt Johnson?

A: No, I don't know anything about it. I never deal with the press secretary. In any case, I think Moyers was probably telling the truth. There's one of the most curious things about President Johnson, the way he looked at his so-called options. I never understood it; it was perfectly obsessive and essentially irrational. In his terms I suppose I <u>was</u> limiting his options, because I was dragging the problem out from under the rug. No one was paying very much attention to it until I kept insisting on it; and it began to attract more and more attention, and the President's responsibility began to be more and more highlighted, so that the option of shoving the problem under the rug became a little bit more difficult. But in point of fact, it was immeasurably too big a problem ever to shove under the rug anyway. The facts of the problem, the real nature of his choice, were not being changed in the smallest degree by what I wrote. It just made him very angry. [Richard] Goodwin, who was still in the White House,

subsequently wrote me an angry letter which I have somehwere in my files and accused me of, so to say, using what I knew about the President's character to "bug" him, or to push him into making the Vietnamese decision to which, of course, Goodwin was opposed. So there was an awful row going on in the White House.

M: Over the policy, you mean?

A: Yes. I mean, there they were. They were right up against the gun; it was perfectly obvious that it was either American intervention on a major scale, or it was defeat. Those were the choices.

M: And were there some there--you've described only Ball as having been on that side before--

A: Well, there was Goodwin on the White House staff--I don't count him, he was a speech writer. But he was a very practiced intriguer and--

M: Moyers was later credited with being on that side.

A: I should think Moyers was on that side. I can't remember whether Moyers was press secretary by then or not.

M: Not quite yet.

A: And Moyers was on that side. There was an awful lot of intrigue and complication before the decision was made. And characteristically of Johnson, the decision was made not all at once, but in the most ridiculous kind of salami-slicing way. It would have been so much cheaper to do it all at once, to wrap the "Old Glory" around you and say, "Well, now, we've got a war on our hands, and let's go in and win it!" Instead of which he started the bombing of the North; and the bombing as it started was about as important as a very small swarm of gnats attacking a very large animal. Then he put the Marines at Danang with orders not to get themselves out of the suburbs of Danang. It was all sort of done--to this day, I have

never been able to find out exactly when or how the final decision to commit American troops in a serious manner was made.

M: What it was finally made in the summer of '65?

A: I know why it was made. Because the North Vietnamese, and that's what they really were already, had rolled up the last reserve battalions of the South Vietnamese army so that the South Vietnamese army was stretched like a fiddle string and had no reserve whatever; whereas the V.C. and the North Vietnamese had a reserve of about, I would guess, five divisions or equivalent. So it was perfectly obvious. Saigon would have been invested in five weeks, in my judgment, if the President had not acted.

M: This is in July of '65?

A: I suppose it was in July that the decision was made. But I've never known what the meeting was, who participated, any of the things that you normally know about a meeting of that kind.

M: Did all of this correspond with another--in time, that is--with another trouble which seemed to occupy a lot of time in the White House of suspicion that Johnson apparently had of people who had been associated with the Kennedy Administration, who either still worked for him or who were in the process of departing through this six or eight month period? Newspapermen, too, I suppose, who had been Kennedy loyalists?

A: I don't know that--no, I don't think that that played a major role. The two persons besides Dean Rusk whose advice weighed the heaviest were, I suppose, Mac Bundy and Bob McNamara, both of whom were Kennedy men. Mac left at the end of that year, and I guess Johnson knew he was going to leave.

At any rate as far as my relations with him were concerned, I was on the real "black list" all through the winter of '64-'65. He used to classify me with Wayne Morse.

M: That's a strange juxtaposition, if ever I heard one.

A: "I'm not going to take the advice of General Alsop or General Morse." And we were presenting, relatively speaking, the extremes. And I didn't see him again until the spring of '66 when he asked my wife and me to a rather awful, but interesting, party for the Presidential scholars.

M: This was, so to speak, just out of the clear blue sky? You'd been on the black list and all of a sudden you're invited--

A: Yes, but this was a very big show. I suppose I did see him once. We were asked to the opening of Mrs. Kennedy's garden, and that was for Mrs. Kennedy. And Mrs. [Paul] Mellon. We must have been on every list that they asked for--people who should be asked. And then after that intercourse resumed in a kind of a way.

M: That's interesting that he--as if nothing had happened, sort of--this type of thing? He never talked to you about your having been outside and down--

A: No, no, no, no, no, no, no! Nor would I have expected him to. It was awfully funny, too, because I have a private rule--I've never asked to see a President of the United States. I've known a couple of them very well. But it seems to me ludicrous for a newspaperman to ask the President of the United States for any time. So, in President Kennedy's day, close as we were, if I wanted to see him I used to call Evelyn Lincoln and say, "Look, I never ask to see the President, and I'm not asking now; but I'm going out to Viet Nam, or I've just come back from Viet Nam," or something like that, "and if he wants to see me I'd sure love to see him." And he'd always send for me. Then, of course, we saw one another a lot. Ours was the last house, private house, that President Kennedy came to regularly, by about a year and a half.

In the case of President Johnson there was no one I could call up in that sort of way and he always wanted to be asked. And I wouldn't ask him, so what would happen is that they'd ask us socially to the White House, and then he'd say, "I'd like to see you." I had in fact been asked by him so then I could call up and say, "The President said he'd like to see me, and I'd sure love to see him." I never did ask to see him except when he was leaving office, and I asked to say goodbye to him and spent an hour with him in his office, very sad and very moving, when everything was being moved out.

M: This was right at the very end?

A: Very end.

M: Had your relationship become reasonably close again?

A: Oh, yes, we were very, really very--I mean to the extent that you ever can be close to a man as secretive as that and as strange as that. We used to be asked there to dinner, you know, with six people or so; and he'd talk away, either obsessively about something that upset him or if he was in good form being terribly funny--you never could tell. He was perfectly unpredictable.

M: Did he ever talk about his feelings about the critics in the country--what was happening to him, what was happening to the government under his leadership because of the vast division that had occurred over the Viet Nam policy?

A: Yes, he'd talk about his critics rather viciously. I never really told him what I thought about it, which is very simple. The trouble with Johnson and Viet Nam was that he was too clever by half. He had 150,000 troops on the ground before the New York Times admitted we were in a major war, literally. And it was an extraordinary feat of political craft, but

it was a completely self-defeating feat, counter-productive in the last possible degree, because if you're going to go into a major war the only thing to do is run "Old Glory" up the flagpole and tell the country why you're doing it.

M: Why didn't he do that?

A: Because it's his nature. Johnson was a great legislative leader and an impossibly bad political and war leader.

M: Political and war leader.

A: Impossibly bad. He was a bad war leader because he didn't know anything about war. And the Johnson-McNamara combination was fatal, whereas a Kennedy-McNamara combination would have been ideal. I mean, Johnson--McNamara was himself a very strange man. McNamara was probably the greatest defense minister the West has seen since Alexander the Great's club-footed cousin, Harpalus, invented the profession in the West.

M: That's quite a while.

A: Well, he <u>was</u>. I mean, he made changes and innovations that unless we lose our heads completely in this country will have permanent historical importance, as military changes and innovations always do.

But he wasn't at all a good war minister, which is inherent in the way he changed the way of doing defense. The way of doing defense had never been changed since Alexander the Great's club-footed cousin. It was always done by, you know, the senior generals and such who said what you ought to do and then you'd either done it or not done it. It was done essentially by hunch, by seniority, by experience, by the feeling in people's elbows. It worked perfectly well until the enormous technological acceleration which led, for example in the thirties, to cavalry generals making decisions about airplanes and in the fifties to big bomber generals

making decisions about missiles which--Curt LeMay hated missiles as the cavalry generals hated airplanes, and tanks too. And McNamara replaced hunch, experience, and the feeling in your elbow with logical and statistical analysis. It sounds like a simple thing to do, but it was anything but simple. It was a towering feat. What he never could understand was that once you got into a war, hunch, experience, and your feeling in your elbow walk right in the other door.

M: That's why he could be a good defense minister and not a good war minister.

A: And a bad war minister. And Kennedy would have had more than enough hunch and experience and feeling in his elbow--would have been an ideal combination with McNamara. Whereas Johnson plus McNamara was a fatal combination, really dreadful.

But the worst thing of all was the President's fatal handicap as a political leader.

M: This is contrary to the public [image].

A: Well, it's just--everybody who thinks Johnson is a good political leader is a fool. If ever I've seen a fair-weather sailor as a political leader, Johnson is it. And the reason for it was very simple. He had two obsessions, and they really amounted to obsessions. They were manias. One was about secrecy, about not showing his hand. And the other was about keeping his options. Well the essence of political leadership schematically is to say to the country: "We've got to go to Point A for reasons B and C." If you point out Point A, if you name Point A, you foreclose your option to go to Point Z--in a direct opposite direction. And if you disclose reasons B and C, you're showing some of the cards in your hand. And he just never could bring himself to do it.

M: This would apply to things other than Viet Nam, too.

A: Everything. And it was laughable. I mean you'd sometimes think it was close to manic! I had a member of his staff twice come to me about future appointments with a very long, solemn, "Joe, I know the President values your opinion. This grave decision is going to be made about--." In one case it was about [Walt W.] Rostow and [Robert] Kintner. And, "Do you think that these are wise appointments? I know he'll value your opinion very much." And both times I went to bed thinking what a nice column I had got if these appointments were going to be made. It was a kind of thing my colleagues, Evans and Novak, deal in very much; and I thought to myself, "Well, now I've got something better than they've had for the last six months." And the next morning I woke up realizing that an attempt was being made to use me, which I don't much like, because if I had published the fact that the appointments were probably going to be made, they probably wouldn't have been made. So I didn't say anything. And I was chosen because, I suppose, that if there had been a hell of a lot of row about the "leak," the "leaker" would have been able to say, "Well, we've always treated Alsop with so much confidence, and of course I didn't mean him to publish it," and all that. And it would have been hard to go to someone else, you see.

But, you know, you can remember half a dozen cases of appointments that were perfectly good, respectable appointments that were aborted or long-delayed simply because they got into the newspapers before the President announced them. Well, what difference did that make, I wonder? I've never understood it.

M: I guess this can really lead almost to the indecisiveness--the keeping options open thing. Decisions just don't get made.

A: No, no, because he always did make the decisions. He was very bold about his decisions. He always made them, but he never prepared the country for them. And the essence of leadership is to prepare the country to carry it along with you. I mean Franklin Roosevelt, who was a great leader--you could write a piece calling him a perfect poltroon for not doing X, Y, and Z, and if he wanted to do X, Y, and Z, he was pleased to be called a poltroon for not doing it because that prepared the road. That actually happened. I got a call--on a piece like that in the Hitler time--from Steve Early saying that was a first-rate piece, and I had called the President all sorts of names.

M: You helped him along the way.

A: And I was making propaganda for what he wanted to do. That's all he had his eye on.

M: Johnson, who learned, or at least should have learned something under Roosevelt, never would do this?

A: He never could--because leadership can be schematically described as I've described him. I mean, there are many other elements, but that's the basis of it. And the two basic elements of leadership ran flat counter to Lyndon Johnson's character.

M: Which could explain quite a lot.

A: It explains everything, basically; because he had the country with him.

M: At least at first, no doubt about it.

A: And it would have been very easy for him to put his critics on the defensive. It would have been very easy for him to wrap himself in "Old Glory." It would have been very easy for him to create a wholly different atmosphere. It was apparent from the beginning that this was utterly impossible if your rule was that you'd talk peace while making war. That just left everybody confused and divided.

M: You spent a lot of time in Viet Nam during this time. As a supporter of the policy, did you get a chance to view things over there differently than some of the reporters who were more critical?

A: Well, I don't know about that. I think I know more about war than they do. They're mostly very inexperienced.

M: Most of those people were younger, people without prior wartime--

A: And they were almost exclusively that. In fact the few of us that did have experience, like Keyes Beech, who served in the second war and we'd done Korea together, and I, were very much divided from all the younger men who very much resented us. Their real fault was not that they were cowardly, or didn't try, or anything like that; their real fault was that they never looked at the other side's problems. And in a war the other side's problems are just as important as your problems. And indeed if the other side has less muscle than you do, they're more important.

M: They concentrated on the what they could easily see--

A: Well, our problems were right under their noses, and goodness knows we had plenty of very unpleasant problems. But the other side had from the very outset enormous and perfectly detectable problems which I probably concentrated on too much, because I thought the reporting was being very badly done.

M: That increased the division between you and the others.

A: Well, you know, I was trying to counter-balance what I thought was one-sided reporting from the front.

But Johnson--I mean, he carried his peculiarities to the point indeed of getting very bad advice, because he would ask for advice and then not tell the people he asked for advice all the facts.

M: Not bad advisers, but bad because of the way he handled them.

A: I mean, you can't give good advice if you don't know all the facts. The most extraordinary and the key episode was just prior to his speech withdrawing himself from the Presidential race. It was a very bad moment immediately after TET, partly because he was also a very bad executive leader, the government had panicked.

M: After TET?

A: Yes. Quite ludicrously. Because I think it will be remembered that TET was the great turning point in the war against the enemy--the decisive turning point in the war against the enemy--providing we hang in there and achieve a good outcome. It was an absolute major disaster for the other side except for the "psychological victory," which was won because the reporting was so bad and because the government panicked.

M: Psychological victory over here, not there--

A: Yes, here in the United States. The New York Times about eight months later published for the first time a piece admitting that TET had been a dreadful military defeat for the enemy and on balance the enemy had lost terribly in South Viet Nam. But added that it was a psychological victory, without taking note of the fact that the principal factor in making it a psychological victory here in the United States was the New York Times!

M: I recall that piece.

A: I almost did a column about that. At any rate this was long after--

M: This is March of '68 you're talking about?

A: Yes. TET was in '68, wasn't it?

M: Yes.

A: I always get lost in the chronology. He called in all those--I call them the "ancestral voices prophesying war." You know, Bob Lovett and Dean Acheson and all the--

M: The wisemen--

A: The wisemen. I call them the "ancestral voices prophesying war." They're always called in when things are rough--Cuba and so on. And he asked them what to do, and they all got briefings from this government which had panicked; and quite large chunks of the briefings were wholly incorrect. Well, the Agency had--its people had suffered quite seriously at TET, partly because they had some people in the countryside who were rather ill-chosen; and so they said the government had completely lost control of the countryside. Well, the government presence had been rolled back from the countryside, but in point of fact the other side had not gained control of the countryside either. The countryside was a kind of--for a time--for a short time a kind of vacuum. That's what really happened. And what really mattered, which they did not stress, was that the most valuable assets of the other side were decimated to no purpose.

M: A matter of emphasis rather than incorrect--

A: Well, it was also a matter of fact. I mean, the briefings were bad because the most important facts were not stressed, and the non-facts were put forward, not in the sense of lying, but in the sense of gross misjudgment of what had really happened.

At any rate, the key thing--or so it seems to me--at that time, was simply that Mr. Johnson wasn't going to run again.

M: You're talking about beforehand now?

A: Yes. I mean, if you were advising Johnson--by then he'd become a desperately controversial figure, very much disliked by huge sectors of the American public--

M: For a lot of different reasons.

A: For many different reasons. And if he was going to run again, the kind of

thing that he did was probably desirable. If he wasn't going to run again, all he had to do was say that, and say that, "I am going forward." It was quite needless, for example, to announce a bombing halt if he was not going to run again. But all these people--I myself had I been involved, which I would never have been under any circumstances--would have given him the advice that was given him, assuming as they all assumed that he was going to run again. I would have given him flat contrary advice if I thought he wasn't going to run again.

M: It was a case of them not knowing the facts.

A: No, they didn't know the basic facts. And so this enormous exercise was gone through, and he got what was essentially advice corrupted by ignorance, either because he was so secretive he didn't want to tell them he wasn't going to run again, or because he was so determined to keep his options open that he didn't decide not to run again until he went into the God-damned television studio. I don't know which.

M: But both of them figure in the factors that you mention, his character--

A: And it was as ludicrous an episode leading to a really major policy decision as I can think of.

M: Does the same thing happen again at the end of the year when he finally has the total bombing halt of the North?

A: Oh, no. No. That was an in-line development from what he'd done already. But it was bewildering. He never ceased to bewilder me, because he was a very, very, very big man--is still, with the most extraordinary mixture of good and bad qualities, all of them larger than life-size, that I've ever seen.

M: Magnified on all sides.

A: Yes. And the bad qualities fought against the good qualities and really

hamstrung him as an effective leader of the country; although if you look back on what he did, by my standards he almost always made all the right decisions.

M: But not always in the best possible way.

A: Always in the worst possible way, either with respect to the war in the way he presented the decisions to the country, or I would say that about his domestic program.

M: I was going to ask you about everything other than Viet Nam.

A: Because the domestic program was popular and all my beloved colleagues were very uncritical about it, it was shockingly oversold. He couldn't resist, you know--I mean, you had these endless thin ends of wedges represented as--

M: Almost revolutionary?

A: Revolutionary. Changes that were going to alter everything overnight! And as this was an area--I mean the whole business of social change is not exactly his thing--he didn't look at all critically at what all the types he called in to produce these packages for him were putting in the package. And a lot of the things they put in the packages were just plain damned foolish!

M: As was quickly demonstrated--

A: And the result has been, again it's--I think he'll be judged to have been a major President--

M: That's an interesting adjective you've used there--"major"--

A: Well, that's the best adjective you can use. But I think his Presidency will be judged as an extremely mixed performance.

M: You said you talked to him at great length right before he left office. Did he make any comments about what he judged to have been--

A: No, I just talked to him about his plans and said how sad I was to see them both go. He showed me the pictures that that fellow had done of Lady Bird and girls and, you know, all that.

M: Personal, not policy, at that point.

A: Yes.

M: There is one subject that doesn't, I guess, exactly relate to Mr. Johnson but which you might be a good witness on. It's going to be asked, I think. There's now currently a lot of published allegations about the events of the latter part of October 1968, when the bombing halt was worked out, involving the activities of Madame Chennault. You go back with the Chennaults a long way. Can you straighten that out anyway for posterity?

A: Well I knew about it at the time, because somebody in the White House told me about it.

M: Somebody in the White House--not her?

A: No, mercy, no! Good God, no! And I don't--

M: You don't have any--

A: No. I feel a great debt to Anna Chennault because my old boss [General Claire] Chennault was a very strange man and a genius, but he was also a man of great pecularities and weaknesses. One of them was rather like the Baron Hulet, in Balzac's "Cousine Bette," about girls. And if some strong-minded woman hadn't come along and taken care of him and taken care of his financial affairs, he'd have made a perfect fool of himself in his older years. And Anna came along and rescued him. So I feel I owe her a great debt. On the other hand I don't like her as a person.

M: So you wouldn't have been involved--

A: And I've never had any contact with her at all. I knew that she was carrying on this intrigue with [Ambassador] Bui Diem, and I knew that it

was having a very unfortunate effect in Saigon, and I knew that she was representing herself to Bui Diem as speaking for Nixon. In fact I was told that Agnew in some eccentric way or another got into the act, but I was told this in very great confidence and on the basis that President Johnson didn't want to voice it in the campaign and put a cloud on Nixon's title and character in case he happened to be elected, which I think Johnson always expected him to be.

M: But they were aware of it--

A: Because Johnson's opinion of his Vice President was, I've always suspected, not very high.

M: I think that showed in the campaign. Johnson didn't, after all, take a very active part.

A: Well, he wasn't asked to.

M: The Humphrey people didn't want the exposure?

A: No, no. They were never able to make up their minds what they wanted.

M: You don't think the Madame Chenault thing contributed importantly then to any of the ultimate results?

A: No, it made a temporary trouble and that's all.

M: You've been very helpful. I don't want to cut you off. If there are anecdotes or insights that you have, I'd be happy for you to continue on.

A: No, I really don't have any more except that I'd like to emphasize my view of the President's essential bigness and rightness.

M: Well, you have quite a number, and I'm sure I could listen to you a great length of time, but you're very nice to give us this much time and we appreciate it.

A: Well, if there's anything else that I've been involved in, I'm sure we can talk again.

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