

INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 28, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: BEN BARNES

INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB

PLACE: Lieutenant Governor's Office, Texas State Capitol, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

M: This is an interview with Lieutenant Governor Ben Barnes. The date is June 28, 1971. I'm in the Lieutenant Governor's Office in the Capitol and my name is David McComb.

First of all, I'd like to know when you first met Lyndon Johnson.

B: I met Lyndon Johnson in 1958. He was in Texas speaking at a meeting of some organization. I was a student at The University of Texas, attended the meeting and shook the then-Senator Johnson's hand. The meeting was very casual and he would have no reason to remember meeting me.

The next time I shook Senator Johnson's hand was when he was a candidate for Vice president and was campaigning in Texas. I campaigned for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in 1960. I had just won the Democratic nomination to the Texas House. I did not have a Republican opponent, and I was an active campaigner for the Democratic ticket in 1960.

M: Were you impressed at all at that stage of the game with Lyndon Johnson?

B: I think any young man is impressed with any member of the United States Senate that he has an opportunity to meet. Yes, I was impressed with Senator Johnson. I remember he was a big man, had the capacity to make a person feel like they were important when they met him. I was very, very impressed upon meeting him.

M: Why did you choose to campaign for him?

B: I was the Democratic nominee. I felt a strong obligation to the Democratic Party because they had nominated me to the Texas House of Representatives.

Of course, that was a thrilling political experience to be nominated at the age of twenty-one to the Texas House, and I suppose, as any young man, I had stars in my eyes.

M: Had you met some of the Johnson people by then, such as Connally and Rayburn?

B: I had met Speaker Rayburn. I had not met John Connally. I had met Cliff Carter. Cliff Carter came down to work in Senator Blakley's campaign when there was the special election for Johnson's seat after he was elected vice president. I suppose that is the first time that the Johnson organization, so to speak, had an opportunity to have any opinion of Ben Barnes, because I met Horace Busby and Cliff Carter both in that campaign, and Walter Jenkins.

You've often been compared to Lyndon Johnson. Did you have any ideas of modeling yourself after his career?

B: No, I didn't have any ideas of modeling myself after his career. I must confess I'm kind of amused at a lot of the newspaper columnists' analysis of how I'm Lyndon Johnson's protege, not that I consider that not complimentary because I really do. I'm a great admirer of President Johnson's, but President Johnson did not really know me until after he got to be [president]. I visited with him several times in Washington when he was vice president, but the meetings were very casual. He never gave me any political advice at that time. It was not until I was speaker of the House that I had any intimate meetings with [him] or had a personal relationship with Lyndon Johnson. He was helpful to me by appointing me on several different--he appointed me on the President's Advisory Commission for Intergovernmental Relations. That's a very important appointment, and he honored me by doing that. There are only three legislative leaders in the country on that. He appointed me to go on-- [that is], the State Department, through his influence, appointed me to make two trips, one to a NATO meeting

in Brussels, Belgium; another to a meeting of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. There were two very good experiences for me. They broadened my horizons and gave me an insight into some international politics. So Johnson has been helpful to me along those lines. He came to my dinner and spoke in 1970, but that was after I had already been elected lieutenant governor and was running for a second term. So I don't know. . . I'm not certain of what the definition of protege is, but I'm somewhat amused at how the newspapermen speculate that Lyndon Johnson found a boy on a peanut farm in DeLeon and decided that he had a great destiny in politics and started molding and shaping his career, because that couldn't be further from the truth.

M: This indicates that you had some pretty clearcut career plans of your own, of what you wanted to do along the line. Is that fair to say that?

B: I suppose I should say that, because I guess every man I've ever read about in high public office always said that as a young boy he used to dream of being governor of Texas, or senator, or going on to even higher places. But, in complete candor, I really didn't plan at a very early age to have a career in politics. I suppose I've always enjoyed politics because politics, I think, is a synonym of people and I like people very much. I was "Most Friendly Boy" in DeLeon High School. I enjoy being friendly and have a genuine affection for people.

But I really didn't decide to run for the legislature until my senior year at The University of Texas when I was employed at the State Health Department. There was a would-be scandal in the health department and I brought it to the legislature. As a result of the legislature finding out what was happening at the health department, the Commissioner of Health and his four top assistants, all being doctors, there were five doctors removed from the health department. I testified in front of the

committee and gave them the evidence that brought about these men's resignations, so I got the taste of politics then. That was as a university student.

M: That was the crucial point.

B: That was the crucial point. I'd always liked government and history, but I had not had a burning desire to be in politics. When I got elected to the Texas House of Representatives, I didn't set out the first day, as some people might say, running for speaker of the Texas House. The minute I got elected speaker I didn't start running for state-wide office. Sure, I'm ambitious. People that are not ambitious do not get anywhere in politics. But I don't have the same recollection as a young man of having a burning desire to be in public office as a lot of people say they have had.

M: In what I've read about you in the newsclippings and so forth, you seem to have a base, a political base which is similar or identical to that of Johnson and Connally. Is that correct?

B: Well . . .

M: That means financial and so forth.

B: I would think that it's more true of the financial base than it is of the philosophical base. I don't know, maybe I have a hybrid of the Johnson-Connally political base; but, again, and I'm not sensitive about this, but I'm pointing this out: it would be impossible for anybody to come along in Texas politics in the late 1960s that didn't have part of the same base as Connally and Johnson because everybody that was interested in politics practically were part of the Connally-Johnson base, or certainly part of the Johnson base, and the Yarborough base, or the Connally-Johnson base. But I've got a lot of Senator Yarborough's very strong supporters that have supported Yarborough all his life, that have been for me from the very first after my first term as speaker and they saw my philosophy and

saw what my platform or my ideas were, and they've supported me ever since. So I think I've had a combination of all three of the liberal, moderate, conservative. Now you can't keep all these people, but it's a new ballgame in Texas. This is something that's hard for people to realize.

Most of Lyndon Johnson's supporters are too old to campaign--not supporters I'm talking about key campaign workers. They're either dead or they're gone. Connally's are really too old now. John Connally's campaign managers are not the right ones. I was very careful in 1968 not to get a large number of Connally's active workers out front for me. Number one, because they had some scars, and number two, they'd already been with the candidate to the top of the mountain, so to speak. They were not going to have the enthusiasm they'd had [for him] for me. So, someone thinking that I took Johnson's and Connally's--I'll bet half of my campaign managers have never met Lyndon Johnson or John Connally.

M: So you built your own base then.

B: Yes, but it's not to say that my friendship with Lyndon Johnson and John Connally has not helped me in politics because, sure, it has helped me, and I'll admit this. As did Lyndon Johnson's friendship with Franklin Roosevelt help him in his first campaign; as did Lyndon Johnson's friendship with Sam Rayburn help him get to be majority leader, help him get to be vice president, help him get to be senator; as did John Connally's friendship with Lyndon Johnson help him get to be governor. That's what politics is all about.

M: In your process of learning about politics and the game of politics, if it can be phrased that way, was this mainly your own experience or did you get advice from other people or both?

B: I think it's both. There are not very many people whose political advice

I've gone and sought. I came up through the legislative branch, and there's not anybody that can give you a great deal of advice about the legislature unless they've actually been in the legislature. John Connally's advice about the legislature is very poor because he has never voted on issues, he has never been a voting member.

M: Does an ambitious legislator, like you were, seek advice?

B: I sought the advice of many of the older members of the House. As a matter of fact, the only way that I got elected speaker--there was one man younger than me when I got elected speaker, my age was my great disadvantage--I went to every member of the House that had any influence, particularly the older leaders, and told them: "Look, I'm a young man. I've got to have your advice; I've got to have your counsel and help." Sure, I counselled and advised with them because they had to feel like that they were part of [it]. They had to feel that here was a young man--and I assume some of them voted for me because they thought I had some ability or they wouldn't have elected me speaker, but I had to make them feel like they were a part. And I think one of the reasons they voted for me was because they wanted to help a young man in politics. A lot of the older people are not jealous, as some of the people are in your own age group, and they really want to help somebody young.

M: There's something else you mentioned that might bear a little bit more probing. Johnson was a national figure and you're, at that point, a state figure. How much influence does a national figure have over the state person?

B: Very little. You've got to understand, Lyndon Johnson was running the world! He was not concerned at all about what was happening in the Texas Legislature, and I would have never gone and asked him for any advice because he was too busy. I would have been very embarrassed.

M: How did he happen to make these appointments of you to these national committees?

B: I think Johnson has a real desire to encourage young people to participate in politics. I think he's going to devote the rest of his living years spending most of his time trying to have influence on the young people as far as their preparing themselves for public office and for good citizenship. He's always interested in this. And he took an interest in me as a young man from Texas. I'm hesitant to go too far in my mind about what he thought because it would be speculation on my part.

M: Did he have interest in a lot of young men or you or what?

B: I think Lyndon Johnson is always looking for bright young men, and I don't want to be sounding presumptuous when I include myself in that category. But I'm not the first young man that Lyndon Johnson has helped. Lyndon Johnson liked to have young men around him. Look at Tom Johnson, still in his twenties now, was a White House Fellow. He picked him out of the White House Fellows and gave him a tremendous amount of responsibility in the White House. Nick Johnson, Jim Jones from Oklahoma, Larry Temple--you can just go on and on--Bill Moyers, the people that were around Lyndon Johnson were young men.

M: Another curious thing. I noticed in one of the newspaper clippings that you had an appreciation dinner in 1963 and Lyndon Johnson sent a telegram or something of that nature praising your work.

B: Yes. But now let me tell you. Lyndon Johnson as vice president probably sent a hundred telegrams that year.

M: That's what I was wondering.

B: That's something you've got to keep in the proper perspective.

M: This sort of thing is common in politics?

B: This is common in politics. But now there I was---I don't know why, and maybe it has been to my advantage, but the press has always written more about me than I deserved or warranted, and a lot of times I didn't understand why. That dinner attracted too much attention in Texas, and I

don't know why it did. But John Connally--it was his first speech that he made, he made it by telephone after being in the car with Kennedy. I guess that attracted a lot of attention. But the story got on the front pages of all the papers in Texas, and it got more space than a normal appreciation dinner story.

ii: That brings up another point of mine. How much of your success is hard work and how much is luck?

B: Ninety percent luck and ten percent hard work, not that I haven't worked harder than anybody else because I've worked harder than anybody else in Texas.

M: Like you said, that clipping got a lot of publicity beyond what you might have deserved?

B: Yes. It's breaks, just like business, just like football, just like almost every other profession, being at the right time at the right place helps, and working harder than everybody else. And I've worked harder than any other two people, I know that.

M: You mean this by putting in hours of labor?

B: I'm talking about physical labor and I'm talking about mental: doing your homework. A young man has got to always be better prepared than an older man in politics [who] can get by with bluffing. I can't afford not to have the answers--there are many times I don't have the answers, but I've just got to be the best prepared man in the room.

M: You also got some publicity for supporting Johnson's Vietnam policy in 1966.

B: 1965.

M: This may sound like an embarrassing question. I don't mean it that way, but was there any kind of an agreement between you and Johnson that you would support him in this in return for his support for you?

B: No, we never discussed it. There was never a conversation.

M: In other words, this was something that you felt ought to be supported?

B: That I felt ought to be supported at the time that I did it, and if I had it to do over I'd do it again from the standpoint at that time with those facts. Of course, everybody has got 20-20 hindsight now on Vietnam and say we made a bad mistake in Southeastern Asia, and now I've said I think we ought to get out. My gosh, even Paul Harvey said this week we ought to get out. When Paul Harvey says that we ought to get out, that really has reached the point-- (Laughter) But I think Lyndon Johnson was acting as commander-in-chief on the information he had, and I support President Nixon as far as what he's trying to do. I really doubt the wisdom of the day when we cripple the powers of the president to be commander-in-chief of this country. There's something in the pit of my stomach and the back of my mind that tells me that this is a very, very grave mistake. If the other nations of this world ever feel like we have a foreign policy that's being dictated by the masses in the street and that they cannot deal on a confidential basis with the president of the United States, I think we're going to find ourselves deteriorating as one of the so-called world powers, or the leader of the free world.

M: After you supported Johnson in Vietnam, did he ever say anything to you about that? Did he ever write you a letter saying "Thanks for the support?"

B: I don't know. We'd have to check and see whether he did or not. I don't remember ever having a discussion with him on that.

M: It wasn't consequential then if he did?

B: No, it was not.

M: Also on a number of occasions you met Johnson at Bergstrom and places like that, notably at your own inaugural. At least one clipping I read said that you came out--

B: He was coming home after Nixon had been inaugurated in 1969, and I thought, "Here's a man who has given over thirty years of his life to Texas," and it would be so easy on inaugural to not be there. And I said, "Everybody's all dressed." And there was a conflict out at the Coliseum because we were having a cocktail party. But I felt out of loyalty and out of appreciation that I ought to arrange--I got a helicopter and did both things. I was late for my own reception, but I wanted to meet the President at Bergstrom.

M: Did Johnson seem to appreciate that?

B: Yes, I think he did appreciate this. I think any of us would, wouldn't we?

M: Yes, I think so. Did you ever have occasion to go to the LBJ Ranch?

B: Yes, I've been to President Johnson's Ranch. I've been to his Ranch much more after he has been back than when he was in public office. But I consider Lyndon Johnson a personal friend of mine. I've enjoyed very much working on the state park, that has been something the state has involved itself in, and I've taken a great deal of pride in it.

M: This is the LBJ State Park.

B: Yes.

M: Did you work with Mrs. Johnson on this too?

B: Yes.

M: Is she as able and capable a person as she has the reputation for being?

B: I think Mrs. Johnson is one of the most capable women I've ever known. I think Mrs. Johnson was a tremendous political asset to Lyndon Johnson during his life.

M: I've heard that a number of times, but nobody can ever give me a concrete example.

B: I can give you this as an example. I don't know that I should say it for

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oral history but I will.(Pause) Lady Bird Johnson spent a great deal of her time trying to understand her husband and trying to support his ideas and ambitions, rather than trying to dictate her own ideas and ambitions. She looked for evidence each day to support what he was trying to do, and as a result, I do not think Lyndon Johnson found himself in a position where many, many men in politics find themselves, I'd say the majority of them, and that is with an unhappy wife, a wife that is concerned about them giving so much of their time to politics, a wife that is not as understanding as she should be during the times that her husband has to spend with her. She had a great ability to find opportunities for Lyndon Johnson to relax, for instance, and to release some of the tension that he had built up. And Lady Bird Johnson is a woman that other women are not jealous of. She's attractive, she's articulate, has a bright mind, a fresh personality, but yet some women--Christina Ford, for instance, would not be a good political asset because every woman in the room would be jealous of Christina Ford. Mrs. Johnson had the ability to make other women like her.

M: You said she found opportunities to let the President relax, and so forth. Can you give me an example of that?

B: She was always looking for ways to get him away from his 18-19 hour days, always finding places for him to relax in an informal atmosphere. She worked; she built her life around his life. Very few women do this, very few women.

M: And that in itself I suppose would help in this.

B: Oh, it's a tremendous help.

M: Did you go to the national democratic conventions in 1964 and 1968?

B: Yes.

M: As a delegate?

B: Yes.

M: Did you go in 1960?

B: No.

M: In 1964 do you recall any great problems in the delegation?

B: In the Texas delegation?

M: Yes.

B: No.

M: In 1968?

B: Oh yes, there were problems there because we didn't--well, they tried to unseat the Texas delegation, that would be the first problem. That was the major problem.

M: The press made a lot of comment about LBJ directing the 1968 convention from Washington.

B: That was not true.

M: There's no evidence of that as far as you're concerned?

B: No. None--none whatsoever.

M: And then you came back and had your own campaign worries?

B: Yes, but I campaigned for the ticket though. I was the only elected public official to meet Humphrey when he came to Texas after the convention. There was a lot of unhappiness. His first trip to Texas, I was the only man to meet him at the Houston airport, the only elected public official. Yarborough had run off with McCarthy and Connally was not yet ready to publicly be associated with Humphrey, and I met him.

M: Yet you didn't run Humphrey's campaign?

B: Humphrey asked me to be his campaign manager in Texas, but I declined to be his campaign manager because I was a candidate myself and I didn't think one candidate that was running for office ought to be another candidate's campaign manager. But I did help him put together his campaign organization, and I suppose that I worked more closely with Senator Humphrey than

anybody else in Texas.

M: In your years in politics in Texas, has the Democratic Party in Texas been influenced to any great extent by Lyndon Johnson and the fact that he was president? I mean the state organization.

B: Certainly it has been influenced. It would be impossible for any state party not to be tremendously influenced by the fact that they had a president from their state that was a member of their party. Texas Democrats, though, we do not have party discipline in Texas. We do not have a strong party organization.

M: You don't have a machine, in other words?

B: No.

M: Why not?

B: Because of the one-party system we've had in Texas. We've had all our battles within the framework of Democratic Party, and it's just impossible to build a party machine in Texas. Because our primaries are always contested.

M: So there wouldn't be such a thing as a Johnson political machine?

B: No.

M: But he would have friends.

B: Sure. Many friends and great political strength, but no machine.

M: And there still is no machine in Texas?

B: No. Quite the contrary. I think the Democratic Party is very weak in Texas today, as far as party organization.

M: Well then, what kind of influence would Johnson have on the party, other than prestige?

B: Just his prestige. And I think Lyndon Johnson being still a live, strong man, he can have influence on whether Texas goes Democratic nationally in 1972 or not.

M: This would indicate that Johnson still has a lively interest in politics, especially in Texas.

B: Why, of course, Lyndon Johnson has a lively interest in politics. It's impossible to turn off and say you're not going to. But I'll say this. Lyndon Johnson has probably done a better job of staying out of politics and staying out of taking public positions than any man that has ever retired from the office of the presidency in the history.. Harry Truman came out and endorsed everybody in the country. Dwight Eisenhower endorsed people and cut television tapes and did everything in the world. Lyndon Johnson has stayed out of politics. He has literally stayed out of politics.

M: I think I've pretty well exhausted your relationships with Lyndon Johnson, but do you have anything you want to add to this, something I should have asked you and didn't have the sense to ask you?

B: I don't think so. I think we've covered it.

M: Let's call it to an end then. Thank you very much.

B: Okay. Thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 of Interview I]

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