

INTERVIEW II

DATE: October 31, 1974
INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT G. BAKER
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: Mr. Baker's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

G: I'd like to start out with several legislative matters that I thought we might discuss, and if you can clue us in on the secrets of any important bills. Any that you remember particularly, how they were done. So much of that is just not in the record, and unless we get it from people like you, who were part of it, we just don't know. I don't believe we talked about Tidelands legislation at all. Do you have any specific memories about the division there in the Senate, and the implications of this?

B: Well, there's no doubt that the then-Senator Johnson was very strongly in favor of the states having the control to the maximum extent. At that time, we were talking about three miles beyond their border for Tidelands. Now we're talking about two hundred miles, and it looks very much like this is what the world's going to come to, and the reason being that the Japanese and Russians have become so efficient at fishing off our three-mile coastline that they've sort of made lobsters, which are a great American delicacy, almost extinct. If they continue to fish the way they've been doing for the past ten years for the next ten years, such things as lobster will no longer exist. They just recently held a conference, I believe it was in Caracas, Venezuela, of the two hundred nations in the world who bound the sea. We're going to come to it. Tidelands at that time was just, for those people who didn't

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understand the issue, just the big fat oil boys versus the poor people. There's a hell of a lot more involved than that, and you can see the wisdom of Lyndon Johnson's position. Those people who represented states who lived on the water wanted to protect their states' rights. I think that history is going to prove that we'd have been a hell of a lot smarter to have approved something like a hundred miles instead of three miles.

G: Did you work on that Tidelands legislation?

B: Sure I did. All I did really though--it had been reported by the, I think it was, Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, and it carried overwhelmingly. I believe Senator Holland from Florida was one of the main proponents, because Florida has such a vast coastline. Any idiot that represents a state that has a coastline would have been out of his mind not to try to protect his state's interests to the maximum extent. To the Russians' credit and to the credit of the other fishing countries of the world, they have just absolutely taken over all of our fish! I mean, we've got a monumental protein crisis in the world, and if you're going to go ahead and permit a few big, massive countries to come in and take over all the fish and the lobster and what else, you're going to find yourself at the end of a fifty-year cycle with a dead sea. That's precisely where we are headed. I wholeheartedly agree with his position on Tidelands.

Senator Russell Long from Louisiana made some brilliant speeches. You ought to go back and read his speeches about what would happen, and everything they predicted has happened. The problem of most liberals in America is that they don't pay any attention to history. They never

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thought that Russians would become sophisticated; their boats will stay out as long as twelve months at sea, because they feed their people this fish--fantastic protein. We'd all live longer if we ate fish. This is one of the things that was predicted that would happen that has happened.

G: What about the Alaska and Hawaii statehood? Can you recount how this bill was passed, the strategy?

B: There was much more sentiment in the Congress for Alaskan statehood than for Hawaiian statehood. There was a man who was dying with cancer, and I hope he lives long enough to hear this interview, and his name was John Burns, who presently is governor of Hawaii, but his term will expire January 3, 1975. He has terminal cancer. Speaker Rayburn was a fantastic person when it came to determining the character of people, and he told Lyndon, he said, "Get that John Burns out of my office. You can't say no to him." Because John Burns had formerly been the chief of detectives in Hawaii, and he was the delegate from Hawaii, a very distinguished, silver-haired, handsome, articulate man, who always gave more than he received. He kept wanting to get Hawaiian statehood passed, and the House passed both Alaskan and Hawaiian statehood.

Once we got to the Senate, we had real problems. I would say of all the confrontations I've ever had in my life, the most courageous confrontation I ever had was when I told delegate John A. Burns, who was seated across my office while Lyndon Johnson was down at the Ranch in Texas, that I couldn't pass his bill. I said, "If you believe in Lyndon Johnson and if you believe in me, I can pass it in six months, but we've got to split these two bills together"--split the two of them instead of

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trying to pass them side by side. I said, "There's one man you have got to go see." Because, contrary to what most people understand, it was felt that four votes, two from Alaska and two from Hawaii, would be four votes for civil rights and for cloture. So I told Governor Burns, I said, "The one thing you've got to do is go over and see Senator Russell and tell him if you are elected to the Senate, as long as you're here"--and it was absolutely certain that he would be elected--"that you will never vote for cloture." Now, Hawaii probably has more minority people than anybody I think, 40 per cent of the population Japanese, 20 per cent or more Filipino, a big Chinese population, and they have proven to everybody in the world that you can mix people together and live together. But he made that commitment. It was because of this man's courage in knowing that when he looked at the big picture, the most important thing in his whole life was to make Hawaii a state. He knew that I had the authority to represent Lyndon Johnson, which I did, and Lyndon Johnson was for it. We passed both of them. There is nothing, if Lyndon Johnson should be alive today, that would please him more than to be able to state over this recorder that he played a fantastic role in the passage of Alaskan and Hawaiian statehood.

G: What did he do as distinguished from what you did?

B: You've got to remember that I could do no more than he would permit me, and he was for it. A lot of newspapers would call me "Little Lyndon" or his alter ego, whatnot, but I never did anything unless I knew that he would approve. He is entitled to the credit; wasn't me because had he been opposed to it, there was nothing I could have done. I think you've got to give the credit to the man. If people came to me and asked me

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about what really great things did Lyndon Johnson do for America, I would have to say that admission of Alaska and Hawaii as states is, by far, the biggest thing that he did for this country.

G: You mentioned, before we started the tape, about attaching this to an aid bill. Can you tell us your thinking here, your strategy?

B: I just received a letter from someone who is doing a research paper because Governor Burns is terribly ill, about why would you attach the East-West Center to the Mutual Aid bill, and the reason was, he was chairman of the subcommittee, and he could control it. The bureaucrats were unalterably opposed to it. Eisenhower was opposed to it. It was just because of sheer personal power that we were able to start it.

Now, our original idea was to build a center on top of Diamond Head Mountain, which is probably one of the most scenic views in the world when you come into Hawaii, was to build a skyscraper that would be able to house 100,000 students from all over the Orient, whereby they could come learn to be a dentist or a doctor or a lawyer, an agricultural expert, whatnot, and go back home. This would be the best money we could ever spend if we were going to win the battle for men's minds. Tragically, by the time we got through with the bureaucrats, it never worked out this way. We wound up with a typical educational institution. I don't think it's been a big success. Use the Philippines [for an example]. If you just take one man that was a graduate of the East-West Center in Honolulu who could meet there and mix with his fellow brothers and go home and become a teacher and a practitioner, what the results would be for democracy and free enterprise are

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unequaled. Johnson saw this, and this is the reason that he went for this program. We used to talk about it about six o'clock every morning.

G: What about the space program? Can you recall the genesis of the--?

B: I think once the Russians had proven to the world that they had been able to send a man into space, it shocked the living hell out of us. We look back now today, I don't know whether it's worth the price. As far as I'm concerned, I'd much rather have spent the money on tripling the East-West Center than sending somebody into space, but you didn't know. It was because of Johnson's leadership, and his colleagues who served on the Preparedness Committee with him were an absolutely outstanding group of senators. It was because of their prestige and their power and their impression with the news media that we were able to start a space program. Jack Kennedy never did understand what space was all about; I don't think he understood it when he died. But he relied on Lyndon Johnson because he knew he was a patriot, and this is one of the reasons that they made such a great team.

G: Can you recall any particular phase of the legislation on space where Senator Kennedy or, later, President Kennedy relied on LBJ's--?

B: Well, I think one of the first things that President Kennedy did was to select Lyndon Johnson to be in charge of the entire space program once he became president. He made a pledge to the American people that he was going to make the vice presidency into a viable operation. And I think of all the things and all the appointments that he made that really meant something had to do with Lyndon Johnson being selected to be the man to chart the course for space.

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G: One of the Johnson innovations in the Senate was the Johnson Rule, so called, a policy of making sure that freshman senators got at least one good committee assignment. Do you recall the implementation of that originally?

B: Sure I do. We had a horrible situation because, under the ordinary seniority rule, anybody that was a senior senator would have first call on any committee vacancy. I'm going to use John Kennedy and Scoop Jackson and Mike Mansfield as illustrations of my point. John Kennedy wanted to be on the Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Kefauver had the seniority, and by all traditions and rights, he should have been selected, but the momentum, the publicity and whatnot that happened to Senator Kennedy by being placed on the Foreign Relations Committee was of tremendous help to him. Now, he was a sorry member of the Foreign Relations Committee, never attended the committee meetings. Senator Fulbright used to complain to me, he said, "What the hell did you put this guy on here for? He never comes to the committee." He had only one thought in his whole mind, and that was to become president. I think he was a big mistake. I think if you want to be on a committee, you've got to serve, you've got to do your homework, which he didn't do.

Senator Jackson wanted to be on the Atomic Energy Committee. He'd served on the House committee. So we had a vacancy, and many senior senators were bypassed to place him on there. To Senator Jackson's credit, he always attended and probably is one of the most knowledgeable men in the country. I don't think he's going to be the Democratic presidential nominee, but when it comes down to hard work and

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dependability I don't know of anybody that works harder, nor was more dependable, than Senator Jackson.

The other one was Mike Mansfield, who had been a history professor, and he wanted to be on the Foreign Relations Committee. So, his freshman year when he came over, I suppose for the first time in the history of the Senate, a freshman was placed on the Foreign Relations Committee and he and Senator Fulbright developed a great rapport and they not only had it then; they still have it now.

G: Well, do you recall when the idea first came to LBJ, or did he have it by the time he was in the Senate?

B: That's a very difficult question because it was absolutely illogical to take a bunch of old men, which we had an abundance of, and give them all the plums in the Senate. As we originally discussed, I came to the Senate, started to work in January of 1943, and I had seen these old men with their greed, not wanting to share their committee assignments and so forth. I had discussions with him, but I can't claim credit for it. It took Lyndon Johnson's persuasiveness with the Democratic Conference to say: number one, every senator shall be entitled to the committee of his choice based on their seniority. After he's had one committee--you know you were entitled to two and maybe some minor committees--but after that, then the Steering Committee, which was a committee on committees, would have the right to select junior members, whereby they could be given the right to show their potentiality.

G: Was part of your job to find out what the preferences of the senators were and try to get them on the committees that they wanted?

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B: Oh, yes, I had a great rapport with 90 per cent of the Democratic membership. Some people didn't like me, but if we had 60 Democratic senators, I would say 50 of them would tell me what they wanted, and they knew of my close relationship with Lyndon Johnson and that I would relay that message. Then you have to weigh the geographical problems, the educational background and so forth and what was really best for the Democratic Party at the time. I probably had more information from more senators than anybody in the history of the Senate, because I talked to them every day.

G: We were talking about this Johnson Rule and everything; was this the reason for replacing, say, Estes Kefauver with Senator Kennedy on the Foreign Relations Committee or was part of it to get Senator Kefauver off the committee?

B: Well, one, Senator Kefauver was not on the committee. Number two, he had the seniority. Number three, Senator Kefauver had ruffled the feathers of former President Truman. Four, he was sort of a maverick, but, five, he was a real decent guy. And, six, I want to tell you, if I had my life to live over again, the one regret of my whole life was that we didn't put Senator Kefauver on the Foreign Relations Committee, because Senator Kennedy never paid any attention to his duties there, and Arthur Schlesinger and Mike Feldman and all these people that write about what a great job he did are liars. Kefauver had a tremendous intellectual capacity. He was, I think, a graduate of Yale, and he was a hard-working fellow, but the club was against him and that was the only reason. And if I had my life to live over again, I would never in my life have recommended that he be precluded from going to the Foreign

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Relations Committee, which he had the seniority for. He had the talent; he had the ability, he had the knowledge. He had been very frequently a member of the interparliamentary union, and it was a miscarriage of justice on the part of Lyndon Johnson and Bobby Baker.

G: Well, what about Senator Kefauver as a vice presidential candidate, as opposed to Senator Kennedy? Why was Senator Kennedy instead of, say, a southern conservative promoted for the vice presidency?

B: Once again, because Kefauver was not a part of the establishment. He was entitled to it. The only thing that really rankled a lot of professional Democrats--I was the executive director of the Democratic Platform Committee that year--was the fact that Walter Reuther controlled the convention. And he made a deal with Adlai Stevenson, who people wouldn't think would make a deal but he did, and he made a deal to deliver Michigan, New Jersey, California, and New York to Stevenson if Stevenson would throw the convention open, and that's the way Kefauver got the nomination. Kefauver was not popular with professional politicians.

G: But there again, did they prefer Senator Kennedy over another alternative? Why support Senator Kennedy?

B: Because he was very attractive; he had a lot of charisma, because his father's conservative background would have attracted a lot of conservatives, and anybody that knew anything about politics knew that Eisenhower was going to win anyway. So the best break Jack Kennedy ever had in his life was that he lost that thing, but it projected him. There are a lot of mysteries in life, and I think that Mrs. Kennedy blames her husband's death on the fact that Lyndon Johnson prevailed on Jack Kennedy to go to

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Dallas to help heal the wounds of the Democratic Party. Nobody could predict with accuracy whether that is true or not true, but from the day that he was killed to today, there has been nothing but hate, which is tragic. The historians maybe someday, somehow, will be able to find out why she felt this way. It was a big rivalry between Lyndon Johnson and Ralph Yarborough and great difference of opinion as to whether the President should go to this place or that place. You take a nut that shot the President. They are available. Any time you are a public figure, you are subject to being shot. I think it is cruel, inhuman, unkind, and I think Jackie Kennedy has been extremely inhumane in the way she has treated Lady Bird and the Johnsons because of the fact that her husband was there. Nobody put a pistol to his head and told him he had to go. He went there because he wanted to raise money and because he wanted to win the election.

G: Another issue in the Senate that I thought was relevant concerned confirmations, and I think there was a big controversy over the renomination of Mr. Strauss to the AEC.

B: Well, you're talking to the man that probably had more influence than anybody in the Senate in defeating Secretary Strauss. He had been nominated by President Eisenhower to be secretary of Commerce, and Lyndon Johnson had been under attack by Paul Butler and the very liberal wing of the Democratic Party for not being partisan enough, being too pro-Eisenhower. So I figured that this was one way for him to show his power and to gather the votes to defeat Louis Strauss. Any president really ought to have--unless the man is a crook--the power to select his own cabinet. I regret it, I really do. I think if I had my life to

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live over again, I would have never made that recommendation, but Drew Pearson and the real radical, extreme liberals in the Democratic Party were opposed to his nomination. But Eisenhower had been elected by the American people, and he was entitled to select his own cabinet. I don't care who the president is, if a man is honest and he presents the political philosophy of the president, he should be confirmed. It was a big mistake, and I had more to do with talking Johnson into voting against him than anybody, and he didn't want to.

G: Is that right?

B: Yes, so I have to take the responsibility.

G: Well, what about the conservatives? Did they generally vote against it too?

B: Any time Johnson took a position, being the leader and being so well respected, but with the Russell bloc, which were the conservatives, he carried tremendous weight, unbelievable weight. There is no majority leader in the history of the Senate that ever had the weight that he had. This is the reason, in my opinion, that we were able to defeat Secretary-designate Strauss.

G: What about the Albert Beeson confirmation or rejection thereof with the National Labor Relations Board? Do you remember that? It looked like almost unanimous Democratic voting.

B: I think this came from George Meany. I think AFL-CIO felt that he was unalterably opposed to anything labor wanted. He had a track and it was an approvable [?] record. I would say the reason that Beeson was not confirmed was because of his own past history.

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G: Let's talk about election politics a minute, particularly the 1960 campaign. You were involved in that very heavily, I understand, and you were one of the witnesses to many of the decisions. I had heard that H. L. Hunt, for example, wrote a letter urging LBJ to go on the ticket as vice president and that you responded to that letter to one of Hunt's representatives.

B: I was delegated to go meet with Mr. Hunt. If I wrote a letter to Mr. Hunt, I am not aware of it.

G: No, he wrote the letter to Johnson.

B: Okay. But whatever happened, I was delegated to go to the Biltmore Hotel to meet with Mr. Hunt and to tell him what our possibilities were, which depended totally on whether Governor David Lawrence of Pennsylvania-- who was really petrified with a Catholic being the Democratic nominee-- whether he could support Lyndon Johnson or not. The ultimate result was he could not control his delegation. He did not go for Johnson, and we lost. But I was absolutely amazed at how liberal Mr. Hunt was in his desire to get Johnson on the ticket. I don't know what their relationship was in the latter years of their life, but I met with him for over an hour and told him the practicalities of the situation.

G: What did you say to him?

B: I just said the only chance in hell that Lyndon Johnson had of being the Democratic nominee depends on David Lawrence. My information is not good, because he can't control his own delegation, because Bill Green, who is deceased now, controlled Philadelphia. Most of the delegates from Pennsylvania were Catholic or black, so Kennedy was tremendously popular with them. We talked about the economic situation and so forth.

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It was my first and last meeting with him in my life. He was a very knowledgeable, confident, genteel man.

G: I was under the impression that after Kennedy had gotten the nomination, Hunt through you, or sending a man to you, tried to persuade you to persuade LBJ, to have LBJ accept the vice-presidential nomination and that you said something to the effect that we won't trade our vote for a gavel.

B: That's not true, because the first that I knew that Kennedy was considering Lyndon Johnson to be his vice-presidential nominee was about six-thirty in the morning. I believe Kennedy was nominated on a Wednesday, so this would have been a Thursday morning. We had entertained all the people who had been loyal to us, and I didn't get to bed until about five or five-thirty, so I had no communication with Mr. Hunt.

G: I presumed that you learned by phone at six-thirty in the morning; is that right, that Kennedy was considering. . . ?

B: Well, Bill Moyers was a telephone boy. He came down and knocked on the door and told me that--we always called Lyndon Johnson "the Leader." He said, "The Leader would like to see you." I said, "Go tell the Leader we got the hell beaten out of us and to forget about it." About five minutes later he came back and he said, "It's a command performance. The Leader says you must come." So I put on a sports shirt and a pair of slacks, unshaven, and went down to his room, whereby he and Lady Bird--there was only three people in the room--and he told me that Jack Kennedy called and he wanted to know what I thought he wanted. I told him in no uncertain terms that he was going to offer him the vice presidency and the reason being that no Catholic had ever been nominated

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or elected president, and that with the divisions in the party, that Richard Nixon was absolutely a cinch to be elected and that unless he would consent to go on the ticket, then the ball game was over. That's how that happened.

The next visitor in the room was former Governor of Texas, John Connally, who came in about ten minutes before the presidential nominee, John Kennedy, came in. When I told him that my advice to Johnson was that the American people dislike haters and they dislike bitter people and that whether he went on the ticket or not, it was impossible to tell whether he could win. But, I said, it is no disgrace to be vice president. And number two, you are one heartbeat away from the presidency. When I saw him in October of 1972 when he knew he was dying, I said, "Leader, I have often thought if that was not by far the worst mistake of judgment I ever had, urging you to run." Lady Bird spoke up with great vigor that there was nothing that ever happened to this man that made him happier than being president, and she enjoyed being first lady.

G: Did President Johnson agree with that assessment?

B: If he disagreed, he sure didn't make any representation.

G: Well, Mr. Baker, I understand that John Connally was very much against it and that even Mrs. Johnson at the time was against going on the ticket.

B: Well, I've read that in the newspapers, but I want to tell you this: If they were opposed to it, they expressed their opinion in private. They did not express it in front of me, and I was almost like a son, and I just doubt very seriously that this ever happened because I know this, I know John Connally hated Bobby Kennedy. I shouldn't say hate, he

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differed. But I think he had great respect for John Kennedy, and John Kennedy named him secretary of the Navy, and they were shot together. I think these newspaper stories about this stuff are just absolute crap.

G: It has been suggested as the reason that Governor Connally went back to Texas and didn't actively participate in the campaign until the last week or so.

B: Well, knowing John like I do, it was, and knowing Texas politics, he won the election the last ten days anyway. So why get out and waste your time and effort?

G: Well, what about Senator Kerr? I have heard that Senator Kerr was very adamant against it and that he was even mad at you for supporting the other position.

B: There is absolutely no doubt about that. I was closer to Senator Kerr than I was to Senator Johnson. When he had read the headlines of the morning *Los Angeles Times* extra edition, that Kennedy had offered the vice presidency to Johnson, when Kerr came into the two-bedroom suite which was--Bill Moyers was out in the reception room answering the telephone, so it was Lady Bird, Lyndon and myself and possibly John Connally. When he came in, he took me in the bathroom, and he slapped the hell out of me, the hardest I have ever been hit by any human being. And he said, "I never thought you would be a traitor to me." When I explained to him that no Catholic had ever been elected; and, two, Johnson had had a serious heart condition; three, that he was one heartbeat away from the presidency; four, that people in general, Democrats and Republicans, dislike a bitter loser and that if Kennedy offered the vice presidency, which at that time had not been offered,

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that he had to take it. We had to do the best we could. To make a long story short, Kennedy and Kerr became two of the best friends that ever lived and worked together closely; they passed the 7 per cent investment credit, all the money for the space program came through Kerr, and they just could not have had a finer relationship. But Kerr, at that particular time, because of his Oklahoma background, was very anti-Catholic. You can't get away from it; he just didn't like Catholics.

G: What happened when Senator Jack Kennedy came in at that meeting? You were there, I think.

B: No, I was in Lady Bird's room when he came in. He came in and met for about ten minutes with Lyndon Johnson, and I told Lyndon Johnson to make the same speech to Kennedy that Speaker Rayburn had made to Adlai Stevenson in 1956. At the Stock Yard Inn after Governor Stevenson had received the Democratic nomination, he called in all the party elders to seek their advice about who ought to be vice president. Now, some of us knew he had made a deal. Well, he did, but he lied, and I don't have the respect for Governor Stevenson. I think Governor Stevenson was a lying politician. But old man Rayburn, being the elder statesman that he was, the party elder, he said, "Governor, there are a few criteria that you must conform to and the first thing is, I've been in Washington since Woodrow Wilson and every president has disliked his vice president. So the first thing you want to do is, whoever you wanted to be vice president ought to be a man that you would like to be the trustee for your children in case you should die. Number one, he ought to be the man that if you should die would be the best man for your country, that's one. Two, he ought to be a man of status and magnitude in your

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own personal mind that would be trustee for your children. Three, you tell this group here in this room who you would like to have that position, and four, I want to tell you I speak for everybody here, he will be selected by the convention." Stevenson took all that advice and thanked him very much and went right out there, and that's when we had the big Kefauver/Kennedy fight.

G: Did he say Kefauver to the . . . ?

B: No, let's say he brought in sixty people like governors, you know, people that control delegations, to seek their advice. Old man Rayburn just took over the whole thing, and he said the first criteria is what is best for your country. Two, I'm tired of seeing a president and a vice president not agreeing with each other, backbiting and so forth, and he went down chronologically from Wilson to Coolidge to Harding to Hoover to Roosevelt to Truman; I don't guess Truman had a vice president, but he had problems with Henry Wallace in the cabinet, whom he finally fired. But he knew his history and he was right. It was the best advice that was ever given; it was absolutely a tragedy that what he said was not taped. But I had heard Johnson make that speech sixty times, and I said, "Leader, if John Kennedy after listening to that speech says he wants you to run, you don't have any choice; you have got to say yes." But Johnson once again was equivocator. He said that he had to talk to the Speaker and he had to talk to this person, because he wanted to clear with John Connally and with Speaker Rayburn and Lady Bird.

G: Did Johnson ever give the speech to Kennedy?

B: Yes.

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G: Do you know when he did it?

B: About 7:15 in the morning. . . whatever time the papers say that he gave it to him.

G: Now, Kennedy left after this, and LBJ was going to wait and talk to Speaker Rayburn, is this right?

B: Yes, the Speaker had been up quite late and it was very early in the morning. Some time between seven and ten o'clock in the morning, he went to see Speaker Rayburn, just Johnson and the Speaker. What they said, I don't know.

G: I think this took place in the back bedroom too, didn't it?

B: No, I think it was in Speaker Rayburn's suite, because Lyndon Johnson would never ask the Speaker to come to his room; he had good manners. But getting to Bobby Kennedy, what did happen around one o'clock was Bobby came in and wanted to know if Johnson would be the chairman of the Democratic National Committee instead of vice president. And old man Rayburn said, "Shit." He had nothing but contempt for Bobby and not very much respect for Jack, because Jack had not been a very good member of the House. He was always sick or absent; he was a playboy. If he attended Congress two days a week, he was lucky. You can go back and check the records, and you'll see. So Mr. Rayburn did not have a lot of respect for Jack Kennedy. I think that once he became president, he did.

G: In that room were Robert Kennedy and Speaker Rayburn and I think John Connally and Lyndon Johnson. . . is that right? Were those the people in the room when Bobby Kennedy suggested the chairmanship of the DNC?

B: I think that's correct.

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G: You were not in there.

B: That's correct.

G: Was there any move by the Kennedy people during this time to try to get LBJ on the ticket by indicating that they might oppose him for majority leader if he didn't go on the ticket?

B: No. No, I think there were a lot of newspaper reports that if Johnson went on the ticket, that it would mean absolute disaster for Johnson, Kennedy, and the Democratic platform, which was much more liberal than Johnson was. Joe Rauh, who was a Democratic committeeman here from the District of Columbia, and Governor Williams from Michigan all stated almost to the point that they couldn't vote for the ticket if Johnson was on it. So there was tremendous pressure on Johnson to not accept the invitation of John Kennedy to be the vice president, but he withstood that and took it. He took my advice and went down through the South on that train trip. . . .

G: Who thought of that?

B: I did.

G: You did. Well, good. We've been trying to pin that down. Can you tell me how it came about?

B: Well, I tell you what. I was Baptist, married to a Catholic, and I knew that the southern courthouse politicians control the electorate. Basically in the general election, they do not vote very heavily. So with Mrs. Johnson's good manners, and she was a fantastic success, and Johnson was unusually good. And by just taking the courthouse politicians and the senators and the governors and those people, and the congressman who would join us, going through each car, shaking hands, we

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won the election. Had it not been for that southern trip on that train, Jack Kennedy would never have been president, and that was my idea.

G: Can you recall when you first presented the idea?

B: He thought I was out of my mind. He just said, "You're absolutely nuts."

G: Why?

B: A fellow that had worked for Pat Brown, that worked for a savings and loan fellow--I wish I could recall his name, but he was a lovely fellow--he was the one that planted the seed with me, and they went from San Diego to San Francisco on a train, and he said it was just amazing what you could with the local politicians. You give them a chance; you go out and introduce them and say here is Senator John Jones and he's supporting the ticket and I want to thank him for being here. He said this is the way you run it. He said you just do a soap-box opera. When I found out. . .I think the damned trip cost a half million dollars. When we went through Virginia--I never will forget--we had nothing but paid political hacks and government workers at Alexandria, which was our first stop. And there couldn't have been two hundred of those. But when we got to Culpeper, Virginia, I never will forget what Lyndon Johnson yelled out, he said, "What has Richard Nixon ever done for Culpeper, Virginia!" The press picked it up. Harry Byrd was for Nixon. He liked Lyndon Johnson, and we lost Virginia. But I had been in business with Governor Hodges in the Howard Johnson Motel in Charlotte, so I called the Governor and said, "Why don't you close all the schools in the state? Have every band in to meet us when we get to Reedsville." The media are very impressed when they see a lot of people. When we had

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every high school band in the whole state of North Carolina, in Reedsville, North Carolina, which is just across from Danville, Virginia. Danville was just cold; if we had fifty people out, I would have been surprised. From that moment on the momentum caught on, everything was dynamic, unbelievable. . .everybody. . .we are going to win, and this is the way we won the election.

G: That really was an epic trip. I know that Senator Johnson had used many forms of transportation, helicopter, airline, one thing and another; did he consider this sort of anachronistic to go back to the old train?

B: He had read about the success of Truman in 1948 and I'm going to be honest, it was not a hard sell. When I told him what it was going to cost and the reason that I thought we had to go through the "Bible Belt" and that we had to have Lady Bird and that we had to have the daughters with us, Lynda and Luci, and go and just ooze southern charm. And we did it; I want to tell you, we oozed it. Being a southerner myself, I knew many of the people, and it won the election. Hell, had we not made that southern trip, we would have lost the election.

G: Who planned the route, do you know?

B: I did.

G: Did you?

B: Yes, sir. You know, you are sort of stuck with. . .basically going south, you have two routes--you can go through the Piedmont area where the people are, where the rednecks are, or you can go down through the swamp land to Florida, and you don't see anybody. Having been a kid and traveled, and so forth, I knew where to go. To win an election, you have to go where the people are. I read about Ramsey Clark and Jake

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Javits. If Ramsey Clark wins the election, it's going to be because of the big vote in New York. I'll bet you ten to one he doesn't win, but it is phenomenal that he is running the race that he is, and he is concentrating on where the votes are.

G: What about the train? Where did you get the railroad car on the train?

B: We contracted with Southern Railroad.

G: Did you make those arrangements?

B: Oh, sure. Sure.

G: Was it specially designed?

B: No, all you have to do is comply with the union rules as to how far they can go. We figured out how many people would be on the train, and Johnson was so meticulous and such a nit-picker about how many people were going to be on it. I'll never forget until the day I die a guy that had given more cash money to Kennedy, and I knew about and I wouldn't tell Johnson, but the guy who gave more money than anybody was a guy named Bart Lytton, and he gave over \$200,000. He was a savings and loan executive, and his assistant was the man who planted the thought in my mind about the train. He said, "Bobby, you've got to help me; my boss wants to go on the train." His boss was a Hollywood type, egomaniac, had been blacklisted for being a communist writer back when everybody in the thirties was communist crazy. So I got him on the train, and when we got to Greenville, South Carolina, Drew Pearson called up and said that he was going to break a story that we had a communist on the train. So, I had to kick him off the train in Greenville, South Carolina.

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G: I had heard that LBJ called on this too, and telephoned and said to get him off; is this. . . ?

B: No, Drew Pearson was the one that called it.

G: Well, who was the man?

B: Bart Lytton, L-Y-T-T-O-N.

G: Was this the case where the guy wanted to ride all the way. . . ?

B: Sure, he was giving out press releases every time we had a stop of the train. We stopped in Concord, North Carolina, and he gave a press release, because it was typical Hollywood mentality. Had he just kept his mouth shut, I would have never had any trouble. And I had to tell Johnson, this guy gave Kennedy \$200,000 in cash.

G: Did Johnson say give it back or anything?

B: No, he just said get him the hell off of here. I said well, he didn't give the money to me. We haven't done anything wrong.

G: There was another story that Mr. Blundell told me involving someone else that had given \$50,000, or was going to, in cash, and LBJ didn't want him on the train. And he told you or told Blundell or somebody to get him off and give him his money back. Do you remember that at all, or maybe it is the same story and just a different version?

B: I think it is the same story, but a different version, but Johnson was petrified of campaign contributions. Kennedy wasn't, to Kennedy's credit. Now I had one man offer a half million dollars in cash, to be ambassador, and Kennedy turned him down. He went to Princeton with it, and he was the heir of the W. and J. Sloan Furniture Company, but he wanted to be ambassador to one of five countries: England, France, Spain, Italy or Germany.

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Mrs. Kennedy was very much pregnant, and I flew all the way to New York to meet him at--

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G: Well, now, we are on the whistle stop of the tour through the South. Can you remember any specific episodes that were memorable. . .involved Johnson stories or incidents in which you have crises or things like that?

B: He had had a monumental heart attack, and I had him booked for a minimum of seventeen speeches per day, which is too many. We had Mitch Miller's "The Yellow Rose of Texas." We had a fantastic speaker system set up on the train that as we would come into the station you could hear "The Yellow Rose of Texas," and as we would leave you could hear it. It was about a forty-minute production per stop by the time you introduced the locals and had your picture made with Lady Bird, and Luci and Lynda and Lyndon and the local politicians, the senator, the congressman and whatnot, the governor. The least time I could get away with was forty minutes. I was the only guy who could say move or stop as far as the train was concerned. He had a tremendous sensitivity to the warmth of the crowd or the hostility of the crowd. If he got a warm crowd, you couldn't stop him, so he screwed up my schedule. When we had to get off the train in Greenville, South Carolina and we had been promised by the editor of the only paper in South Carolina that if we would come to Anderson, South Carolina, which is forty or fifty miles from Greenville, that he would have 150,000 people there to meet us, and we got there and if there was 25,000 people I would be surprised. He was furious. He was literally furious, so he made a dull speech. [If] he had a good

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crowd, he could just charm anybody in the world, but if it was a small crowd or if somebody had lied to him, then he could be the dumbest speaker in the world.

Then we had to take a helicopter from Anderson, South Carolina to Rocky Bottom, South Carolina where they were having a party really in my honor, but he was the guest speaker, but I was to introduce him. We had the schedule arranged where he could take a rest for a couple of hours. We used a Southern Bell telephone lineman's helicopter. It was a two-seater. As big as he is and at that time I was a little smaller, but the three of us could fit in there. Because of my early youth, I remember the way the road went and how to get out there, but the helicopter pilot didn't know and the mountains were getting higher and higher, and Johnson said, "Stop this damn thing." We stopped out in the middle of a field just before we came to a mountain, and a guy came out of a little old country store and said, "Get the hell out of here. You can't park here." It had belonged to the Baptist Church. It was called a Royal Ambassador's Club or something like that--it was a summer camp, and this was in the fall, so it was closed. I'm telling you, I never picked so many of those little cockleburs that can get on your pants. So you can imagine, here I am with the vice presidential nominee and myself, I'm hitchhiking to go over to my classmate who is now the lieutenant governor of South Carolina, Earl Morris, Jr., and his family had a lovely home there in the mountains and that was where Johnson was going to take his rest. When we got over there the press was terribly fascinated. It was like Mary McGrory who writes for the *Washington Star*. She just said, "Rocky Bottom, South Carolina." She could not get

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over this place and it was nothing but a bunch of. . .they only have twenty voters in the whole area. And by the way, we lost the area, but we had at least a thousand people for dinner, and I introduced Johnson as being the best friend I had ever had. He just said, "By God, I am not riding that helicopter back out of these mountains." So we had a highway patrolman drive us. . .he had the red light going and the siren going, going ninety miles an hour around those mountain roads. Johnson--you know, living in Texas there are very few mountains--he just said, "If the Lord lets me out of here, I never will get back in there. We got on the train in Easley, South Carolina where I was born, which was seven miles from my home town of Pickens, so we were running an hour and a half late, and you know what that does to your crowd.

Our next stop was Clemson College, which was controlled by a late friend of mine named Charlie Daniel, who had built a lot of buildings over there and so forth. But they were very strong Goldwater people. They booed and hissed, and Johnson sulked, and he was angry. We got him out of there, and their school song is "Hold that Tiger," and every time he would get ready to say something, they would start playing "Hold that Tiger." He really was livid. Then we went on about twenty miles further to a little town called Seneca, South Carolina, which is a Cherokee Indian name. After we had stopped the music, "The Yellow Rose of Texas," and gone through the introductions and so forth, this little gray-haired lady came up to me and grabbed me and kissed me. She was my cousin, and I hadn't seen her in twenty years. And southerners have a tendency to give a double name to people, like her name was originally Lillie Belle Bridges. She had married the local minister's son, who had

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become a pharmacist, and they own a pharmacy. They owned one and they still do. She goes by the name "Lil" now. She was so thrilled to see that her cousin was in a position of prominence, and she was just hugging me, but she was a little loud and I guess her voice carried. When Johnson was about five minutes through his speech, he just stopped and said, "Mr. Baker, when you and whoever you're talking to get through talking, I'll finish my speech. I cannot compete with the two of you." It was the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to me in my whole life.

After we left there we went on to Atlanta, I think we stopped in Toccoa, Georgia for five minutes, a very short stop, because we had been told by Senator Russell and Senator Talmadge that you are going to win the election if you don't say anything, but you are liable to blow it because somebody will say something wrong. Betty Talmadge loved Lady Bird and she loved Lyndon. And when we got there, nobody was there to introduce Lyndon and we got in the middle of the train tracks with no crowd or anything, but somehow there must have been two hundred people out in the middle of the train tracks because they had been reading about the great response we had had. I had to introduce Lyndon because my mother and father were originally from Georgia, and I just said that it was "a thrill and an honor for the son of parents who are native Georgians to introduce to you the next vice president of the United States." When Walter Cronkite was doing an hour story about me and my life and how he didn't like me, they played this and they came over very good, but I can never forget that trip to Seneca, South Carolina.

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Then when we got to New Orleans, he was so tired, he had been six days, and he didn't like the Mayor, deLesseps Morrison, who had been an original Kennedy backer, and he [Johnson] was really rude. I was so angry with him, because Senator Long and the whole, entire Louisiana congressional delegation, with the exception of the Mayor, was for Johnson. Hale Boggs--Lindy Boggs was just the sweetest lady you ever met in your life, and she had been on the trip with us. But the Mayor was very gracious. I didn't know him well; he was killed in a plane crash in Mexico. But he could not have been more gracious, and I like people with good manners. Then, I had committed \$25,000 for the pre-Mardis Gras in the history of New Orleans [?], and we had close to 200,000 people, and it was an absolute sensation. This was the grand finale. The press went absolutely ape; they just couldn't believe that this many people would show up. The *New York Times* on Saturday morning got pictures--the whole front page was just incredible--that Kennedy had won the election because of Johnson's trip.

I had a friend of mine named Nick Popage [?] that had a restaurant called the Vieux Carré. I called him and I said, "Nick, we are broke. We don't have any money, and I've got seventy guests for dinner." He [said], "Give me thirty minutes and I'll close the restaurant." And I took him over there. The only real mental argument I ever had with Lyndon Johnson I had over his bad manners that night. I just said, "I hope you get elected. I don't want to ever see you again. I've never seen a ruder man nor a more ungracious man in my life that you were tonight." It was about five days before we ever spoke again, but he came to my house, which was about five minutes from his house. He

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knocked on my door, and he said he was wrong and he apologized and he said "I need you and I need your brain," and we got back together.

G: What did he do that was rude? Did he say something to him?

B: Well, he would shake hands like a dead fish. He made the worst speech. He read his speech. Senator Long is presently the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and he has married a pretty little girl named Carolyn Bason Long now. She came here about eighteen as a secretary to the late Senator Hoey [Clyde Roark, D. NC] and I was fourteen. We became great friends. Russell Long had about four drinks, and he speaks with his left hand, and he got to talking about Checkers and Nixon and everything. I've heard political speeches in my life, but this was by far the best I'd ever heard.

G: Really?

B: Without any doubt in the world. Congressman Morrison did the same thing. Louisiana politics are tough. They were talking about Texas politics being tough; you better get into politics in Louisiana if you want to see tough politics. The things they said about Nixon, which I would have never have said, but they talked about the coat that Mrs. Nixon had and the Checkers speech and so forth. It was really raw.

G: A lesson probably from his father Huey. How did Johnson slight Morrison, though, as opposed to the others?

B: He just wouldn't have anything to do with him.

G: He ignored him?

B: Yes, he just ignored him.

G: He didn't insult him.

B: No. No, but he was just cold.

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G: What about Earl Long? Wasn't Earl still on the scene down there then?

B: That's an interesting question. I don't know. I don't know whether Earl was in Galveston or whatnot, but we didn't want him. He was a liability. We needed him like we needed cancer.

G: Do you recall anything in North Carolina other than the things you mentioned?

B: I think Luther Hodges, who has just passed away recently, by being governor and knowing how to use that office, by having all those high school bands at every stop we stopped, made a mediocre trip into a fantastic trip.

G: That really got the ball rolling.

B: Music, you know. . . anybody that wants to go into politics, the first thing you have got to learn is that you have to have a lively musical group to get the crowd enthusiastic. That is the first lesson of politics--is that music is the one thing that completely surpasses all political lines of differences. Because if you have a musical group that is enthusiastic and attractive, like cheerleaders and baton twirlers, these are things. . . . This is one reason I'm sure Jack Kennedy was so successful in Wisconsin and West Virginia, was that the young people were for him, and they influenced their mommy and daddy.

G: What other trips did you make? Did you go to New York when--?

B: No.

G: You weren't there. What about Houston? Were you down there for--?

B: No, I was not there.

G: I understand there was a huge reception in Chicago.

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B: But see, Mayor Daley is a pro. He is like Luther Hodges. He knows how to let all the employees off. And history will show that he is one of the best pros in the history of the business. He and Lyndon Johnson were great friends until the very end.

G: Did you see that whistle stop as a success immediately or--?

B: Sure. I knew we had won the election when the whistle stop was over, without any doubt. We had to split the South. We knew we couldn't carry all of them. Virginia and Florida you could forget about. Once we won North Carolina and Georgia, Louisiana; I think we won Alabama. But we split them, and by doing that, we won the election.

G: Are there any other campaign anecdotes that you want to tell? You have been so graphic on these things that I don't want to leave anything out.

B: Well, I just think for historical purposes, when the real historians look at how did John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson win the election, I think that they will see that the southern whistle-stop tour was the key. Had Johnson not gone on the ticket with him, he would never have been elected, because the South was nowhere as liberal as Kennedy. And Kennedy was not as liberal as he had to take positions [as being], because he had made commitments to Reuther or to people like that. History will not be very kind to him as far as being a successful president. Very few presidents are really successful anyway. But he was growing--I liked him; he was witty, he was kind, but he also could be a very vicious, bitter, mean man, which is a part of life that most people don't know about, which I do. If he disliked somebody, he wanted to destroy them. This I can't say about Johnson. Johnson would pout,

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but he did not have the real ill will toward his enemies that Kennedy did.

G: I have heard that LBJ was that way--that it wasn't a matter of crushing his enemies, merely a matter of overcoming them so then he could do what he wanted to do.

B: You are absolutely correct.

G: Well, Mr. Baker, you've gone beyond, I think, what we had hoped, and I certainly appreciate it. That is the best account I have ever heard of that campaign through the South. I think you have also added some new items on the convention that we didn't know about.

B: Well, that's good. I hope that it will be of some help to you.

G: I hope we can continue in Austin.

B: Sure.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II

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