

INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: H. V. "DICK" BIRD  
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette  
PLACE: The University Club, San Diego, California

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G: You indicated that you had met Lyndon Johnson shortly after he came to Washington--

B: Yes.

G: --in 1937.

B: Through my brother Phil. My brother Phil was head of NYA in Oklahoma and Lyndon was, of course, the head of it [in Texas]. NYA, National Youth Administration, I think that's the proper--

G: Right. That's the name.

B: Yes. They met each other and they liked each other. My brother Phil is about the same size as Lyndon and, being a good westerner, midwesterner, they took to each other.

Then my brother Phil insisted that I go over and meet Lyndon, so I did. I took it upon myself. At that point I was--I forgot what my job was, but it had always been something to do with personnel. As I mentioned earlier, at that period in the military they shunned Congress; they were scared to death of Congress. If a congressman called, they would do everything in their power not to answer and not to return his call. It was a strange feeling. But I took the opposite tack. I had been Admiral [Chester] Nimitz' aide before coming back to Washington,

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and Admiral Nimitz became chief of naval personnel, so he brought me back with him. So I was in sort of an aiding position at that time. I was [an] aide and that was it, so I didn't have any particular chores. What am I saying? I didn't have a particular job, I could sort of be on my own, and on my own meant getting to know Congress. Of course, that helped a lot, too, because whenever a congressman or senator, including Lyndon, had a problem with the navy, they would call me. And of course being next to the boss, why, I could expedite things.

So that was the beginning of a relationship which lasted--well, lasted for a long, long time. We saw each other, as I mentioned, socially quite frequently, once every week or so, and went back and forth. There was a girl named Carleen Roberts [?], and Carleen [had] lived next door to me in Oklahoma City and I'd been sort of a beau of hers when we were going to school together. She became vice president of American Airlines--she was the only woman executive--and Lyndon sort of took a shine to her, in a nice way, because they were good friends and they helped each other. She helped getting tickets. I mean, getting seats on airplanes was beginning to get a little rough and she used to--the reason I mention her [is] because we were sort of a fivesome, with Carleen, Lyndon and Lady Bird. So we went to dinner and out a lot together. As I mentioned, Lady Bird and I always called each other cousins, although I really don't think we were. But anyway, we were kissing cousins, say, put it that way.

G: Do you know how Lyndon Johnson got that commission?

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B: Yes, I commissioned him.

G: Did you?

B: Yes.

G: Do you recall the circumstances?

B: Well, now let's see, we're talking about the beginning of World War II now.

G: He got the commission before the war.

B: Before the war, that's correct. Because he went out on active duty the first year of World War II. Well, yes, I was the director of officer procurement at that time and we were beginning to open offices all over the country, one in each capital city. I commissioned a million officers during that period. But, anyway, he went down to the Washington office and applied and passed all the exams and he was commissioned. Of course, I was sort of fathering it because it was my job to do that, too.

G: Did he indicate initially that he wanted to become a commissioned officer?

B: Yes. Yes.

G: And asked you to follow up on it?

B: Well, he didn't ask me. I knew, of course, as I was seeing him once or twice a week, and I knew when he went down there, and of course I called the director of that particular office and told him I was personally interested. Lyndon never asked me to interfere in any way at any time in anything. I always approved. So many of those congressmen really put the pressure on.

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G: Really?

B: Yes, to get this boy commissioned, get that boy commissioned, it really was. . . . But Lyndon never, ever put any pressure on me or anybody else that I knew of. He would tell you about his interest in somebody but never pressure.

G: John Connally was commissioned, too, wasn't he, about the same time?

B: Yes, about the same time. But I know they were both during that period.

(Interruption)

G: In July 1937 the House Naval Affairs Committee and the Appropriations Committee went to Norfolk for an inspection trip of the Fifth District on the destroyer Porter. Were you along there, or do you remember anything about that occasion?

B: The trip I remember about that same time, when the committee--we went out on an aircraft carrier. I don't remember that particular destroyer or the name of the aircraft carrier, but I know we were all on it, because everybody wanted a drink. And I informed the committee that, no, they couldn't have alcohol, and so they sort of took it out on me.

G: Oh, really?

B: Yes. (Laughter)

G: Well, was Lyndon Johnson a good sailor? Did he like being aboard a ship?

B: Well, I never recall him getting sick.

G: (Laughter)

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- B: I couldn't answer whether he was a good sailor or not. Actually, we were always on such big ships when we were together that no one could get possibly sick.
- G: In 1939 there was a bill up to establish a naval base on Guam, and Johnson supported that. Do you remember, did you work with him at all in getting that appropriation?
- B: I worked with him in that--if you'll realize, never was I in any official capacity with that committee. Always this was just as aide to the Admiral, whatever--so I talked to him about it a lot because I was very interested in Guam, and [I] subsequently became the commander of the Marianas in Guam. Because at that point we all knew we were going into war with Japan; I mean, all of us officers knew that. So we needed bases and that was the--well, I was very much for Guam.
- G: Do you recall his efforts in that respect?
- B: Yes, he worked very hard to get that base, worked very hard with the committee. I can recall that. And of course it got to be a major base, as you well know.
- G: Was he helpful to the navy on its appropriations bills?
- B: Yes, very. He worked very closely with a great friend of mine named Senator David Walsh, who was the chairman of the Senate then Naval Affairs Committee, subsequently the Naval Armed Forces [Armed Services] Committee. He and Lyndon were quite friendly and they worked together very closely on all of those bills. And neither one ever took a bill, to my knowledge, up on the floor that didn't get passed.
- G: Now, President Roosevelt had an interest in the navy, too.

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B: Yes, very.

G: Do you recall LBJ ever discussing anything with President Roosevelt about the navy?

B: Well, I wouldn't have been present at such conferences.

G: But did he ever talk to you about this?

B: Yes. President Roosevelt was very high on Lyndon; he was sort of a protege. I think probably Lyndon was his favorite congressman, so they talked to each other quite frequently. I don't recall any particular conversation. But, anyway, Roosevelt of course was all for building up the navy and so was Lyndon.

G: Why do you think he was put on the Naval Affairs Committee to begin with?

B: I think just by happenstance. I don't think he--of course, that was a powerful committee in those days, because it controlled a lot of money.

G: Sure, but there was nothing in--

B: No, in his background.

G: And he didn't have a coastline in his district.

B: No, so he was far from the sea. Well, you know how they work those committees; the speaker makes his recommendations and he just sort of proportions them out. I think it was happenstance. I never recall Lyndon saying he had requested it.

G: Well, the story, of course, goes that in the train ride from Galveston to Fort Worth when he rode with President Roosevelt that they discussed committee assignments--

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B: Oh. Oh.

G: --and decided on the Naval Affairs Committee. But I'm just wondering, he never talked to you about that?

B: I doubt very much. No. And I doubt very much, because in the first place, the President wouldn't be discussing with a young congressman assignments on committees, because that would be interfering from the White House, and they certainly then and now try to keep hands off those committee assignments.

G: The House Naval Affairs Committee visited in Corpus Christi in 1939. Were you at all part of that?

B: No. I doubt if there was any naval officer that went along with them.

G: Anything on Johnson's aid to the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station? Did he work with you at all on that?

B: No, not that I recall. Corpus Christi, that was a navy project. The navy pretty much started that on their own. I doubt very much if there was any congressional action or reaction, except maybe the congressman from Corpus Christi, whom I don't remember who it was.

G: Dick Kleberg.

B: It was? I knew Dick well, yes.

G: Johnson had worked for Kleberg, as a matter of fact.

B: That's right, yes.

G: Did you ever see them together?

B: Yes, we had lunch together many times in the House luncheon place there. Yes, they were obviously quite close.

G: Anything on the navy expansion bills that came up before that committee?

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B: Well, specifics, I can't [recall], but Lyndon was always for a big navy, and he was a navyphile. Anything that he could do, he did, I think, both in influence and in talking to his friends and so on.

G: In 1940 the House passed the two-ocean navy bill. Do you recall his advocacy of that?

B: No. But I'm sure, knowing his general philosophy, that he was for it.

G: Yes.

B: Don't your notes show that he voted for it?

G: Yes.

B: I thought so.

G: What was his attitude at the time? Did he express concern about the war clouds and the--?

B: Yes. Yes, I think he was well aware by the way we were heading, and with that in mind, that just added to his support for a bigger navy.

G: Of course, not everyone was in sympathy with the defense move and there were a lot of isolationists in the Senate.

B: Oh, yes. Yes.

G: Walter Winchell got into trouble for attacking some of these people who went to the Navy Department. Do you recall the Walter Winchell incident? He was a lieutenant commander in the navy and they tried to get him to either resign his commission or--

B: You're talking about World War II now, because he was still there the first year of the war.

G: Sure.



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B: Yes, but only vaguely and not enough really to comment. I know that there was some movement in the Navy Department to try to get him to resign or get out. But he didn't, as I recall. He stayed right in there. But then he did resign, as I recall, too. I'm sorry, just the details escape me at this time.

G: Nothing of Johnson's involvement in it?

B: No. No.

G: How about LBJ investigating the Navy Department, do you remember any of that?

B: What year do you refer to?

G: Well, I'm talking about 1941 to 1943.

B: I don't recall him ever investigating the Navy Department.

G: Well, I'll give you some specifics. One thing that he was interested in was drafting executive brains for government service. Do you remember that?

B: No. No.

G: Just as you would draft doctors or--

B: Yes. Well, we did draft doctors. No, you're talking now about the year 1941 and 1942. No, I don't remember any connection between Lyndon and--and that was my job then, I commissioned all the doctors, so I would have. I'm sure we must have discussed it.

G: Well, businessmen, though, drafting businessmen.

B: Well, that was, again, part of my job. We were just reaching out, and everybody wanted to get into uniform, you know, they just wanted to.

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And we were taking them, right out of business and right out of every place.

G: He also made an investigation the effect of which was that the Navy Department was filling too many desk jobs with able-bodied sailors that ought to be at sea.

B: Yes, I remember that, I remember that.

G: Now, tell me about that.

B: Well, of course, it made headlines, because that's exactly what we do, and that's why we started the WAVES. And Lyndon was very helpful in the WAVE bit, by the way, which I organized; I organized the WAVES. And he was very helpful, because David I. Walsh, the senator, was very much against women in uniform, very much. He opposed it, and Lyndon was for it for just that reason, that he thought the women should take over those desk jobs.

G: And what did he do? Do you recall?

B: Oh, you mean specifically?

G: Yes.

B: No.

G: Did he get along well with Secretary [Frank] Knox?

B: Yes. Yes, indeed. They were good friends.

G: He himself seems to have used Navy Department personnel to staff that committee of his and the subcommittee.

B: I don't--of course, Bill Deason was over there and, first, John Connally, but, no, those were his own--I don't--

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G: Well, he had a couple of WAVEs when he was doing some of the investigations.

B: Well, I don't think you'd call them on his committee, though.

G: Well, they were detailed to the [committee] to--

B: To work. Well, I don't recall. I'm sorry.

G: Okay.

B: But Lyndon was very careful on using people in uniform because he was worried about the public on it.

(Interruption)

G: He also made the criticism that the navy and the OPM were ignoring the small petroleum companies in buying oil for the armed services. Do you remember that?

B: No. No, I don't.

G: He was, I suppose, representing the independent producers.

B: Oh, I'm sure he must have, sure. His district was full of those independents. Probably still is.

G: You have some notes there that--

B: No, I was just looking at dates.

G: Oh, I see.

B: These are just by dates, that's all.

G: Okay. He, in 1941, worked very diligently for the extension of the Selective Service Act. You'll recall that the act was going to expire in October.

B: Yes.

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G: And I think it passed by one vote in the House, the extension of the Selective Service.

B: I recall that vote.

G: Did you work with him on that at all?

B: No. No, I did not.

G: Do you recall his efforts?

B: No, because that would have been out of my field there. Selective Service was not navy.

G: Yes. Did you ever have an opportunity to see him with Sam Rayburn and observe their relationship?

B: Oh, yes.

G: What were they like together?

B: Very close, very close.

G: Would you elaborate and just describe any times that you were with them?

B: Well, they were sort of like brothers.

G: Well, give me a particular time that they were together and tell me what it was like.

B: I've had lunch with them dozens of times there and they didn't move without the other. They worked together just like brothers. Very close.

G: Of course, Rayburn was considerably LBJ's senior.

B: Oh, yes. Actually it was more like a father-son relationship, I would put it that way rather than brothers. Sam Rayburn just sort of watched

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after his protege there all the way through. Later we went out to visit--where is Sam's home? Do you remember where he lived?

G: Oh, in Bonham?

B: Bonham. We went out to visit him out there in Bonham.

G: When was this? This must have been in later years.

B: It was later years, yes.

G: This must have been right before he died.

B: I think it was. I remember his sister was the one--we had lunch there and his sister was greeting us.

But, anyway, to answer your question, it was like a father-son relationship.

G: Another thing that Lyndon Johnson did in 1941 was promote navy advertising in small Texas newspapers, navy recruitment ads.

B: Through his stations there?

G: Well, no, in Texas newspapers. He tried to get the navy to take out ads in small weeklies and local daily papers.

B: If he did that, I'm not aware of it.

G: He didn't lobby you on that?

B: No, he did not. No.

(Interruption)

G: Let me ask you about the attack on Pearl Harbor and LBJ's immediately going on active duty. Do you recall that? Did you have any association with him during this period?

B: No, I did not. I do recall this, that he actually desperately wanted to get out and get into the thing. Get in a uniform and get out and

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get into it. There's no question about that. Now, there was some question of his coming back, but that was another story because, well, they brought all the congressmen back. We had a lot of them in uniform, a lot of them. And Lyndon came back very reluctantly, that I do recall.

G: Really?

B: Yes, he wanted to stay out longer and establish himself as a naval officer and promote--what I heard, and I'm sort of vague on this, but I remember talking to several officers who were with him when he was on active duty and they said he was really an excellent officer. I know there have been pros and cons on that, but this was from people that were actually with him on duty and said he was excellent.

G: Yes. Did you ever have a chance to observe his relationship with Admiral Nimitz?

B: Not actually when they were together, but later. That's when we came out; he asked Admiral Nimitz to come up with [Konrad] Adenauer. I went down to pick up Admiral Nimitz and bring him back, and the relationship, from what I saw of those two, was quite nice. But of course by then Lyndon was long since out of the navy and had nothing to do with the navy. I do know this, he kept talking about Admiral Nimitz frequently and he admired him as a good Texan.

G: Yes, he was a neighbor practically, wasn't he?

B: That's right, Johnson City and [Fredericksburg].

G: Well, now, after the outbreak of the war, LBJ went to the West Coast to work on the [James] Forrestal program of inspecting navy yards and

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manpower training programs and that sort of thing. Did you have any contact with him at all?

B: No, not during that period.

G: Okay, do you recall the next time that you did see him?

B: Well, when he got out of uniform and came back to Congress.

G: Really?

B: Yes.

G: Do you have an impression of how his experience overseas affected him?

B: My feeling was that he was rather proud of himself for having gone overseas. Of course he, to my knowledge, never was in any action. He got shot at, I think, while he was flying, but never was in any action as such. I think he felt pretty proud of himself.

G: Did he feel that there were some problems in the services? Lack of coordination among the services, for example?

B: I doubt it. He didn't have enough rank to have an opinion on that. He just couldn't possibly know.

G: He seems to have felt that our planes were not as good as the Japanese planes.

B: Well, they were not. (Laughter) He was right. But we knew that, too.

G: Yes.

B: Yes. So we started building better planes.

G: Did he ever talk to you about this, though?

B: Yes, he talked quite a bit about--he was always conscious of not being inferior in arms. This he carried through his whole life. He did not

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want us to have second place, like we are in now, by the way. I wish we had more Lyndons right now that believed that.

G: There was some consideration to having him work in the Navy Department when he came back. They were working on something with Forrestal or maybe something in the [office of the] secretary of navy.

B: Well, he and Forrestal were quite close. They both admired each other. That I do know personally. And it could have been. On the other hand, at that period the mood was to get all the congressmen back in their seats; that was the mood of the public, to get them all back out of uniform and back in their seats. So if there was what you've just said, then I'm sure Lyndon probably would not have [accepted]. I don't think he could have accepted any--

G: Well, this was a time in February and March before he had gone overseas. And the note that I have indicates that he was going to go to work either with Forrestal or with Dr. [Joseph] Barker in manpower training.

B: Oh, yes, Dr. Barker.

G: He was a civilian, wasn't he?

B: Yes, and a non--well, I won't say. I never thought very highly of Dr. Barker.

G: Really?

B: No. And I worked with him quite closely. I don't recall really. It could very well have been, because Lyndon and Forrestal were so close. This was before he got into uniform?



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G: No, he was in a uniform, but he just hadn't gone overseas. He was out on the West Coast.

B: Oh, well, that could well have been, but I don't know anything about it, though.

G: Yes. Anything about his association with Dr. Barker?

B: Well, I think we both shared equal views of Dr. Barker. We thought he was--I don't want to quote Lyndon on that one; I can just quote myself. I thought he was sort of--my first opinion was a menace to the military.

G: How so?

B: Well, he was one of these take-charge--what he wanted to do was basically he wanted to replace the chief of naval personnel in uniform with [a] civilian. That's what I think basically he wanted. I don't know whether I would want to be quoted on that. I wonder if Dr. Barker is alive?

G: I doubt it.

B: But we didn't see eye to eye, that's for sure.

G: Did LBJ ever talk about his trip overseas?

B: His trip overseas, you mean when--?

G: He went to Australia and New Guinea.

B: Yes.

G: What did he say about it?

B: Well, as I've said before, I think he was sort of proud of himself. He conducted himself very well. Again, I'm repeating, but two or three other officers who were with him said that he was an excellent

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officer. And I do know that he mentioned many times that he was not ready to come back when he was recalled but he had no choice.

G: I know that one of the things that they wanted to do--this was I guess while he was gone--was get Mayor Tom Miller's son in officer candidate school. Did you recall that?

B: I don't know Mayor Tom Miller.

G: Okay. He was the mayor of Austin.

B: Oh, that name means nothing to me.

But along that line, the pressures during that period on Congress were fantastic. The congressman would have his campaign manager he'd known all his life, donated and made him--and his son was there. So he wanted him not to be drafted but to go into OCS or be commissioned. The pressures were really tremendous.

G: Well, how did you deal with this in the Bureau of Naval Personnel?

B: Well, I did it. What I did was, number one, one basic thing, to be an officer in the navy you had to have a college degree. Now, the army didn't do it that way. They drafted them, put them into training camps, whatever they called those things, and let them work their way up. But I said--in fact, I set the policy--that if a man had proved himself both educationally and in business or profession, let's give him a commission right there. So there was the difference between the two opposing philosophies.

G: Were there enough spots in OCS, though, for all of the people that wanted to be officers?

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B: Well, our OCS was minor compared to the number of officers that we commissioned outright.

G: I see. I see.

B: Most of the officer strength in World War II came directly out of civilian life, into my offices all over the country, and they put on the stripes.

G: Instant officers, huh? (Laughter)

B: Yes. But they turned out pretty well.

G: Yes. Well, how did they learn all the procedure?

B: Well, depending. If he was a doctor, he became a doctor. If he was a civil engineer, he became a civil engineer. If he was straight line, which means ships, we sent him for three months to--we had three schools: Chicago--so we trained them in three months to go out and take command of an LST, literally. But they had enough brains to do it.

G: Well, Lyndon Johnson was a lieutenant commander in the navy.

B: Yes, that's burned him. He never got to be commander.

G: Well, did he talk about that? What did he say?

B: Yes, at night, late at night, we were in a plane or something, he would say that he always wished that he could put that brass on his cap. But there was nothing I could have done about it.

G: Yes. Tell me what the status of a lieutenant commander was during that time, in 1942.

B: Well, it corresponds to a major in the army. Lieutenant commanders

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had command of LSTs, amphibious ships; commanders had destroyers.

Does that answer your question?

G: Well, I want you to go beyond that and tell me how they were regarded, what sort of influence they had, this sort of thing.

B: Well, in the military, of course, each grade that you got up, you have more influence; you have more men or a bigger ship or so forth. That's about the only difference between lieutenant commander and a commander except for the gold braid on the cap, and that's what Lyndon wanted.

G: Well, do you think it helped that he was also a member of Congress on the Naval Affairs Committee?

B: Helped in what way?

G: Well, to just give him increased stature in the military.

B: No.

G: It didn't?

B: No.

G: How do you know that?

B: I don't know it as a fact, but it wouldn't. I know my navy that well. You take the ordinary ten lieutenants on a ship, they don't even know what a congressman is, for heaven's sake. And I mean that literally.

G: But an admiral would know.

B: I see what you're getting at. No, I don't think that--certainly Admiral Nimitz was the boss and I don't think. . . . Well, Lyndon didn't get exactly the highest jobs he could have had, you know. So to answer you directly, no, I don't think it had any influence, none whatsoever.

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G: In August of 1942 he flew to Seattle on a mission with I think it was Warren Magnuson. They ended up out at Dutch Harbor, Alaska. And there was an Admiral [L. H.] Thebaud there--

B: Thebaud, yes.

G: --and [Artemus] Gates and Gehres, I guess, Leslie Gerhes [?].

B: Gehres, yes, who was here.

G: Is that right?

B: He ran for Congress from--

G: Did he?

B: Yes, I knew him well.

G: What were they doing out there, do you know?

B: Well, at that point, just like Guam, we were looking for [bases]. Remember, the Japs were in Alaska. Do you recall that? They actually landed in Alaska. So we were looking for bases and, though I don't recall that, I'm sure that's what they were out there for. And undoubtedly the admirals were trying to get Congress to give them some money to put in a base.

G: I gather here was a real problem of coordination among the services. There's an indication that they even had to break up a fight while they were out there.

B: Oh? Well, that I wouldn't know.

G: You don't know? He never talked about it?

B: No. No.

G: Okay. There's also a note in the files that indicated that he wanted

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John Connally to go to London as a member of Admiral [Harold] Stark's staff. Do you remember anything about that?

B: I remember there was some talk. But I had sort of lost track of John Connally at that particular period. I don't know where--do you know where he was on duty at that time?

G: Oh, I think he later ended up on the Hornet, didn't he?

B: Yes, but at that particular time you're speaking [of], I don't know what--I know Lyndon of course always was interested in John.

G: Now, in late 1942 there were rumors that LBJ was to be sent on a secret mission to London, and it had something to do with the Navy Department. I think the trip was cancelled, but do you remember the circumstances of it?

B: No, but I do know that Admiral [Ernest] King, who was then our chief of naval operations, wanted to use Lyndon as much as he could on these kinds of things because Lyndon was good at them. But I don't know about that particular [mission]. It sounds very top secret to me so there was no reason why I should know.

G: He went out to Oregon when they scraped the battleship Oregon in Portland and made a speech there.

B: What year would that have been?

G: This would have been December 1942, I believe. Do you remember that?

B: Vaguely. I did not go along with him, but there would be no reason for me to.

G: Yes. In 1953 [1943] he really began his investigations. He was investigating personnel in the Navy Department. Do you remember that?

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B: No, I don't recall he ever did.

G: Well, as I say, what sort of jobs people were holding down, able-bodied sailors, and also he was investigating absenteeism in the areas of defense contractors. Remember that? He even introduced a bill, a work-or-fight bill.

B: I remember reading about it, but I was not in Washington at that time.

G: Okay. That was 1943.

B: Not 1943; you said 1953.

G: No, this was 1943.

B: Oh, 1943. Well, then I was there, but I don't recall that investigation.

G: He was also appointed a member of the Board of Visitors of the Naval Academy. Can you tell me about that?

B: Right. Yes. That's quite an honor and, matter of fact, I think I went down with him. The Board of Visitors, of course, [met] annually, and what they do is spend a week down at both West Point and Annapolis. I mean, not the same group but. . . . What they do is look into the curriculum and see if they want to change policy and this sort of thing. An outside group and a good thing, and Lyndon liked that.

G: I noticed that in February 1943 LBJ criticized Paul McNutt, the manpower administrator, with regard to absenteeism. Do you remember that?

B: No, and there would be no reason why. That was outside the military. I remember reading about it. I don't think Lyndon and McNutt ever got along very well, but this is just--I have no reason to say that except I just don't think they did. They were both prima donnas.

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G: Really?

You've mentioned that LBJ was a good friend of Ed Weisl. Can you tell me more about their friendship?

B: I don't know where it started and I really don't know how or why. In other words, I don't recall, but we went up twice with them to spend-- well, we spent three or four days with Lady Bird and Lyndon in Ed Weisl--he lived in the Hampshire House in New York, which is a very fancy place. I do recall one evening we were there and Tom Clark--you remember Tom Clark?--and Mary Clark and Lyndon and Lady Bird and Elsa, my wife, and me with the Weisls. And the ladies all wanted to go out to a play, and I remember none of us wanted to go out and see the damn play, none of the four men. So Lyndon said, "Well. . . ." I said, "Let's have a vote. Let's do it just like you do in Congress. Let's have a vote." So the three of us voted for him [to do] it, so he took all the ladies out, which was not anything, but he took all of them out. [He met the] Weisls through Dick--well, the president of Hearst, such a good friend, I'll think of it in a minute--but he was the one I think that originally introduced Lyndon to Weisl [Dick Berlin]. He saved Hearst; Hearst was about to go bankrupt.

G: During this period he was also investigating shipbuilding operations, particularly those in Texas and places like that.

B: Yes, and also that famous New Orleans--the one that was building all the ships. Oh, what was his--I'm good on names. The one that built all those LSTs, turning one out every day, from New Orleans, that famous shipbuilder--Kaiser.



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G: Yes.

B: Kaiser. What was his first name? [Henry Kaiser] Anyway, Lyndon was sort of queasy about Kaiser and I think he probably investigated Kaiser. This probably is what you have there. But Kaiser was doing the bit and we needed him. One a day, you remember those Kaiser merchant ships?

G: Yes.

B: They were awful.

G: Were they?

B: Yes. But we had to have them.

G: Drew Pearson, in one of his columns, mentioned a report by LBJ on how the Navy Department helped get deferments for civilian employees and that this was hushed up by Chairman [Carl] Vinson and Secretary Knox. Do you remember anything like that?

B: Well, sort of, because we had categories of civilians. Actually that was me. If they were in a certain category where they were--and we had boards to investigate--they were more important to the war effort staying where they were, then they were given deferments. What did we call them? Not 4-F. Anyway, we had a category we put them in so then they were not draftable. But it was necessary. I could challenge anybody who would say that wasn't necessary.

G: Sure.

Anything else on LBJ's relationship with the administration, Harold Ickes or any of the other cabinet department heads, agency heads?

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B: No, but there would be no reason that I would know about that.

G: Anything on his association with other members of the Naval Affairs Committee?

B: Well, of course, Carl and he were very close. Joe Casey, he was close to Joe. And of course to Warren Magnuson. I don't see his name on here. And Sterling Cole, he was close to Sterling.

G: In 1943 he felt that there were some personnel problems at the Naval Air Training Center in Corpus. He reported this to Vinson. Did he ever talk to you about that?

B: No.

G: How did you meet Bill Deason?

B: I think through John Connally; I'm pretty sure it was through John Connally. But there were four or five of us there, Lyndon and Connally and Bill Deason and a couple of others, we'd have lunch together. I think it was a casual--and then of course Bill I commissioned and Bill came to work for me in the bureau there.

G: He was stationed in New Orleans for a while, Bill Deason was, isn't that right?

B: Could be. I always recall him just in Washington.

G: I see.

B: But that gang up there, they were great, with Mary Rather and Mary Margaret [Wiley Valenti] and Bill Deason and all that group. They were fine people.

G: Now, in 1945 LBJ went to Europe at the close of the war in Europe to

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investigate, I think, surplus material and things of this nature. Do you recall that trip? Did he ever talk to you about it?

B: I was out fighting the war in the Pacific at that time on the Missouri, so I--no.

G: I know you wrote him a letter after that, so he must have written you about it.

B: Yes.

G: Anything on his relationship with Tom Clark that--?

B: Yes, very close. I would guess that Tom was probably his best friend during those years in Washington. And as I've mentioned before, socially we were all very close. We'd see each other. He thought very highly of Tom.

G: What was Lyndon Johnson like socially during this period?

B: Sort of distant.

G: Really?

B: He really didn't like parties. He liked small dinners and that's what we did mostly.

G: Well, was he animated in those occasions?

B: Oh, yes, he would hold the floor.

G: Really?

B: Oh, yes, he was always making a speech. And really quite charming as a dinner companion, at least that's what my wife used to say. Her father's an admiral and her grandfather's an admiral, so she's pretty well trained in making estimates.

G: Well, was he humorous on these occasions?

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B: Sometimes. He could tell stories, but he wasn't one of these professional storytellers--you know the kind I'm talking about--that he would take over the whole dinner conversation. No, he was quite charming, particularly when we were around with--what was the name of that American Airlines girl?

G: Carleen Roberts?

B: Carleen Roberts, yes.

G: What sort of stories did he tell?

B: Not off-color.

G: But, I mean, were they Texas political--?

B: No, not political, just Texas down-on-the-farm stories.

G: Crider boy stories, things like that?

B: Yes.

G: Was he a good mimic?

B: No.

G: Never heard him mimic?

B: Only himself.

G: That's about all I have on this period.

B: Yes. Of course, the later period is when I knew him much better.

G: Yes.

B: After the war.

G: Anything else, though, on this period during the war or immediately after the war?

B: Well, immediately after the war, that would be in 1945. Yes, a little something. After the surrender on the Missouri, I had orders to be G-1

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on Admiral Nimitz' staff back in Pearl Harbor. I was just a young-- no, I was an old commander, not quite captain--and G-1 on a big staff is tantamount to promotion. So I reported in at Guam; in fact, I flew back with Admiral Nimitz from the Missouri to Guam, where his headquarters were then. Then we flew back to Pearl Harbor. I was happy because I was doing the whole demobilization, the flying carpet we called it then, getting all the troops back from [overseas]. And I had it pretty well organized and I was really quite pleased with myself.

[I] had been there about a month and Admiral Nimitz called me into his office there in Pearl Harbor and he said, "You have orders back to Washington." I said, "Oh, no, please, Admiral, I--" He said, "Well, I just talked to Admiral King. I don't know who you know back there but you're going back to start congressional liaison for the Navy Department." I said, "Oh, Jeez." I was so happy because everything was going fine. And I said, "Please--" He said, "You're doing well here. You're doing very well and I didn't want to lose you." And I said, "Well, can't you call Admiral King and then tell him I'm not"--well, he knew me but--"tell him I'm very happy here and everything seems to be fine?" He said, "All right." About an hour later he said, "Did you ever know a congressman named Lyndon Johnson?" I said, "Well, yes, I used to know him pretty well." He said, "Well, he wants you to come back and be congressional liaison." I said, "Well, can't Admiral King do something about that?" He said, "Not this time." So in twenty-four hours I was en route.

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G: Really? Did you ever talk--?

B: So I went storming in to see Lyndon. I said, "Lyndon, I know you have the best of intentions and whatnot, but I was very happy and that's a good professional job. I'm a career officer. That's a good professional job." He said, "Yes, but we need you back here more." So that's a little anecdote.

G: Well, did you work with him during this period?

B: Oh, yes.

G: This was immediately after the war?

B: After the war in 1945, yes.

G: What sorts of issues did you work on?

B: Well, by working, I was in this position, as I mentioned, that I was aide to the chief of naval personnel, and so Lyndon and I would have lunch and he'd say, "What do you think about this?" and "What do you think about that?" And I'd give him my honest opinion and I think he believed it, because there were a lot of difficulties [?], particularly the unification of the armed forces. That was a big issue then.

G: It was also a controversial issue.

B: Very controversial. And the navy was completely against it.

G: What was Johnson's role in this, do you recall?

B: I've forgotten what his position [was], but he was very big on the Naval Affairs staff at that time, the Naval Affairs Committee. And so was David I. Walsh. I was trying very hard to lobby them into not having an armed forces [committee]. I tried very hard but I lost.

G: Do you think it turned out to be a good thing?

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B: No.

G: Really?

B: No.

G: What was LBJ's appraisal of it in retrospect, do you recall?

B: He did not want it.

G: Really?

B: No. He wanted to keep the old Naval Affairs [Committee]. Well, for not only that but selfish reasons, too. If they formed a big committee, he would lose priority in the committee. You know what that means to a congressman. A young congressman is a nothing.

G: Anything else on, say, the investigations? I asked you about the Elk Hill [Naval Petroleum Reserve]. Any of the other--?

B: No, but if you want to get to the later years, then--I don't know whether you want to do that now or want to have lunch.

G: Sure, let's go ahead and talk about that.

B: All right. Well, I had led up to it because, as I mentioned, I was chief of staff for the First Fleet. No, no, no, no, that's later. In the year 1951 I went back as senior aide to John Connally. That may be a little ahead of ourselves.

G: That's 1961.

B: 1951. 1951. 1961 I went with Lyndon.

G: I see. Okay.

B: 1951 I was with John Connally. He was secretary of the navy.

G: No, John Connally was not secretary of the navy in the fifties.

B: Fred Korth. Fred Korth, yes.

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G: I see. Do you recall your association with LBJ during this period?

B: Social.

G: Really?

B: Yes.

G: Okay. Well, I have in 1954 you are at the Naval War College and then in Europe.

B: Yes.

G: Then in 1957 in the Philippines and Hawaii.

B: 1956, I had command over a destroyer squadron out of Norfolk. 1957, in the Philippines, chief of staff. And then chief of staff of the First Fleet in 1959. There again, a chief of staff of a fleet, you are going to become automatically an admiral, that is the way the navy works. [I was] sitting right here in San Diego over on the cruiser Springfield, our flagship, and the phone rings. This would have been just after the elections, February or something like that. I guess it was Mary Rather--I don't know, one of the secretaries there--and [she] said, "Lyndon wants you to come back to Washington." Whoever it was, Mary Margaret or Mary, I'd know them; I knew who I was talking to. And I said, "No, I'm chief of staff of a fleet and if I don't mess up I'll be an admiral shortly," which I would have been. Well, she said, "Lyndon wants you to come back." So I said, "Well, all right, but I don't want to." So I called Tom Clark and I said, "Sounds like Lyndon's going to try to get me back there, and I want to be right here. I'm happy here." Tom said, "I'll see what I can do for you." He never called back.



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The first thing I know, the next day practically, Admiral Holloway [?], who was then CNO, called and said, "You're going to come back here to Washington." I said, "Well, Admiral"--I went through this whole routine. Forty-eight hours later I was en route to Washington.

G: Now, this was when he wanted you to work on his staff, is that right?

B: His chief of staff, right.

G: Yes. And he was vice president at the time?

B: Yes.

G: Okay. Well, what did you do in this capacity?

B: Everything, you know. Made his appointments and--

G: Was he happy as vice president?

B: Now, that's a very tricky question, so I'd like to be off the record on this. Turn that thing off.

(Interruption)

G: Well, he was chairman of the [President's] Committee on Equal [Employment] Opportunity. Do you remember that, Equal Employment Opportunity?

B: I remember him talking about it and he felt very strongly about that. And I don't know why, really, being a southerner basically. He, I'm sure, disliked the blacks, but he bent over backwards. Every time anything would come up, he bent over backwards to side with the blacks.

G: Why do you say that he disliked the blacks?

B: Because instinctively I know he did.

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G: Really?

B: Yes. He didn't like to have them around.

G: Just because he was a southerner or--?

B: Who knows? I don't know. I just always had that feeling that he disliked and distrusted blacks.

G: Do you have any concrete examples?

B: No, only on the positive side. Every time anything would come up, either on the floor or personally or whatnot--he had two or three fine blacks working for him for years. I've forgotten their names, but he had had them forever. And he treated them very well and very considerately. But I always had just the feeling that he disliked them. I can't say more than that.

G: Okay. He was also chairman of the [National Aeronautics and] Space Council.

B: Yes.

G: Do you recall any of his work in this connection?

B: Well, he was all for the man on the moon project. He worked very hard to see that that came about.

G: And chairman of the Peace Corps Advisory Committee.

B: Well, now, the Peace Corps as Peace Corps, he never really believed in the Peace Corps as such, I don't think. But again, I've never heard him say one thing against it, but this was just my feeling, because I knew the man pretty personally. My feeling was that he thought it was a waste of money, the Peace Corps.

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G: He also traveled to Vietnam in 1961, among other trips. Do you remember that trip?

B: No.

G: May of 1961 I believe.

B: No, I think I was at sea. No, I was with him. Anyway, I didn't make the trip.

G: Okay. You went with him to Norfolk, Virginia in 1961.

B: Yes, because Lynda was, let's see, the rose queen, whatever they call the festival down there. Savannah has one; Norfolk has one. We went down and he crowned her.

G: Any other recollections of that trip?

B: Only this, that we got down there and we had taken one of the Air Force Ones--they had three of those planes that the cabinet and the President used. We took the plane down and I released it, because we were supposed to be down there for three days. The first night he said, "Let's get back to Washington tomorrow." I said, "Well, we don't have a plane." "Well, get a plane." So frantically I called and got the operations and got the plane back the next day. Then we had Eddie Hebert and two or three congressmen with us down there, the Norfolk congressman, and they'd known me. I'll never, ever forget Ed saying, "My God, here we were supposed to be [here] three days and we're going back tomorrow. Old Lyndon gives you a hard time, doesn't he?" I said, "Well, luckily I lucked out on this one, so we got the plane back [in] one day instead of three." And I thought to myself,

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here's his own daughter with all of the festivities down here, but he wanted to get back. And so we got back.

G: You also went to Kansas City with him, I think.

B: Yes, to see Harry Truman. That was a trip. We went out--oh, Lyndon was trying to get all the ex-presidents. What was he trying to get all of their backing for? Back his move on something or other. No, it was the Cuban crisis, and Lyndon was sent out by John Kennedy to get Truman and others to say that he did all right in the Cuban crisis. I remember when this--no, the Bay of Pigs, the Bay of Pigs.

G: Yes.

B: And John Kennedy was trying to get some backing. So he sent Lyndon out to see old Harry Truman. So we walk into that house in Missouri, whatever the name of the town was, [Independence], a white house, I'll never forget, and here's Mr. Truman sitting there. We walk in and he says, "All right, Lyndon, I know why you're out here. You're trying to get me to back that young fool in the White House. I'm not going to do it, because he made a mistake." So Lyndon said, "Now, Harry, you sure you can't change your mind?" "No, I won't change my mind on that for any reason whatsoever." I was just fascinated with these two talking like that. Of course, I was against the Bay of Pigs, too. I didn't have a vote.

G: So how did the discussion go from there?

B: Okay. Then the two of them sat down, they forgot the Bay of Pigs, and they went over every state in the Union as to who was running the Democratic Party thing, what his first name was, what his name was,

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how much money he could be depended on to raise. Every state in the Union. We stayed there for about four hours.

G: Well, what was the objective of this, I wonder?

B: I don't know.

G: Well, did you feel like it was all for a purpose?

B: I thought it was for Lyndon's political benefit, that's what I thought.

G: Did you think he was going to run for something that would require him to have this information?

B: I had no thoughts at that time. I still don't. But those two, just remarkable how they knew this country and where the corpses were buried.

G: Well, what was LBJ's reaction to the Bay of Pigs?

B: Oh, he was against it.

G: What did he say, do you recall?

B: Well, he said it was a damn fool thing to do, or words to that effect. That's all I recall. Anyway, he was against it.

G: Did he know about it in advance?

B: Yes. He'd sat in a [National] Security Council meeting when it was decided, and as far as I know, he voted for it. But I was not there. I think they all voted to do it, just like they voted to try to capture or advise Iranian [?]

G: Yes. Let's see, I believe you went to New York with him, saw Advise and Consent.

B: Right. He didn't like that one bit.

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G: Why not?

B: We went up there with Mary Margaret and I guess Liz [Carpenter]. I don't think Lady Bird was along.

G: Why didn't he like it?

B: Well, because Advise and Consent was about the vice president. That was the whole plot. And it didn't make him--he sat there and started grinding his teeth, and we left before the end of the play.

G: Really?

B: Yes. I wonder how you got that. Where'd you pick up that little tidbit?

G: Oh, just here and there. Well, did he talk about it afterwards?

B: Yes.

G: What were his--?

B: He said he thought it disparaged the vice presidency.

G: Really?

B: Yes.

G: You also went to the Governors Conference in Honolulu with him.

B: Right. I told you about that, yes.

G: Yes. Anything else on that trip? I don't think we put that on tape.

B: Well, on that trip--

G: You said he was restive after he got there.

B: Very, very. But he was in charge of it, so he had to preside at the [meetings]. We went out with, again, I guess Mary Margaret and Mary Rather, George Reedy. I can remember saying, "Well, this is fine. Now we have Mary Rather and Mary Margaret and that's George and me, so

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that's fine. That'll be a foursome." And he said, "The hell it will! This will be a fivesome."

G: Okay. Let me ask you about the Sequoia. You would go out on a--

B: I have a picture of John Connally and Admiral [Harry] Felt and Lyndon at my house. I probably should have brought it down, because it's a good picture. We were on the Sequoia on the Potomac. We went out quite frequently. Where would you have gotten that? You've got ways that--

G: Oh, it's in the records.

Any other travels with him while he was vice president?

B: No, not the big ones.

G: You mentioned earlier that you were at the Ranch when Chancellor Adenauer was there. Can you--?

B: Yes. I told you about the flag.

G: No.

B: Okay. So just the two of us, Lyndon and I, went out, and Adenauer flew in on some other plane, I don't know. And we were having this barbecue with all the Texans around, all the top Texans, you know, the wealthy ranchers and so forth, about twenty or thirty of them. The barbecue is proceeding and the sun starts going down, and he had this flag flying up on top of his house. And I'm having fun with some of those Texas girls out there, I mean, just casual chitchat and whatnot. But I'm not paying much attention to what's going on. All of sudden, "Dick, Dick Bird! Get up here!" So I came up to him. "Look," he says, "the sun is going down and you haven't hauled down that damn

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flag. What kind of a naval officer are you?" (Laughter) You know at sea we haul down the flag at sunset. So he remembered his navy days a little.

G: You mentioned that he and Adenauer didn't seem to get along well.

B: I don't think I mentioned that. If I did, it would just be on a hunch. Well, Lyndon was a patriotic American, and we had fought Germany, and I think just the fact that [he was] the German premier. But he had requested to go out there, Adenauer had requested it, and Lady Bird called me and she said, "Lyndon's not going to be able to handle those social things. Will you go along?" So I said, "Well, sure, if necessary." And then Lyndon comes storming in, said, "I hear Lady Bird's conned you into going out." I said, "Well, she wants me to handle the protocol. This is the premier of Germany"--the prime minister of Germany, I don't know what his title was then--"the prime minister of Germany and we've got to give him honors, got to--" Of course, I was up to here in protocol then. So he said, "Well, all right, okay. Well, you handle things then." And then I didn't handle the flag. (Laughter) But that turned out to be quite a trip. I didn't see any animosity.

G: Really?

B: I did not at all.

G: Well, was he in a good mood on this occasion?

B: No.

G: He was? Did they have some interactions with the local German community there in Fredericksburg?



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B: Well, they invited a great number of those people. There must have been twenty or thirty people there, and I'm sure many from the German community, because that is a German town, as you well know.

G: Yes. Anything else on LBJ during this period?

B: No, except he was always--I'll never forget Liz Carpenter, who is not exactly a graceful, svelte, lithe figure, and she was sitting at [her desk]. We had three desks, Mary Rather, Liz, and me, over in the office there. We had little loudspeakers on our desks. I always used to, at noon, go in to tell him it's noon, he had to open the Senate. There was this ritual; he always waited till I came in, and I went in with him, and he opened the Senate. This particular day it was about time to go in and get him and suddenly on Liz Carpenter's desk, "Liz, get the hell in here! Look here, what have you done to me?" So Liz gets up and has a heart attack, I think. Anyway, she fell, and I thought she had a heart attack. So I went over and picked her up, and she seemed to get better. Well, what had happened, there was a press release, something unimportant, but he was reading the paper.

G: Well, why did you stop working for him?

B: Well, because I was promoted to admiral. John Kennedy's aide was a colonel in the army, so Lyndon didn't think he should have an admiral for his aide if John had only a colonel. So I was promoted out.

G: Now, he had an army aide and an air force aide as well, too.

B: Yes, but they were over in the Executive Office Building. They never entered into--

G: I see.

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B: He had a colonel, two good, fine colonels, too. They were picked. I don't think either of them ever made general, though. One was a Texas boy, very wealthy. You don't have his name, do you?

G: Well, let's see. Howard Burris?

B: Yes, Burris. Howard and I never got along very well. But he never saw Burris; he just kept him over in the Executive Office Building.

G: Anything else on LBJ that we haven't talked about?

B: We've pretty well covered it.

G: Well--

B: I would have liked to have been with him when he was president, but by that time I had command of a flotilla. I was a sea-going admiral.

G: Well, I surely do thank you.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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