INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 15, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: STEWART ALSOP

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Newsweek offices, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

Interview starts abruptly.

A: . . . to get some insight into the Johnson decade or the Johnson years.

M: Right, and not to reproduce the things that are well known and well written, in your case, for example, in, I take it, your most recent full book.

A: The Center, yes.

M: Which, I might say, is a real favorite of this project. We use it frequently as a reference book.

A: Oh, do you?

M: Your story about "the sons-of-bitches gaining on us" is sort of the house joke of the Johnson History Project and is frequently referred to.

A: Frank Kent's old joke. That has a curious quality, that joke. It seems to have no point, but the more you think about it the more interest and relevance it has.

M: And some days they seem closer than others, particularly on this project, it seems like.

Let's get your name on the tape here as a means of identification. You're Stewart Alsop, and you were a longtime syndicated columnist with your brother Joseph, whom I also interviewed, incidentally, and later with the Saturday Evening Post, and now with Newsweek regularly.

A: That's right

M: And the author of The Center, which appeared last year, a book on current times and power in Washington. I know you did cover LBJ to a certain extent in the 1950s. I'm familiar with one feature you did that you mention in the book. How closely did you follow his activities in the Senate years?

A: Of course, when he was the majority leader of the Senate, it was essential for anybody who was trying to keep on top of the news to see the leader fairly frequently. I don't mean every day or every week, but to be in touch with him and his people.

M: He was accessible?

A: Yes, he was always accessible. He wasn't always very informative. People around him were more informative than he was, people like George Reedy and Bobby Baker.

M: You say that he got along better with the press then, and that's my impression as well. Is the Capitol Hill press that much a kept group, that a man who doesn't understand the press can get by there and perhaps not in other parts of the government?

A: No, I wouldn't say by any means that the Capitol Hill press was or is today a kept press. But the relationship between a senator and the press, and especially a majority leader and the press, on the one hand, and a president and the press on the other hand, is very different. And I think that one of President Johnson's troubles was that he thought he could deal with the press the way Majority Leader Johnson dealt with the press, and the two don't march together. You know, a majority leader is dealing with an essentially different situation: how people will vote on what issues and why. It's a much more constricted world.

M: Did he have better help then, as far as his press relations were concerned?

A: Yes, in a way I think he did. I think George Reedy and Bobby Baker, who were the two main people who dealt with the press below him, were very effective, Bobby particularly. Bobby was a very useful source, and a lot of aging newspapermen still have a certain affection for Bobby Baker because he was a very good man to know in those days. And he'd always, within certain limits, come clean with the press. You know, if you wanted a headcount on what was likely to happen, or if you wanted an insight into people's motivations, a senator's real underlying views, Bobby was a good man to know. So, of course, was Lyndon Johnson.

And, as I say, the whole relationship is very different. Johnson used to have these little kind of seminars at the end of a long working day. You could go up to his tiny little room that he had when he was majority leader, that later expanded into the Taj Mahal. But initially he had a very tiny, handsome room with Brumidi ceilings right off the gallery. A lot of reporters would crowd in there, and the drink would flow pretty freely, and Johnson would put his feet up, and very often you'd have one of those Johnsonian monologues. But, in fact, Johnson was a brilliant monologist.

M: Self-justification mostly, or was it real hard information he was giving you?

A: You'd get an impression. He never was a man for giving out much information. He always was a man for playing his cards very close indeed to his chest, but you'd get an idea of what was going on. Ideas would flow out of him like water out of a stream.

M: That's the kind of easy camaraderie that's associated with the Kennedy years. Did Johnson lose the ability to do that when he was president pretty much?

A: I think a president loses it. A president does not have that relationship with the press. He can't have, he's president. Whereas, any senator, even a majority leader, can have a kind of feet-up, bourbon-and-branch-water relationship with reporters he knows fairly well. Everybody understands the rules of the game, and it's a much more relaxed relationship.

M: This was where Johnson was good, in those kind of feet-up sessions.

A: Yes, he was awfully good in those sessions. And he tried to do the same thing initially when he became president, and he simply found it didn't work because it doesn't work. It never does work. What a president says is inherently news. And even if he had six or eight people sitting around having such a session and he'd talk fairly freely, it always got out, and he always resented it. What he didn't understand was that because he was president, it was inevitable that it would get out.

You remember the whole era of the Johnson stories. All sorts of stories, many of them with scatological implications. These are the same stories he used to tell as majority leader, but when he was majority leader nobody cared. Nobody would repeat them much. Lyndon was just being Lyndon. But as president, it made all the difference. And that was the relationship with the press, which, in my view, as president, Lyndon Johnson never understood.

M: That's interesting. You describe in The Center what you call "treatment A" that was administered to you personally.

A: Yes, and many others experienced it.

M: Did he continue to try to do that type of thing as president.

A: He didn't to me, but he did to others, I'm sure. He wasted an extraordinary amount of time with the press, as president.

M: As president?

A: Yes. I did have one interview with him. Let's see, it was the time of the Detroit riots. When would that have been? Late 1967 I guess. I wanted to see him on some other subject, and I'd had my name in. I was in New York. I got a call late at night at the hotel where I was staying, saying that the president wanted to see me the next day at five p.m.

or something. All that day he devoted to talking to reporters individually--I knew most of the others--the entire day, and the theme he was selling was that he had no constitutional alternative but to do what he did in Detroit, to delay before sending in troops, you remember all of this. And the point could have been made in three minutes.

M: And to a group, too.

A: To a group or even individually. I still remember the President's huge finger going over the relevant previous Supreme Court decisions, pointing them out as if I couldn't read. There was always I think about Johnson a certain naivete where the press was concerned, which to me was always oddly appealing. That sounds condescending and silly to say so, although I know very well he didn't have any affection for me towards the end of his administration, or indeed for any but two or three reporters or journalists. To me there was always about Johnson a kind of boyish quality, a kind of naivete, a kind of innocence about many aspects of the world.

M: In spite of thirty years here.

A: In spite of thirty years of extremely cynical experience, which to me had a certain charm. There's no other word for it.

M: You mentioned only two or three friends in press people who were still close to him at the end. Were most of those people--the names are fairly well known--people with whom he made friendships in the Senate years and then lasted over?

A: Yes, I would think so. They were also people who would consistently write nicely about him.

M: Were there people whom he was particularly close to in the Senate years that became skeptical after he became president who are notable?

A: There were a good many with whom he had bad breaks. I think in my book there's a story of Phil Potter and the Indian issue. Again this was something he never understood: that it was a reporter's job to write what he could find out, and if he wrote it accurately it was no attack on the president. He was infuriated with the reporters for writing what he didn't want to have them write, but the government of our system doesn't work that way.

A: Did he call you up in instances sometimes when you wrote stories that came to his attention which he didn't like?

A: You mean when he was President?

M: Yes.

A: No, he never did. I know he did others. Towards the end, after the 1964 election and after he began to slide off the in the polls and his popularity began to be reduced, I think he did it less and less. And what he did instead was to give reporters the frigid air treatment, the sort of treatment he gave Phil Potter, for example. He'd pretend they weren't there and he wouldn't see them. They had become ghosts.

M: Did he ever try to go above them to the publisher?

A: Oh yes, he was well known for doing that. I had no personal instance of it, so I'm not competent to report on it, but I know that he several times appealed to publishers about stories which displeased him.

M: And of course this just had the absolute negative reaction for a reporter.

A: He never understood; he never will understand,

M: That's probably right. How frequently did you travel with the President, or with Mr. Johnson even before he was president?

A: I went on one or two campaign trips. I traveled with him briefly during the 1964 campaign. And then I went with him on that foray he made to the Middle West in 1966. But not very often.

M: Did the unpredictability of his scheduling which is so well known really have a substantive reaction negatively with the press that followed him around regularly, do you think?

A: It irritated them. Of course, I wasn't a White House reporter so perhaps I'm not qualified to speak. It didn't seem to me that they had any right to be irritated. The president is his own man, and it's up to him to decide when he's going to go and where he's going to go, and it's the press' job to follow him. If there's a certain amount of discomfort and unhappy wives involved, that's just too bad. I never had any sympathy with the bitching about the way the President handled his travel arrangements. I certainly had a lot of sympathy with the bitching about the way he attempted to use the press as an arm of the government, which he always tried to do, and which, of course, never worked.

M: You mean through leaking the viewpoint of the administration?

A: I think there is a thing in my book about this; I'm not sure if I used it. But I remember he fed three contradictory stories to the New York Times within a ten-day period about the Vietnamese war.

M: I don't believe that's in the book.

A: This is a little vague in my mind. I remember talking to Scotty Reston about it, who, I'm sure if you're going to see him, would remember. He was using these stories and attempting to use the Times, in effect, as an arm of the government. He was attempting to use the Times to communicate with Hanoi by giving the Times that information. It doesn't work! Sooner or later people don't believe you if you do this.

M: What about the credibility gap? Was it a whole lot worse, do you think, under Mr. Johnson than it had been under the other presidents you've had an opportunity to watch fairly closely?

A: The relationship between the press and the president is always inherently bad; it's never good.

M: It shouldn't be, as a matter of fact.

A: It shouldn't be. It's inherently an adversary proceeding, because we're trying to find out things that he, the president, doesn't want us to find out. It's really as simple as that. And we're also critical, and I often think hypercritical, of the president, considering the hideous difficulties involved in the job of the presidency. So no president ever likes the press, and no press ever really much likes the president. Even Jack Kennedy wasn't an entire exception. You remember the phrase "managed news" arose under the Kennedy Administration. And you remember it was Jack Kennedy who cancelled the New York Herald Tribune in a fit of fury and rage. And by no means all the press was in love with Jack Kennedy; there were some reporters who were, but he had his share of criticism too.

And the credibility gap has always existed too. In the Eisenhower days, for example, the "Top Secret" stamp was used very, very freely in order not to conceal information from the Soviets or from potential enemies, but simply to conceal it from the U.S. people and from the press. This is done again and again. You can cite several examples of information which the Eisenhower Administration knew that the Soviets had because they were about Soviet weapons developments.

M: Which they could hardly miss.

A: They could hardly not know. Which nevertheless were all marked "Top Secret" because it would have invited extensive reaction by the American government. So there was never any "palliness" between the Eisenhower Administration and the bulk of the press. Truman, the same thing. God knows, Roosevelt was the same.

But Johnson's case was unique and special because there came to be a venom on both sides which had not been matched before. The press constantly felt that Johnson was trying to use them. Johnson's habit of going over the head of the reporters and appealing to publishers infuriated the working press. By the same token Johnson felt, and I think quite often felt with good reason, that the press was right unfair to him.

M: Of course the administration likes to talk about the Times, Post, Newsweek axis as being the chief bad guys. Was there a particular venom among the reporters for those particular media?

A: You mean in the Johnson Administration?

M: Yes.

A: I can't speak with any authority on that because during that whole period I was working for the Saturday Evening Post.

M: I thought that might make you able to speak with some objectivity about that.

A: Of course it went back to the Vietnamese war above all. This was the albatross that Johnson placed around his own neck.

M: Did he do a lot of this personally, is he the one who tried to use the press badly, is he the one who misled them intentionally, as opposed to somebody who worked for him?

A: It was Johnson.

M: Johnson personally?

A: It was Johnson and Johnson's influence that created this miasma of distrust.

M: What about his press secretaries? Was he well or poorly served by his succession of press secretaries?

A: I always liked George Reedy and admired him too. I think he's a very able man, highly intelligent, kind of one of nature's philosophers, and a very nice man too. But his position with Johnson was absolutely impossible. Johnson is in some ways a bully, and George was always one of his chief targets.

I think Bill Moyers is a very, very able man, and I think for awhile he did a lot to help Johnson. But again, sooner or later, the relationship became impossible.

M: It was the personal relationship, not the official relationship, that--

A: It's hard to draw a precise line between the two. But working for Johnson--no one who has ever worked for Johnson would claim that it's relaxing. An incredible experience. So he went the way of all flesh.

M: You mentioned the large number of former aides and ex-employees that Johnson had. Was that a problem with him? A lot of people who had worked for him and had learned to dislike him who had an axe to grind?

A: No, it's a curious thing. I've talked to a lot of people who are ex-Johnson people, and of course the woods are full of them, and were full of them throughout the whole Johnson period. I found none that I can remember who really detested him, who considered themselves enemies. They all spoke with a curious mixture of admiration and exasperation about Lyndon Johnson.

M: They just didn't want to work for him!

A: But after awhile they just couldn't work for him anymore. It became impossible to do so. It was more than human flesh could bear! So they all would sooner or later get out from under. Curiously enough, I don't think Johnson himself knew how unreasonable he was being. It didn't seem to him unreasonable at all to expect a man to work from seven thirty a.m. until two a.m. and never see his wife. After all, he was working for the president of all the people!

M: Did they do a bad job of coordinating news releases through the various agencies of government? The Nixon people made a big thing of this news coordination. Did the Johnson Administration handle that with a particular lack of success?

A: I can't really speak with much expertise on that, because that's not my end of the business. I think what they tried to do was to put out everything that reflected credit on the administration in the name of the President and the White House, and everything that was difficult and disadvantageous and politically dangerous in somebody else's name. But that's not a new trick either.

M: No, it's not. How about these alleged obsessions with secrecy? Is it true that leaks, for example, changed government positions, to your knowledge, appointments, this type of thing?

A: Yes.

M: Are there specific examples of that that you have knowledge of?

A: I think Rowlie Evans would be able to give you about a dozen. He used to collect them. So did Arthur Krock. He listed several in one column, I remember. I can't remember them all, but there's no question about it: both policy and appointments were affected by prior leaks. I hate the word "leaks"--a news stories. Johnson would pick up the paper and somebody would say he was going to do X, and instinctively, even if it meat major sacrifice of talent or a major shift in the necessary policy, he would prove that he was not going to do X; he was going to do A or B.

M: How often was he the source of the information that displeased him? Did he let it out at the White House frequently in his rambling talks with newsmen?

A: I think what happened was that without realizing he was doing it he would sometimes give people leads which would then lead to confirmation of a given story. I think I cite one example in the book, and I've forgotten what the issue was--the bombing of the North, I think, in Vietnam. Again, you have that peculiar strain of naivete in the President.

M: Unwillingness to believe that reporters have the initiative to follow it up.

A: Just as much sense as he does. It's not only that; there's a feeling that--the word naive comes to mind. Most people think of him as terribly shrewd and long headed and Machiavellian and all the rest of it, and he is those things in some ways, but in other ways he has this curious naive blindness to the obvious.

M: How much trouble did the Kennedy loyalists among the press cause Johnson?

A: I would say considerable, just as they're causing Mr. Nixon a lot of trouble now.

M: The stories of the Georgetown dinner circuit and so on that the Johnsons at least believed are not exaggerated? They did exist, and they were calculated to do him damage?

A: There's no doubt at all but that the feelings between Bobby Kennedy and the President were about as bitter as that between any two major political figures in recent political history. And there were people to an extent, and still are, who were wholly committed to the Kennedy cause, and this bitterness certainly fed the fires and anti-Johnson feeling in the country.

M: How soon did this start after Mr. Johnson became president?

A: I think it started on the date that President Kennedy was killed, November 22, 1963. From the very beginning there was a feeling that Johnson was the usurper, that he was a Macbeth, that his claim to the presidency was inherently illegitimate--always that kind of instinctive, sub-level feeling about Johnson among the people who profoundly admired Jack Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy.

M: And there were influential analysts, press people who were in that circle?

A: I think some were affected by that feeling. I wouldn't like to put any names to them, but it was a not unnatural feeling, you know. Jack Kennedy was a man capable of arousing enormous affection. So was Bobby Kennedy. And the feeling that Johnson was a usurper was instinctive and subconscious, I think, rather than conscious.

M: Was the enmity between Johnson and Kennedy traceable to any single cause or event that you can pin down?

A: I think the famous interview was the straw that broke the camel's back.

M: The 1960 convention episode?

A: It was before the 1964 convention when the President asked Bobby to come in and said that he couldn't have him for vice president. And then of course Johnson repeated the story about Bobby Kennedy, claiming that his mouth hung open and he didn't know what to say--you know, making Johnson's special kind of fun of him. That got about, and that finally broke the relationship.

M: And Johnson was the one who spread that?

A: Yes, he was.

M: Personally.

A: He told a lot of reporters the story, I don't know how many, but it was one of his usual little chats with reporters. He drew a picture of Bobby Kennedy as a kind of stunned, semi-idiot. And this of course got right back to Bobby Kennedy, and this was the final break.

M: Did you ever go to Vietnam as a working reporter?

A: Yes, I've been there three times.

M: What is your impression of the government's news operation in Vietnam? Is it responsible for a lot of the difficulties that the issue has aroused?

A: You mean on the spot in Saigon?

M: Yes, the news management in Saigon.

A: I think you had a phenomenon in Vietnam, which is not unfamiliar, which you've had before but never to quite the extent that you had it in Vietnam. And that is the natural conflict between the military and the press. Again, the press wants to find out things that the military doesn't want them finding out. The military are trained to suppose that if General A says that oranges are square, that the press will then write that oranges are square. And it never works that way. The press obstinately writes that all oranges are round, which they are necessarily. I think that the press, under the influence of some very strong characters in the early days, became far too crusading in Vietnam. Certain of

the reporters out there, and I won't go into names but they're pretty obvious, became not reporters but editorialists, crusaders, and purveyors of the line. This naturally infuriated the military and the civilians, the American officials in Vietnam. And the gap grew ever wider. I'm not proud of what my profession has done in Vietnam.

M: You're anticipating my question there. The defenders of the administration policy, including I think your brother, have frequently said that the press in Vietnam spent their time in Saigon bars and didn't get out and seek the news as they might have. Do you think there's some accuracy in that?

A: I would say some but not very much. I don't think you can impute cowardice to the press by any means; what you can impute is prejudice. The press has a tendency to follow the leader. Reporters spend much too much time interviewing each other anyway.

M: And that breeds conformity pretty quick.

A: And in the peculiar atmosphere of Saigon this happened much more rapidly and much more decisively than ever before.

M: Did Vietnam as an issue divide the press corps like it divided much of the country apparently into pro and anti?

A: In Saigon? Yes, I think it did. As I say, I'm not expert on Saigon, I've only been there three times and for the usual two or three weeks at a time. I never covered the war in a general way.

M: Even generally was there a sharp division in the press between those who favored and those who opposed what the administration was doing?

A: Oh, yes, I think so. There were the hawks and doves which we have everywhere else, a phrase which I unfortunately invented. I didn't invent it: I popularized it.

M: How much difficulty was there between working reporters and publishers on the Vietnam issue?

A: Again, this is not a subject on which I can speak with any expertise. I know that there were conflicts on Time magazine, for example, and I think to an extent in Newsweek, but I don't really know about that. I never have had the faintest pressure to write one way or another on this or any other subject for any publisher.

M: There are no ways for people like us to find out all the instances in which you may have had contact with the President, or even before he was president. Are there others that stand out in your mind that I haven't thought to mention or that you think would be worth recording here?

A: No, actually after he became vice president I saw very little of the President. I used to see him much more as majority leader, and I did a long piece about him for the Saturday Evening Post in preparation of which I spent two long weekends at the LBJ Ranch, which was an unforgettable experience which others have had.

M: Was he a different man there than he was here?

A: No, I don't think so really. I think he was the same man, and both the extraordinary qualities of the man and the troubles which he finally invited upon his head were quite evident there: on the one hand, the extraordinary energy and the vast will to succeed, to get things done, on the other hand, the enormous ego which invited puncturing the way a child's balloon invites puncturing if you give the child a pin.

M: You can't help but use it. You don't want to put the press in the position of a child here, but nevertheless--

A: The press, in a sense, was in the position of a child.

I think the story of Lyndon Johnson is a very sad story because in many ways he had great qualities, qualities of genuine greatness. He's a large-minded man, and he's a patriot in a kind of old-fashioned way, but in a way in which I admire. He had really enormous achievements in his first two or three years as president, and then he shot that albatross and then the whole road was down thereafter. He never could bring himself to realize what deep, deep trouble he was in until March 31, 1968. And suddenly the reality was right up in front of him.

M: How much of that, do you think, was attributable to the unanimity of his advisers, and how much to his own obstinacy in trying to plow a furrow, once having started it?

A: Again, I don't think that Johnson receives enough sympathy, particularly from the Kennedy admirers. After all, if you look back to spring and summer of 1965 when he made his key decision, the decision to bomb in the North and to commit American combat troops in the South, who was advising him?

M; The Kennedy people.

A: Without exception, the Kennedy people! Rusk, appointed by John F. Kennedy; Robert McNamara, appointed by John F. Kennedy; McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's chief adviser; and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of whom were appointed by Kennedy. And they all said the same thing: "Mr. President, if you don't want to be the first American president in history to lose a war, you've just got to do these things." And every single damned one of them vastly overestimated the effects of aerial bombardment of the North and vastly underestimated the requirements of an infantry commitment in the South. And all of

them suffered from what, it always seemed to me to be, the most dangerous disease of American thinking, the notion that you can win wars easily and bloodlessly by dropping bombs from the air on the ground below.

M: Surgically, as the Air Force said.

A: Which has been shown to be complete nonsense from World War I through Korea, now through Vietnam, and which a lot of people still believe.

M: When did important people in the government start talking quietly to the press about opposing what was going on? How soon did important objection within the government build up? Can you date that?

A: No, I can't really, because when you say "within the government," you're thinking of people like George Ball, Bob McNamara--

M: Or even at lower levels. John MacNaughton--

A: John MacNaughon had a few doubts. Paul Nitze has his doubts. There were a few. But by and large those who were still in the government hewed close to the line, and that includes McNamara. One could sense by talking to McNamara that he was beginning to have serious doubts by 1966-67, but he never made them explicit or clear. Rusk never did have any doubts. He was convinced, and I believe still is convinced to this day, that we were doing the right and necessary thing in Vietnam.

M: Where I was trying to lead there is if you thought there was a time in which a lot of people objected to what we were doing but they weren't telling the President about it. They were telling newsmen, they were telling each other, but it wasn't really getting through to the top in some ways.

A: That may have been true. George Ball, as you will remember, was the devil's advocate, and he wrote a long memorandum which has turned out to be very close to accurate--I haven't seen it, but I've been told about it--warning the President of the likely consequences of an all-out commitment in Vietnam. But even he would never talk to reporters in this vein. He'd make it clear by implication that he was not too enthusiastic about the war, but he'd never get specific.

I suspect that the President himself realized that Bob McNamara had lost confidence in our ability to win the war and was increasingly dubious about the whole policy, and that this was the essential reason for McNamara's departure. But I don't know; I have no way of knowing. Maybe you ought to interview Mr. Johnson or Mr. McNamara on this subject. I don't know if McNamara ever went to Johnson and said, "Look, Mr. President, I think we're doing the wrong thing, and we've got to reverse this." I don't know but I doubt if he ever did what, in effect, Clifford did do in March 1968:

have a good look at the situation and say, "Look, we've got to just stop and turn around." It would be interesting to know.

M: You've been very patient and helpful. Are there any other points that you think are worth mentioning here? I don't want to be in the position, of cutting you off or limiting you in any way.

A: No, not at all. All I say is that if he hadn't been so damned unlucky, Lyndon Johnson might have been a great president.

M: That's about as good a conclusion as one could [ask for].

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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