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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Narrator Joseph A. Beirne Address _____

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Biographical information:
labor union ofcl.; b. Jersey City, Feb. 16, 1911; evening student Hudson College of St. Peter, Jersey City, 1933-37, N.Y.U., 1937-39; Utilities, instrument repairman Western Electric Co., N.J. and N.Y., 1928-39; pres. Western Electric Employees, N.Y., 1937-38; organized Nat. Assn. Tel. Equipment Workers, 1937, nat. pres., 1938-45; v.p. Nat. Fedn. Tel. Workers, 1940-43, pres., 1943-47, pres. Communications Workers Am. (successor union), 1947 - ; v.p. CIO, 1949-55; v.p. AFL-CIO, 1955 -- . Vice pres., dir. United Community Funds and Councils of Am., Inc., 1956 --.

Interviewer Thomas H. Baker

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Discusses his knowledge of organized labor, and his association with Lyndon Johnson.

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INTERVIEWEE: Joseph A. Beirne

INTERVIEWER: Thomas H. Baker

DATE: March 4, 1969

Ba: This is the interview with Joseph A. Beirne, the president of the Communications Workers of America. Sir, if I may begin by just summarizing your career, subject to additions and corrections, you were born in 1911 in Jersey City; you worked as an instrument repairman for Western Electric; and in 1938 organized and became the president of the National Association of Telephone Equipment Workers. Then in '43 you became the president of the National Federation of Telephone Workers which in 1947 became what it is now--the Communications Workers of America. In 1949 you became a vice president of the CIO; and with the merger in 1955, a vice president of the AFofL-CIO. And you have an impressive list of civic, religious, governmental service positions of one kind and another. Is that essentially it? Have I left out--?

B: That's a very good, yet rather brief, summary of a long life.

Ba: When did you first meet Mr. Johnson?

B: I first met him when he was a Senator from the State of Texas. In meeting him then, it was simply for the purpose of trying to influence him on certain matters that we were interested in.

Ba: This was in connection with union work?

B: With union work, with social and legislative goals that we set out for ourselves in which the vote of a Congressman or Senator is sometimes needed on important legislation.

Ba: I notice that in the early '50's you served with the War Stabilization Board.

B: Wage Stabilization Board, during the Korean War. Yes, I was a member of the Board during that period.

Ba: Did you have any relationship with Mr. Johnson in that connection?

B: No,none at all. He was still over there in the Senate. Of course, the Wage Stabilization Board was a rather independent agency making the decisions needed to keep the economic stability in the country.

Ba: During those years when Mr. Johnson was in the Senate, how did labor rank him as a Senator?

B: This is a very interesting question. For to give the honest answer to that, organized labor of Texas had a very dim view of Senator Johnson, even after he became Majority Leader in the Senate.

Ba: That's why I asked. Because he had voted for the Taft-Hartley Bill and his campaign in '48--

B: I really don't know. I wouldn't want to speculate as to why they had this rather dim view. I would only make the observation that I believe it stems principally from the nature of politics in Texas. In some fashion Mr. Johnson got himself aligned with certain forces that the organized labor group of Texas had a very dim view of.

Frankly, it was because of the Texas politics, and this rather dim view of Mr. Johnson, that I got to know him a little better when he was up in the Majority Leadership post, for they were attacking him quite frequently in Texas in the press and in resolutions at labor meetings. Some of the boys from the Communications Workers had aligned themselves with the DOT's--the Democrats of Texas--and with, I believe, a Mrs. Randolph, who spearheaded it, who was great at fund-raising and that kind of stuff. And some of my own people were involved in that operation. And that disturbed him, and I had the occasion then to meet him a number of times in his office where he more or less complained about the unfairness

of our people towards his record.

Ba: Were these meetings on his initiative or yours?

B: They were on his. And, frankly, I sympathized with his viewpoint. I don't know a darned thing about the politics of Texas, except that it's awfully confusing. And I never had any difficulty, because of their record, in believing that both Mr. Johnson and Mr. Yarborough were fine, outstanding, public servants. Yet just reading the newspaper, and having that as the only source and listening to some of our people in Texas, it would seem that people looked upon those two men as being so widely apart as to make Mr. Johnson a reactionary and Mr. Yarborough a liberal.

My view of what happened up here at the Washington level in the Senate didn't uphold that stereotype--or that picture--that somebody had painted.

Ba: Did Mr. Johnson ask you to use your good offices with your people in Texas to--?

B: He asked me in effect, first, if I shared that view, because I had known him. I had met him a number of times, and had sought his support on different legislation and had received his support on different legislation. I feel that he, like myself, felt he knew me well enough to put his problem forthrightly. He just felt as any sensitive man would feel--rather upset that a distortion was being made of his record and his activity.

He first wanted to know if I shared that view, and I told him quite frankly I did not. Then he wanted to know if there was any way that I could think of that he could correct the impression that was given to our people--the Communications Workers down there in Texas--and I volunteered to try to handle that. It was a simple matter from my standpoint to say what the record was of a Senator--that's public--and what his work was as well as his record as Majority Leader. That was public.

And he had an exceptional record. Now it followed a pattern. He was very much a liberal for at least four and a half to five year of his Senate term. It is true that he became silent, and he began to worry about reelection in that last eighteen months--at which time he wouldn't be quite as outspoken and quite as helpful.

Ba: I don't imagine a labor union leader finds that unusual among Senators, does he?

B: Oh no, that's very much the pattern. There are men who are in the Congress of the United States under the public cloak of being liberals who are quite the opposite. In other words, they talk a good story.

That's very much unlike Mr. Johnson. He didn't talk a good story, but he worked like hell and produced results and was dependable. I don't think any particular kind of slogan could be used in his case. By slogan, I mean conservative, reactionary, liberal, or Populist, as he was called in the press by many. I think he was just a hard-working human being very much interested in the affairs of people, and knowing our system. And so very few men in public life--and a small percentage in private life--even know our system so that when you have one who does know it and works at it, results are produced. And I think his record is the thing that's going to startle people when it's finally put together.

Ba: Did you have any luck in putting this view across in Texas?

B: Yes, I did, quite frankly. I had the occasion to go down there on more than one occasion to talk about their views and their activities in the political arena.

Ba: This would have been in the late '50's, I imagine.

B: In the late '50's, and even into the '60's. You see, when Mr. Yarborough first ran for office down there in Texas--that is, the national office--our people down there supported him. And they had signs up for him outside the Union Building. And, of course, one of our locals in one of his

very first campaigns--which he incidentally lost--was charged in the public press of Texas of being the Communist organization supporting Mr. Yarborough. I suppose by the old technique of association they would make our local people Communists, and that would spill off on Mr. Yarborough; and hence, the public would believe Mr. Yarborough was a Communist. But I found no difficulty ever in understanding our people's support of Ralph Yarborough. I did have difficulties in understanding why they had this feeling about Mr. Johnson. In many long talks I had with our leadership in Texas, I don't know how many I convinced, but I know that not--because he was a Texan--the people in our locals of Texas by the time he finished his term as President thought very highly of him, and he won that himself. I don't know how much the discussions when he was a Senator and when our people were involved in some of the political shenanigans of Texas--I don't know how much influence our talking to people had. It's like trying to gauge what is the real influence of education.

Ba: Besides, the politics in Texas in that period was pretty bitter and chopped up.

B: Yes. I never understood it. I don't understand it yet. I have a general view of what goes on in the political life in the United States. And I unhesitatingly say the brand of politics being played in Texas, in all of my memory, is entirely different from that that's playing in Mississippi, in New York, in Pennsylvania, in Illinois, South Dakota. I guess only the people of Texas understand what they're doing.

Ba: And I'm not sure that they understand it all the time.

B: I would question whether they did.

Ba: Incidentally, this may be irrelevant, but are Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson in their capacity as owners of the television and radio station in Texas employers of any of your union members?

B: Yes. They are employers. There was one story out that this gives me an opportunity to correct. It was published widely in a magazine that the Communication Workers of America had labor difficulties with Mr. Johnson on his television station, and that we struck the station because of the management's stiff-neckness. That is not true at all. There's absolutely not a shred of truth to that. We never had such a relationship, never had the kind of problems that were manufactured. That was one of the things that unfortunately happened so often--that out of pure cloth, a picture is woven, and truth has a hard time catching up to fiction.

Now, the radio station we're familiar with. The personnel practice we're familiar with. The management of those radio stations are like typical management types. With typical management types dealing with typical labor types from time to time you run into disagreements, and from time to time there may even be a strike. And a strike is not a reflection on the inability of the labor leader to secure a contract peacefully, nor is it a bad reflection on the management for being stiff-necked and forcing people to go on strike. Rather the strike should be looked at as the expression of people participating in the decision-making regarding their own affairs, and ready to sacrifice for whatever little they may change somebody's mind. That to me is the essential strength of the kind of a country and the kind of a society we have built up. So you find the typical management types running the Johnson enterprise. This is nothing that should be used by anybody in their right mind to tar a person.

Ba: But the union never actually struck the station?

B: Heck, no. That story was out of pure cloth. There was absolutely nothing

to it, and the more you talk about something that's a complete lie-- Well, what do you say after you've said it's a complete lie? There's not one word of truth to it, period. You keep talking about it and so you wind up the same way. It's just a lie. You can't answer a complete lie. You only brand it.

Ba: It's good to have it on the record--an answer to it. Does it make any difference if the owners of the station are the President and First Lady of the United States? Does your local down there tend to tread more cautiously in its activities?

B: No. That's, again, one of the hidden strengths of the people of the United States. I don't want to be presumptuous, nor do I want to try to over-simplify something that's very complex, but there's so little understanding of what a local union is. The stereotype of a union is that there's a big boss like me sitting up here with a lot of buttons and a lot of goons around me. We make decisions with only one view in mind--how can we disturb the whole system! That's not it at all. People join the union because they are talked into it; they see a need for it. Then you have a few-- 10 percent 12- percent--who participate actively.

When you get into negotiations with an employer, it doesn't make any difference who owns, or who the personality is , it's a local group of people who want better wages, higher wages, more benefits, better working conditions. They know what they want, and they go in with all the powers of persuasion and try to get the fellow on the other side, who likewise has hidden responsibilities, to see things their way. Most of the time you succeed in reaching an agreement. From time to time, you don't. Well, the control of what people want--the intensity of their interest to struggle to get what they want is with the people. Now a leader can

only give guidance.

And when you get to the national level, the guidance is very watered down to a local situation. They may listen to a guy, but there's no such thing as orders or anything like that. They're making up their own minds. And they make up their minds quite frequently in a manner which is exactly contrary to advice given by the national leadership. I think most of the time that happens. I think national leadership understands what we've got here. We've got a society within the society which is completely democratic in its orientation, and which tries mightily to get the practice of participatory democracy to work--where people will make up their own mind; where people will participate; where they will understand.

So it doesn't make any difference whether it's the First Lady of the land and the President to happen to be the owners, either through trust or direct. It makes no difference. People are making up their minds because they want things and because they think they're entitled to them, because they think they should have it. There's no leverage in the bargaining on either side because a great personality is involved.

Ba: Does Mr. Johnson, do you think, understand this structure of national labor unions?

B: That would be a hard one to answer.

Ba: You've mentioned the limitations on the national leadership, people like yourself. Do you think Mr. Johnson understands that?

B: That would be a hard one to answer, frankly, because a, I really don't know what Mr. Johnson understands about the workings of the labor movement, except that in every contact with him on matters that involved national legislation or national politics, I would unhesitatingly say he knew the proper keys to the labor movement and used them extremely well.

Now whether that could carry over that he had an understanding of the

complexities of collective bargaining at a local level, the answer is "No, I don't know whether he would understand that or not." When it got to matters of national interest like the big strikes where you have a nationwide strike, that's unlike what we were talking about earlier. That's not a local situation. That's where the national leadership must live up to their responsibilities, where they must make decisions subject to the approval or rejection of the membership in a referendum.

Now he understood--and that was certainly indicated by his selection of people like Arthur Goldberg and Willard Wirtz, John Connors of Commerce, people of that type, who had a working knowledge. He had good advisors. Joe Califano knew the mores of the labor movement, and they were there to advise him. Whether he had a personal comprehension of them or not, I wouldn't be able to say. But all of his public statements and all of his public actions and all of his private actions, as he would put heat on labor leaders to help end an airline strike--he would go outside the airlines industry to involve labor leaders, involve industrial leaders. He certainly knew how to do that.

Ba: The reason I asked was, fairly recently of course in Chicago, the summer before the Democratic convention, there was a telephone strike which for awhile threatened to foul up the whole convention.

B: They were not Communication Workers of America.

Ba: They were not Communication Workers?

B: No. That was the IBEW. That's a sister union who shares a jurisdiction with us. And those men who were on strike in Illinois, they were members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Ba: Did you hear from Mr. Johnson in connection with that?

B: No, I didn't hear from him on that one at all. I did hear from Mr. Reynolds of the Labor Department; Mr. Wirtz, Labor Department; Joe Califano, who was

one of the President's assistants. They came only for the kind of advice I might be able to give them on who they might see. Of course, that was a fouled up mess, I don't mind telling you. But as far as the President himself, no, I never heard one single word out of him. But there was a lot of interest on the part of the Administration of course in getting that one settled.

Ba: That was obvious from the newspapers and so on that they were trying to clear it up.

To back up in time a little, at the time of the Democratic convention of 1960 when Mr. Kennedy was nominated and Mr. Johnson was nominated as Vice President, did most labor leaders tend to oppose the selection of Mr. Johnson as the Vice Presidential candidate?

B: No. Well, I said "no" too hastily. I have to put it in this context. Most labor leaders who attended the Los Angeles convention in '60 were supporters of John F. Kennedy. Some of them--Daugherty of the Letter Carriers would be a case in point--where openly in support of Mr. Johnson for the Presidency. Now from a personal standpoint, Joe Beirne and Bill Daugherty, who share the communications industry jurisdiction internationally, we belong to the same organization, we made a pack out in Los Angeles. I was for Kennedy and he was for Johnson. So Daugherty agreed that if Johnson got the nomination he'd support Kennedy for Vice President. I agreed that if Kennedy got the nomination, I'd support Johnson for Vice President. Now it worked out a Kennedy-Johnson ticket.

I was at Los Angeles, and we met when the word came out after Kennedy's nomination that he sought Johnson. The word that came to us was put to us so as to inflame us against Johnson. We were told when the meeting assembled that against the vigorous objection of Bobby Kennedy that John Kennedy was going to ask Lyndon Johnson to be his running mate.

Ba: May I get this clear? This was a meeting of labor leaders generally?

B: At the convention, right--on caucus.

Ba: And who gave the word in that fashion?

B: The word first came from one of the International Ladies Garment Workers political people--I don't know his name--and frankly,from Arthur Goldberg, who was then with the Steel Workers and was then with the labor movement.

Ba: This would have been on the Thursday morning after Kennedy's nomination?

B: Yes.

Ba: And then what was the reaction to this word?

B: The reaction was kind of mixed frankly, and we took no vote, and we formed no consensus. To the best of my knowledge, President Meany, who was also there, made no overtures to John Kennedy; selected no committee nor instructed any person to my knowledge to go and tell Kennedy anything, that we either favored Johnson or opposed him. In the caucus itself, when this word was given, both Daugherty and myself spoke that we saw nothing wrong with that kind of a ticket. It would be one that would strengthen Kennedy, for it was known then that Kennedy still had a major hurdle. He still was a Roman Catholic. He still was a young man. And they were two rather big handicaps, and especially in that part of the country where Johnson's standing was very high--the South and the Southwest and the West.

A number spoke that it would be a good ticket and a strengthened ticket. Others were for other candidates for Vice President. But no consensus was reached, and no action was taken. Nobody suggested that somebody pay court to Kennedy to tell him to do this, that, or the other thing. To the best of my knowledge, Mr. Meany, who was president of the AFL-CIO and sort of head of the caucus, did nothing one way or the other, to the best of my knowledge.

Ba: Did this impression that you say came from that meeting that Johnson was going to be offered the nomination over the objections of Robert Kennedy--did that ever get cleared up, or was that still--

B: No, that one is still the impression that a couple of hundred people in our caucus, I know, would have as I had myself. I know th se around me, when we were breaking up, had the shared view that, "Hell, that was given to us to really get us to oppose Johnson." And we didn't do it. Now, there was no clearing up. I don't even know where the people come in, Goldberg and the guy from ILGWU, where they even first got the story that Johnson was being approached by Kennedy, because it was new. When we got it, it was brand new stuff. Or where they got the story that Robert Kennedy protested to John Kennedy. That's something that I don't know where they got it from, but that was currency right in 1960.

Ba: I was going to ask you if you thought maybe the idea originated with Goldberg, or that he was operating on behalf of Robert Kennedy, but I don't guess--

B: I really don't know, you see. I'd just get there into the realm of pure unadulterated speculation. I don't know. I know what happened, and I know what the reaction was and how it started--who started it. You know, a convention is quite a thing to participate in.

Ba: Was there any further objection from major labor leaders during the rest of that day?

B: No, absolutely none.

Ba: Shortly afterwards, the AFofL-CIO council met and endorsed the ticket, unanimously or--

B: Unanimously. That was a unanimous endoresement.

Ba: Did Johnson make an effective campaigner in your view in that--

B: Yes. Everything I heard--again, from those active in the political arena for organized labor, Johnson's campaign and Mrs. Johnson's participation was

extremely effective--from all of the so-called experts of the labor movement who work in this political arena, extremely effective!

Ba: How important in that election was the issue of Kennedy's Catholicism? And may I point out, for the record here, that you are a Roman Catholic yourself, are you not?

B: Yes, I am a Roman Catholic, so therefore, I don't think I'd be capable of having a balanced view on whether his religion was or was not a factor The prejudice would be, maybe not what do you think, because I'm a Catholic. I found no prejudice in my lifetime stemming from me being a Roman Catholic.

I read and lived the period of Alfred Smith, and was old enough to know what was going on. I was a working adolescent. There was no question at that time Rum, Romanism, and Religion was the plastered sign all over. And the Pope and everything attached to Roman Catholicism came in for public review by people who didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

One of the sorrowful things I've observed many times, even in connection with Lyndon Johnson--it's one of his gray areas right now in his lifetime--that you'll find experts speaking on something they know nothing about. The result is that we pool our ignorance and share it, and we wind up--all of us--imbecilic as far as the slightest idea of what the truth was.

Now, the Kennedy bit had none of that. When he went into West Virginia some of our people were with Hubert Humphrey. I found no evidence of any great religious opposition to Kennedy. And West Virginia is part of the Baptist belt from which in the past has stemmed much opposition to Roman Catholicism. So I know how things are done. I know that the big meeting down there in Texas when Kennedy went down to meet the ministers and what not, that that was considered by many writers as a turning point--that

that religion wouldn't be played much. So my prejudices--I never did think that was a burden to bear--being of that religious belief.

I thought it was just played up, going back to 1928 or whenever it was when Smith ran, when it was an issue, and it was made a public issue and everybody understood that. But between the period of Smith's running and Kennedy's running, there was a world war again. There was Hitler. There was the concentration camps and the Jews. There was the senseless killing because of religious beliefs. There was Korea. There was the Iron Curtain. There were all those things that happened which even without articulating, the American people got more or less united. They were in their first steps of their world leadership that now is recognized by everyone--then not so clearly. But I think the American people were growing closer and closer together in many areas. And I think in one of the areas religion fell to being but a small point of difference in this country.

Ba: Did you see much of Mr. Johnson while he was Vice President?

B: Yes--not much--but I didn't lose contact with him. Let's say it that way. His office and the people working for him were very helpful. He was carrying out many important tasks for the President, and he was working hard at it.

Ba: Did he still have much influence on legislation; that is, would you go to Mr. Johnson as Vice President to help you on the Hill?

B: Yes, quite frankly, I think that the period of his Vice Presidency--he had not the effect, of course, of when he was Majority Leader--I think Lyndon Johnson at that time, and I think even today, has high standing with his Senate colleagues.

One little incident that strikes me as something of value that would suggest his standing in the way in which he could get Mr. Dirksen to do things that were important to Kennedy, and later when he was President, important

to his policy and the instances of Mr. Dirksen defending Kennedy and Johnson when many of the Democratic party leaders deserted. So he was very effective as Vice President.

As a matter of fact, he was a storehouse of information. If he himself wouldn't get involved, anybody who could get to one of his aides or get to him and say, "Tell me how I should handle this," you could stack your chips. But if you followed the advice, you'd get a heck of a better response than if you tried to do it on your own.

Ba: You mean, you could get from him which Senators and Congressmen would be--

B: How to do it, how to make the approach, what to stress, what not to stress, who to see, which ones were important, and which ones not to waste your time on--that kind of information.

Ba: Always worked?

B: Well, I've never known one to fail. Now maybe there were some to fail, but I don't recall--just sitting here. The thrust, the belief, the idea is that, yes, you went to him because it never failed.

Ba: After the assassination when Mr. Johnson because President, he in that period of a few weeks there he got in touch with an awful lot of leaders in various aspects of American life. Did he call or get in touch with you during that time?

B: Mr. Humphrey called the day after Mr. Johnson arrived back to Washington as President--called for the President, he said, at his request. Then a few days later after the burial of President Kennedy, yes, he did call.

Ba: What did he say on that occasion?

B: In effect, he identified himself and said that, "You know the terrible job I've got and I'm going to need a lot of help, and I'm going to be calling upon you and a lot of others for the help, and I hope I can count on you," to which you would give the normal response, first, of being very proud of

the fact that you were called; and secondly, you gave the normal response, "Count on me for anything you want." It was brief and to the point. Humphrey's was in the same vein, except he went a little further because it was plain that some of the problems were going to be there--"Well, we may help," and what not.

Ba: Almost immediately after Mr. Johnson became President, that spring of '64, he got directly involved in those complicated railway negotiations. From the standpoint of a labor leader, does that kind of thing satisfy you? That is, in one sense, what he did was sort of bypass the concept of collective bargaining. You could say that he used the power of the Presidency rather than the mechanics of collective bargaining. Does that kind of thing disturb labor leaders?

B: In a way, yes. Of course, you've picked an industry that many of us are familiar with. That's <u>the</u> only industry--railroads--where almost anything conceivable by man will not work! More than one person has either gotten disgusted when asked to act as a mediator--I'm talking about national personalities--got disgusted with the whole situation; and some even got to the point where they refused to handle anything remotely connected with transportation on the simple belief that anything connected with transportation is not worth getting into.

Now whether Mr. Johnson was right or wrong, nobody will ever know. That one can't be gauged, you see, because--I remember the incident you're talking about. Mediations of all types had been exhausted, the Transportation Act of 1934 is quite elaborate on the procedures you follow to get disputes resolved. They had been exhausted. He was faced with a crisis. So he acted in what I would consider to be the only way he knew how to act in any situation. When it was big enough to require strong action, he acted, and then he worried later whether he stepped on somebody's fancy toes or not.

And in collective bargaining, there are fancy toes that people can step on. But what's important in collective bargaining is to have both sides reach an agreement which at the moment neither side is satisfied with, but both will live with. Now, that's what's important. How do you get that done? And he took rather direct action, and I think the results of that were much better than when it started flying through that we had laws passed to require arbitration.

I mean the direct intervention, phoning people, and locking them up in a room and saying, "You get to the reasoning," of Isaiah, that he quoted so frequently, "Let us come and reason together." You know, lock them up and say, "You come out with an answer." Now the collective bargaining process was working because collective bargaining, when it gets to the real disputes stage, works best when both sides are under extreme pressure. And he put them both under it.

Ba: On what kind of occasions has Mr. Johnson as President called on you for advice or help? Do you remember any specific instance?

B: Take the one he made public. And we'll stop it there, because he made it public. This is when he gave his speech to the Congress. Among other things, he recommended that the Labor Department and the Commerce Department be consolidated into one. It was Mr. Wirtz, Secretary of Labor, who called me the day before the speech--at the President's request, and I suppose he called others too--to tell us that he was going to say this in the speech. He wished that we wouldn't be taken by surprise, and that's why Wirtz made the call. Well, I immediately went through that mouthpiece on the telephone with Wirtz, saying "Whoever the hell gave him this advice, gave it without the slightest knowledge of how the Department of Labor came into existence, number one; what it's charter is, number two; and what the responsibilities interests, and pressures of the Commerce Department are. And whoever gave

him that advice gave him very foolish advice", for which I was very sorry, and I hoped the hell he wouldn't say it; and if he was going to say it, okay, I wouldn't be shocked when I heard it.

The day after he gave the speech, and he did call for the consolidation, he called a number of us over to the White House at 5:30 in the afternoon. We sat in the Cabinet Room--some seven or eight of us, with President Meany leading us. He came in about 6 o'clock and explained many of the portions of his speech and what he intended to do, and then finally got to the proposal for Labor and Commerce being joined. Of course, he must have been told by Wirtz that I was the only one who opposed it. And he and I had rather frank discussions across the table,to the point where, on one occasion, David Sullivan of the Building Trades tried to interrupt by saying "Friends shouldn't be arguing that way with each other." The President cut him off and told him that he wanted the views. And Meany tried to get it out of the rut of discussion that he and I were having for a good fifteen minutes. And he shut Mr. Meany off. And he and I went at it.

Now I'm sure he was seeking advice, because I observed that was his method. And if he could provoke you into bringing out everything that was in the disagreement, that was his learning period. And I happened to know that and stayed right with him. Fortunately, I happened to have my facts correct.

Now he made that public when he gave the hundred pens to the AFL-CIO. He stressed the fact that there had been differences. There had been many things we had agreed upon, and he did seek advice--and sometimes even advice after a fact, and he got it even with the table-pounding of Joe Beirne--and he just put it out that way. Well, what he was referring to was the Labor-Commerce--

Ba: Weren't there other major labor leaders who opposed that proposed merger, too?

B: That's the great silence, you see. You mentioned earlier that you were in a job of trying to perceive history. I feel sorry for you because trying to perceive contemporary history is an extremely difficult task. For, on this one, I haven't come across anyone since that incident who favored the consolidation. I feel certain, however, based upon the experience in the Cabinet Room, that no one had told Wirtz except me that they would oppose it when being informed that the President was about to propose that.

Now I don't know what someone may have thought, so therefore you're left only with what they tell you that "I was opposed to it from the beginning." Well, if they were, they didn't say so. I can't help but sort of conclude that the President of the United States in a major speech to the Congress of the United States wouldn't be making a proposal of this type with only the advice coming from what you might call the academicians of the labor movement. I think someone in the labor movement had to be in favor of that.

Ba: There was some speculation that George Meany had endorsed the idea.

B: I doubt Meany's endorsement. I think he was neutral; I think he was asked--and I'm only thinking, I'm guessing, I don't know--that he was asked about it, and I think his position was as it was in the Cabinet Room--neutral. That he'd study it; that it was worth a study. It was a pretty major thing, and he wouldn't be for or against it until he really got into it.

Ba: Actually, it sounds like that the day before the speech is to be made is a little late to be calling people to ask their opinion on it.

B: I don't think we were called to ask our opinion. I think we were called to sort of tip us off on the belief that either most of us would be listening to radio or looking at television, and if that sentence comes out, then the damage was done, because then we'd be calling among our circles in labor to

find out who the hell gave that kind of stupid advice, you see. And finding nobody who did, then the assault on the White House by organized labor would be quite a different matter. But when you're prepared that he's going to do it and you react, then when it's done you're not listening and catching it the first time, so you may not be quite as enraged. Now having heard it, say, "Well, I knew he was going to say it, and he did, hoped he wouldn't, but he did. Now how the hell do we undo this mess!"

Ba: Have you often had that kind of frank exchange of views with Mr. Johnson as you described in the conference room?

B: Yes, on more than one occasion, of course, he invited us over for lunch--just a small group. With us, and I don't know how it was with other groups, but with us he would either expound himself in the areas that he was searching for reactions, or he would have one of the experts like the Bureau of the Budget chief Schultze, or Wirtz, or Goldberg, support or give the story of what he was looking at, and we'd react. He would want it that way. And anybody who wanted to react, they either just stood up or raised their hand or just started to talk--depending upon the size of the group. And I think he did a hell of a lot of listening.

Ba: Did you ever talk him out of anything? It's on the written record what he proposed--

B: Well, in the incident I used, I think we talked him out of the Labor-Commerce merger because I heard no more of it after that speech. Now, did he ever acknowledge that he was talked out of something? Not to my recollection just sitting here trying to recall. Had he ever been talked out of something? The answer to that one is "yes." But did he ever have a reason to acknowledge that he was talked out of it? No. Because you never knew when he was talked out of it, you see. It's only after he's on the record--like the Labor-Commerce merger--that by his actions you find out whether he's talked out of

it or not. But when he's not on the record; and he's saying what he thinks; and then he's searching for you to give your view, if you have dented what he has already been thinking, you have no way of knowing it because he's the man who finally has to give the go-ahead. Who can really tell what little adjective got him thinking in entirely different channels than he had been thinking. I don't think there's any way to run that down. However, by his own expressions on more than one occasion--in mixed company, not just with labor leaders, not just blowing smoke at labor leaders but where there were industry leaders too--he adknowledged the contribution of people from organized labor in helping to shape his viewpoint, particularly on social legislation.

Ba: How have you gotten along with the Labor Department in the Johnson Administration? Has Wirtz been an easy man to work with?

B: Yes, I really believe Willard Wirtz will go down as the greatest of the Secretaries of Labor in the Twentieth Century. Now, of course, there are a couple of more Presidents going to come along, but right up to this point--up to 1968. Now I have personally known every Secretary of Labor since Mrs. Perkins, including whom I consider a very good friend and a very talented man, Arthur Goldberg. But I honestly believe that Willard Wirtz, measured against Perkins and Mitchell, Judge Schwellenbach, Tobin, Goldberg--that Wirtz will stand head and shoulders above them. His talent was not the talent that any of the others had, including Arthur--who had a tendency for flamboyance, but who also had great talent. But Wirtz was knowledgeable, number one; firm, number two; he didn't care whether he had to tell you something you didn't particularly like to hear. He'd tell you in a nice way, but you knew you were getting it straight--and did it without anger, sadness. He was just a master craftsman and a master artisan in the handling of the rather complex problems that the Department of Labor had. So you see, he not only

had to deal with organized labor, his job is to represent all the working people in the United States, and most of them do not belong to organized labor. So he had to be pretty tough with us, and he was. He measured up to that. And I think that's the measurement of a man.

Ba: It's about 3 o'clock. Have you got a few more minutes?

B: Yes, let's--

Ba: Because I wanted to ask you this related to that. A lot of the social legislation of the Johnson years has involved organized labor directly. It's partly that there have been passed a lot of things that labor has been wanting for a long time, like Medicare. But I was thinking more specifically of things like OEO and its employment activities, and manpower training. Have you been able to work pretty closely with OEO and the Labor Department in these areas?

B: OEO has been a sort of fractured organization to work with, so from the standpoint of working with the national office of OEO--yes. We had people working with them all the time trying to help them shape things. When it came to manpower, that was in the Department of Labor. Of course, Wirtz gave an assignment to Stanley Ruttenberg who spent many years as the research director of that old CIO,and later, the Director of Research for AFL-CIO before he went to government. Stanley, of course, is a) a very knowledgeable man; and b) had worked drafting really the policies that old CIO and later AFL-CIO were adopting. He did practically all of the staff work that formed our policies in this very field. So when he took over manpower, a) we immediately knew it was in good hand; and b) we immediately knew and found of course to be true--and I think we would have if it had been somebody other than Ruttenberg--the open door there where something in some particular part of the country would be going sideways, or something would be done with funds that really was not the intention of either the

legislation nor the policies of the manpower group, and we'd have ready access to get things straightened out.

Ba: I gather you rank Mr. Johnson pretty highly as a President from the standpoint of labor, but do you think he did all he could have? For example, he proposed several times, but never got through Congress, the repeal of 14-B of the Taft-Hartley Act. Do you think he tried hard enough?

B: I'm certain he tried. And I'm certain that his people in the White House--the liaison people--tried, because I happen to have had discussions with Larry O'Brien who was heading up the legislative contact work even after he became Postmaster General. There's no doubt in my mind that Larry and his people were working hard--just as hard to have that done as they did to get other legislation which they succeeded in getting.
Now 14-B, of course, is in a case all by itself. It's a very important change that should be made. It's the only small sentence in federal legislation which has ever, to the best of our historical research, which has ever had the Congress of the United States abrogate to the States certain of its rights. It's unheard of in our political system. From that standpoint, 14-B stands as a bone in the throat.

Now there are strong emotional strings tied to 14-B. Even Everett Dirksen in the now-Nixon Administration can threaten to filibuster if he doesn't get his way, and he'll filibuster on 14-B or getting an amendment to the Constitution making prayer possible in the schools I mean, he has a hang-up--to use the popular expression today--and that's his thing. Well, we don't underestimate the ability of Everett McKinley Dirksen, when he tackles 14-B, to arouse the passions.

Now on labor legislation--14-B is part labor legislation--one strange failing that we could neither impress Kennedy or Johnson with--I doubt if we'll have much success with Nixon, although I personally would hope we do--

labor legislation falls into the category of emotional appeal 90-percent of the time, at least in my judgment. The only time we hear about anything connected with industrial relations is when there's a strike. And the bigger the strike and the more big shots that are disturbed--you know, like an airline strike when you can't take a $1,500 trip to Hawaii, you get very disturbed and you take out ads in the newspaper as some rich man in Boston did when it was an airline strike. So people become disturbed. My God, the experts come out of the woodwork, including Everett McKinley Dirksen, who in my judgment knows very little about all the complex matters involved in the relationship between people, one group of whom represents organized labor and another group of whom represents invested capital in a corporation and who has a managerial function. He knews very little, but he talks like an expert. And so do most of the Congressmen, and so do most of the Senators. And while we spend billions of dollars on research, you know, on how to get the man to the moon, we're not spending one penny on the research associated with these relationships of people in an economic, effective, impact on our country--economic field. No research at all. And so we're governed most of the time by the emotions of people who are reacting to something that disturbs them, and they're in a position to pass themselves off as an expert. That's what Dirksen does on 14-B. He's preserving the rights of people to have a job, and he really believes that. And 14-B hasn't got a damned thing to do with the right of people to have a job. Neither does union security, have the slightest thing to do with people having a right to work. Nothing to do with it at all!

So I would say, "No, Johnson didn't do as much as he should have." Neither did Kennedy. Neither did Eisenhower. Neither did Truman. Neither did Roosevelt. And I have to stop there because at least in '35 he was the inspiration for Wagner to go out and we got the first real good piece of

legislation for organized labor in order for organized labor or for workers who wanted to organize.

Ba: I've taken up a bunch of your time. Is there anything else you think ought to be added to a record like this?

B: Oh there are many things that could be added, but I think you as a historian will have to select that.

Ba: I've about run out of questions to ask you.

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Ba: The machine had been off, but while we've been talking, Mr. Beirne has commented on what he thinks is Mr. Johnson's major accomplishment. Would you elaborate on what you were just telling me?

B: Not to the same great extent. I believe that Mr. Johnson's record during his Presidency for advocating and supporting and pushing for social domestic legislation will rank him high in history, and in my judgment, having lived through all the Roosevelt years, will by accomplishment be rated above Roosevelt.

Taking the one significant--now, that's the whole social effort-- the one significant one is based, as I mentioned, on our own growing up, our own age, the age bracket of organized labor's leaders in late '40's, '50's, '60's. So all of us lived through the '20's and the '30's during a period when to graduate from grammar school was considered great. From our forefathers we inherited, from our parents we inherited, and from the leaders of the movement before us we inherited that which we still believe--and I think will be believed by the future labor leaders until the whole matter is corrected. That's the belief that the only substantial progress made can be gauged by the educational activities in the nation.

Now, Mr. Johnson as President, the matter of fact--the record we looked up--has produced more tangible practical legislation, has produced the dollars

to support the ideas in sum total that exceeds the total of all the thirty-five presidents before him. Therefore in this one area which is extremely important to us because we sort of live with the problems of why people are still ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed. We still live with that, and we try to do something about it. It's the essence of the whole labor movement. Mr. Johnson's contribution in this one field--if nothing else, and my judgment will rate him--it does with labor leaders right now, and will in the future rate him as the most effective President the United States has ever had.

Ba: Does the same ranking hold with the rank and file?

B: Unfortunately in this one area I'm talking about, no. Because, unfortunately, in the United States, and it's because of many things that go on--I might say parenthetically I'm a Marshall MacLuhan disciple--but the many things that go on that sort of forms opinions and forms views, and hence, sort of directs energies in the United States--the mass media, the newspapers, the radio, the TV especially--that doesn't place premiums on important things. It places the premiums on very unimportant things. So unfortunately, in my judgment, most of the American people are very much concerned about things which are very unimportant. Our education is the most important thing a person could devote their attention to. Parents, adults, and they have to direct their attention in order to give the guidance to the kids. The kids won.
The kids are no different than they were fifty years ago. They like the day they're not in school, not the day they go to school. If it's a rainy day, a snowy day, or cold that keeps them out of school, that's a plus. So the tender guidance and firm guidance that has to be given to the young is a very important thing, and it's not being given because the elder doesn't understand it. There are still too many parents who still believe the second car and the third television and the fifth radio and the house in the suburbs

is really the important thing.

And in order to accomplish these things, kids are still directed out of high school. Now we call them dropouts. Well, they became dropouts because of the influence, in my judgment, of their parents and their neighborhood; and their adults, parents and in the nieghborhood has caused them to place a very low premium on pursuing education. When they drop out, then the family is happy, and they're going to get a little additional income for a couple of years if it's a girl. They'll at least not have to pay for the clothes if it's a boy. And so their instincts and priorities have been satisfied. So, no, I don't think that our members would share our view because 53-percent of our members in the Communications Workers of America are under twenty-nine years of age, and most of them therefore have no college at all.

Ba: Did this kind of thing show up in the '68 election?

B: The '68 election was a strange one. The thing we talked about earlier in Chicago--the things that led up to Chicago--sort of harmed the Democratic nominee. The adroitness of Nixon over many years in getting the right combinations together was a factor in the '68 election. And of course George Wallace, from the standpoint of our people, was quite a factor. From our own internal surveys, George Wallace was commanding in the month of September about 39 percent of our membership's support.

Ba: Did that hold up through the election?

B: No. When the election was over, he didn't get 11 percent. He did not get 11 percent.

Ba: How did they divide between Humphrey and Nixon?

B: Humphrey got the majority. I'd say about 57 percent of our members now, members of the Communication Workers of America only, about 57 percent; Nixon down in the 30's; Wallace the 11.

But the effort in '68 or organized labor, for example--
I heard Humphrey say this; I heard Muskie say it; I heard Harris say it; I heard Birch Bayh said it; and all of these people of course are leading Democrats--Humphrey and Muskie being the two candidates--that the difference can really be attributed to organized labor's educational program when it was recognized as it was in October that George Wallace was really appealing to all the base instincts of our membership. No campaign up to 1968 ever received the educational support of organized labor that the 1968 one received, because we knew we couldn't let go unchallenged the open naked appeal to base prejudice, base instincts, of people that Wallace was effectively making.

Ba: Did you concentrate your educational campaign in these terms; that is--

B: Yes. We told the Wallace record when he was Governor. In that record of course we brought out this thing we talked about a little while ago--the educational factor for the people of Alabama when he was governor. Well, he couldn't duck the responsibilities of what went on when he was governor so long and later succeeded by his wife. He had all the power he needed to really make Alabama a shining example of everything he said he stood for. He didn't do that. He did quite the opposite. The wages were low. The educational levels were 'way low. Crome in the streets was awful. Homicides in Alabama were terrible. I mean, they were a 'way up in high-ranking state. So here was a demagogue. This is what we recognized in George Wallace. Here was the real demagogic material now coming through a new media called television. He had everything going for him that a demagogue does because unfortunately too many people, when they recognize something bad, they don't do anything about it. They turn their back and they don't want to be involved. One of the reasons we have so much crime in the street is because not enough people who want to take interest in protecting themselves. They think somebody

else has to do it for them.

But we shaped up to this one, as we did with Hitler. Because you got back into the record of organized labor, and the only group in the United States who never waivered in the middle '30's on Hitler was organized labor. He was condemned in every AFL convention. And when the CIO was organized, he was condemned in the CIO convention, for what he was--a dictatorial demagogue who was hookwinking even such people as Joseph Kennedy, Ambassador to Great Britain, who thought he was a great man. Now the same way with Wallace. Because if there's one thing organized labor is always sensitive to, it's the demagogue.

Now many people have accused Johnson of being--you know, just something in his own mind a little less than an autocratic king. He wasn't. Our antenna would tell us if he was, just as it told us about Wallace. Wallace was a greater threat than just getting 30 percent of a vote, and not being elected President--a much greater threat, because he was teaching things; and had all the media at his command to teach the worst things that's still in this rational animal called man. And he was appealing to them all and getting them up on the surface.

Ba: Thank you again, sir.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
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Gift of Personal Statement

By Joseph A. Beirne

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Joseph A. Beirne, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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Signed Joseph A. Beirne

Date July 15, 1971

Accepted Harry J. Kirkendall - for
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Date October 4, 1974