INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 21, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM M. BLACKBURN

INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB

PLACE: His offices in the Republic National Bank Building in Dallas, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

M: First of all, I'd like to know something about your background: where were you born, when, where did you get your education?

B: Well, I was born in 1939, February 17, in Shreveport, Louisiana, and lived there through about the first or second grade. After spending about a year in New Mexico after that, I moved to Stamford, Texas and graduated from high school there in Stamford. Then I attended Oklahoma University for a year; then graduated in 1961 from Texas Technological College in Lubbock; went to law school at The University of Texas in Austin and graduated in January of 1964. I went into the Army.

M: Were you in the Judge Advocates Corps?

B: No, no, I was in the Adjutant Generals Corps because at that particular time it only required two years active duty as opposed to three for a JAG, and so I chose to go AG, which is primarily personnel work. I did my basic training in Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana and then was fortunate to be assigned for the remainder of my active duty at Austin, Texas, back where I'd gone to law school.

Then as a result of doing fairly well in law school, on my academic record, I was hired by Thompson, Knight, Simmons and Bullion, the firm I'm currently with. Worked for about a year, nearly exclusively for J. Waddy Bullion of this firm, senior partner, primarily in tax planning, corporate and estate planning also.

This was more or less my entree into government or connection with President Johnson. Mr. Bullion for many years had been a personal friend of the Johnsons, as you probably know. He was a trustee of their property, along with Mr. Moursund, when they put property into trust when he became president. I believe it was Christmas of 1966, that Mr. Bullion went down to the Ranch with the President, and the President, as I've heard it related, said, you know, to "send one of your bright, young associates" out to Washington for a couple of years to learn about the operations of the Executive Department and [gave him] just a kind of broad description of what my duties would be. As a result, in January of 1967, I was called in to a meeting of the senior partners of the firm, and they proposed this to me. Of course, I was delighted to accept. I went to Washington, and this was the first time I met the President.

M: You arrived in Washington when?

B: January, I guess specifically date-wise it must have been about the twenty-ninth of January of 1967.

M: What was your title then? Did they give you one?

B: I didn't have a title initially. After talking with the President, he said that he wanted me to learn about as much of operations of the White House and the executive branch as I could. Initially, he asked me to work with Marvin Watson who was at that time appointment secretary, and really the top man in the White House as far as I suppose you'd say control of the operations and influence with the President. I worked then with Marvin for about a year, and also worked at a secondary level or secondary matter of emphasis with the congressional relations department headed by Barefoot Sanders. Henry Hall Wilson was there and Larry O'Brien when I first came. Although O'Brien was postmaster general, he still supervised the congressional relations efforts. But shortly after I arrived, Henry Hall Wilson left, and Barefoot Sanders was brought in and headed up the congressional relations team.

M: The purpose of your going, then, was to more or less teach you about the workings of the executive branch?

B: Well, I think so. I laughed and I accused the firm of deciding that I was the most expendable, least experienced, and the firm could do without me best, but Mr. Bullion assures me that that's not the case. The firm, number one, didn't have any idea, I'm certain, what my experiences would be, and the President a lot of times acts on impulse and it may very well be that he didn't really have a clear plan formulated when he asked Mr. Bullion to send someone up. As a matter of fact, I did really flounder around in different areas and never really concentrated in any one area. The first year

under Watson I worked some on appointments, but he already had Jim Jones who did most of that. I did a variety of things, as I say, worked some on his daily schedule, did a lot of reading of classified reports and materials that I would summarize for the President's night reading.

M: What's the advantage to the firm in giving you experience like this? Is there an advantage?

B: I really don't know. I doubt it because this firm in particular, and I guess you could say Dallas in general, really doesn't do that much work for federal agencies. It's not like if you stayed in Washington and you represented clients before agencies. I think really it was more a gesture of personal kindness from the President toward Mr. Bullion because he has stated on more than one occasion that Mr. Bullion never asked him for anything and he's never really done anything for him. So I think it was really just in recognition of the services that Bullion had done for him, that it'd be a nice gesture. So I was really the third party beneficiary of that understanding and I think I was immeasurably enhanced personally by it, or enlightened and educated and matured. I don't know that it will ever reap any direct windfall for the firm other than you serve with other lawyers in various capacities and you meet them and I guess any contact you make helps.

M: Right. What was it like working for Marvin Watson? You know, he's caught lots of criticism from the books that have been put out.

B: That's right. That's right.

M: Being narrow minded and overly concerned about communists in government and things like that.

B: Well, I've said many times before and I'm glad I have a chance to go on record officially with this: I think Marvin Watson is probably one of the finest men I've ever known. He has great integrity, great sense of perspective, and loyalty. I just have the greatest amount of respect and admiration for him. He was personally kind to me as well, but he's a hard worker and he demands hard work of you. I worked about seventy to seventy-five hours a week, I suppose, the first year and a half I was there, and helped Watson out a lot, as well as working some for the President directly. But a lot of the work I did initially was more or less under Marvin.

I'd advance some of the President's trips or ceremonies, you know, go out and help set them up. Marvin would be in general overall charge of that, and he'd ask me to go along on those. A lot of the documents and things that came across his desk I would summarize for the President, whereas I think Marvin had been doing a lot of that himself, prior to that point. But one kind of onerous chore that was assigned to me--Jake Jacobsen had been at the White House I guess for a couple of years and he left a couple of months after I got there after he'd finished his two year tour, so to speak. He had gotten in the habit, I'm sure from the President's direction, of clipping three or four, maybe a dozen at the most, pertinent passages from the Congressional Record and showing them to the President first thing in the morning. So this project escalated

and it was assigned to me. The way it wound up when it was going in full gear and that included right down I think to the morning of January 16 or 17, 1969 before the President left office, was that a White House limousine would come out to my apartment every morning anywhere between six and six-thirty, six-forty-five, and bring the Congressional Record. I would read it on the way into the office and underline, underscore, pertinent passages, comments that various senators or congressmen made, indicate key votes. Then I'd get into the office and I would type up--and I did this myself rather than have a secretary come into the office at this hour for this--a three or four page report and take it over to the President to his bedroom at seven-thirty in the morning when he customarily awoke. Sometimes he'd be up earlier, sometimes he'd sleep later. But, by and large, he'd be up then and I would go in his bedroom and hand him the Record and sometimes discuss it, sometimes not.

M: Was that one of the first things he read in the morning?

B: Oh, it was, and I was generally the first one to see him in the mornings, on those mornings that he was up at that time.

M: Now, in the things that you would draw from the Congressional Record, he was interested in key votes, commentary by various congressmen.

B: Both for and against him personally or the programs that our administration was proposing. He would read this and get on the phone many times right there and call up a certain Cabinet officer or sub-Cabinet officer. The point of this is it really isn't as old news as you would think, although it would have been said the

previous day. In point of fact, the congressmen have until midnight that night to revise and extend their remarks, so many times they wouldn't drop this into the Government Printing Office chute, so to speak, until midnight. So really this was the first chance you had to see in black and white their comments. Many times this was effective in stemming a tide of opposition or something that was gnawing on a congressman or senator and this might be the best way to tell it. He did this all through the Congress and the Senate. Incidentally, I understand he's always read the Record and I think he's still getting it down in Austin.

M: Then he would have an immediate reaction to this material you'd give him and sometimes take immediate action.

B: Yes, that's right. And also he had me circulate copies of it to the leadership. I would have a copy of my brief and a copy of the Record sent to Senators Mansfield and Russell Long; subsequently, Ted Kennedy and Speaker McCormack, Hale Boggs,[Carl] Albert,also Byrd [W.Va.], the leadership generally. So as a result, they would have this resume. I suspect that they didn't read it as religiously as the President did.

Another thing that happened then that we did as a result of this study: we would have the departments and agencies [respond]; not the independent agencies but those subject to executive control, would be expected to respond to these criticisms,if the response were appropriate or possible. In other words, if some congressman got up and said, "The SBA is fouling up in my district; they've got a

crook down there in the office," we'd call up and say, "Now what's the story on this, and we want you to go speak to this congressman and if the situation is as he describes it, do something about it; if it's not, resolve it." I personally think it was very effective because the senators and congressmen knew that their opinions were being observed and it was, I feel, very effective.

M: What's it like to see Lyndon Johnson, the president of the United States, the first thing in the morning? Was he dressed?

B: No, he'd generally be in his pajamas. By the time I would go in there--ordinarily as I said I was the first one to see him, sometimes I would be--many times Paul Glynn or Ken Gaddis would be in there arranging his clothes and sometimes the butler would have brought in his breakfast. But generally he'd be propped up with television sets going to see the early morning news and reading over some night reading that he hadn't finished, already busy, hard at work. He was invariably pleasant.

M: He didn't give you a hard time?

B: You hear so much about President Johnson being hard on his people, and I'll be the first to confess I didn't work as close with him every day as many did, but I think I was a lot closer to him than some that have written very knowledgeably lately, and he was never discourteous or unkind to me, even under conditions when I know he had a lot on his mind. So I found it very pleasant, even at that hour of the morning.

M: Where was Mrs. Johnson?

B: Generally, they had separate bedrooms, because he was up so much during the night with calls on the war and all that it would be disturbing. But sometimes she would come in later and join him for tea or breakfast and read some of her own correspondence. And, once again, she was very courteous always.

M: Do you remember the first time you took that in there?

B: Yes. Yes, I do. I was quite nervous. Watson just called me up and said, "Take it over to the bedroom in the morning. I don't want to come down here that early just to carry it over." Of course, always he'd clear this first with the President. But I went over there and had to go up in the elevator and the Secret Service looked at me like I was crazy, and they checked me to see what I was doing going over to the President's bedroom that early. I went in and this first morning I was about five minutes late, it was seven-thirty-five, and I thought I'd really messed up. I told him, "Well, I was late because the Record was late getting out this morning," which was true. And he said, "Well, I've been up since four-thirty." Some development had occurred in Vietnam over the night, I've forgotten what, and he'd been getting calls and he'd been up all morning. But, as I say, some mornings he'd visit and ask about personal things, and sometimes he'd be busy and there would not be a word exchanged. Generally you could sense, you know, sometimes I'd stay there and wait if he were signing papers and he'd want me to carry them back and route them to the other staff people. But, most often, if he hadn't completed his night reading and it wasn't ready for me to

carry back, what he generally would do was wait until Watson came over and later when Jim Jones took over that, so Jim Jones and Larry Temple came over, and then he would go over a lot of it with them. You know, involving the actual day-to-day decisions of his schedule and this sort of thing.

M: What about the President's reputation for having a bad temper? Did you ever witness any of that?

B: No, I never did. And I want to say again, I'm not trying to represent that I was that close to him--I saw him nearly every day and I was on trips with him, and I was around a lot at ceremonies, when I'd have to set up the guests for him, and pictures, but I was not as close to him every day as, for instance, as Tom Johnson or Jim Jones or George Christian. But I was in the West Wing, that's where my office was. I never was the object of it and I never was witness to it, although I'm quite confident that it existed because I've heard tales from some of the other staff people how he could be irritable like anyone can. But I never knew anyone to quit because of it. I think it's a reaction to pressure. I'm sure it must have been.

M: While we're on this subject, he also has a reputation for being rather earthy in his language. Is that true?

B: Well, I don't know how to say [it]. I guess earthy would be all right, yes. He likes a good story, and he probably doesn't fit in to the Eastern Establishment's ideal of a president, an Ivy League president. But I understand John F. Kennedy could curse like a

sailor, too. I've heard that from several people that were on his staff that knew him quite well, which is no reflection, in my opinion, on Kennedy or President Johnson. I think really there's too much emphasis on his personal shortcomings, if that is a shortcoming, and I think that will be something that will be soon forgotten.

M: It wasn't anything that would be offensive to you?

B: Not to me personally, no. I will say the only time I heard him tell any stories or use any language that might possibly be considered offensive it was in the company of men. I never heard him around women. And I never heard anyone say they were offended by it. He's a good story [-teller], a raconteur, I believe is the word. Delightful. So, no, I'd say no problem there. People have different sensibilities on it.

M: Is there any doubt in your mind that he was hard-working?

B: Oh, none at all. None at all, but that was his life. I mean, he lived there at the White House and liked for his staff people to be close in and accessible. But he was completely dedicated and he didn't get out and play golf and this sort of thing. No, he was a very hard worker. I think sometimes he was guilty of generating work. Some people have accused him of that, I think that sometimes there was some overkill involved. But I think when you're so close to something, it's hard to avoid that.

M: Did he ever read anything just for the sheer pleasure?

B: Not that I know of.

M: Did he read novels or anything?

B: No, I don't think so. But the stack of reading material, reports, letters, that he had to read every night and during the day was just fantastic. I would think that it probably would be inadvisable to expect the President that has to read that much material to spend his leisure time reading also. He found his relation, as best I could tell, in visiting with intimates and friends and relaxing. I think he did plenty of reading. I don't think you can fault him for not reading novels.

M: Yes. But then I was going to ask you how he entertained himself, and you mentioned he'd talk to people.

B: He used the swimming pool some. He'd go out on the boat and, of course, primarily when he could get away to the Ranch that is what he enjoyed the most. But he enjoyed entertaining and having friends, people he could trust, including staff people, when he felt comfortable around you and felt like he didn't have to guard what he was going to say. I think he was very gregarious.

M: How much material would be in the night reading? Two hundred pages?

B: Oh, more than that. No, if I could use a measuring stick I would say a stack of material sometimes would be maybe a foot high of typewritten reports, classified material regarding the war, FBI reports, maybe just thank you notes from people, say, that had been invited to a state dinner, or many, many memos from staff people recommending certain courses of action with check marks where he would check: yes, no, or see me. Then he'd add his marks to it, see. Califano generated an awful lot of correspondence like this.

M: He'd start reading this at what--about twelve o'clock at night?

B: Well, it varied. When I first came there he was reading most of it at night and, as a consequence, a lot of times he'd still have to do it in the morning.

M: I see.

B: Then Mrs. Juanita Roberts and others were partially effective in getting him to start looking at this some in the afternoons. And, as a consequence, along toward the last six months or maybe the last year, he did manage to cut down on it some, but he consequently had other staff people review his night reading to see if there wasn't some way it could be cut down. Marvin Watson did this, later Larry Temple and also Charles Murphy; we'd try to edit it, and if it wasn't absolutely necessary for the President to see it, [omit it]. You know, nearly every politician, bureaucrat, would send in a speech for him to see that maybe they'd mentioned him and praised him which was always appreciated, but he really didn't have time to read all that. It fell my duty to summarize these things and highlight them. I suggested at one point that unless they were particularly noteworthy or meritorious that they not be sent in to burden his night reading.

M: How well did the White House staff work? Did you think it was an efficient organization?

B: I think so.

M: Were they stepping on each other's toes or were they all working on the same project? Did they seem to mesh well together?

B: I think when I was there they worked very well together.

M: Was there any empire building, for example?

B: No, Marvin had been accused of that, and I think some of the staff people were resentful of Marvin because he was the one who would finally say who could have car pool privileges and who could do this and that. But you've got to remember that a lot of what Marvin got blamed for, he was just following instructions from the President. And when President Johnson would say so and so and so, Marvin wouldn't say, "Now, Mr. President, that isn't right, because so and so." And neither would anyone else, as a matter of fact, and that's the way it should be. So he got blamed, took a lot of heat for doing his job. But as far as any real dissension, there wasn't any that I could tell when I was there. Prior to my arrival there, I gathered from talking to different people on the staff there'd been some tension between Bill Moyers and Marvin Watson, and some others and Moyers. But I never met Mr. Moyers and I respect his obvious abilities and I don't mean to say that to impugn him, I just think that there were two strong characters there and apparently there had been some schism there between factions. But I think that was absent when I was there.

M: How about between Califano and Cater?

B: I never worked with Doug Cater too much. He was primarily an HEW-type man and speech writer. Joe Califano is a man of fantastic ability and unfailing good cheer; despite pressure he'd always be smiling and I always got along very well with him, and he was really

accused of empire building. He had a very competent staff of young lawyers, who were very brilliant. Joe was a can-do guy, I mean, he could get it done one way or another. And I just think that a person who's an activist that does things is going to draw criticism. I think, as the President has said, "If you hunker up like a mule in a hail storm, and don't go anywhere and don't do anything, no one is going to criticize you, but you don't leave any tracks." I think there were strong personalities there. I wasn't aware of any tension between Cater and Califano. Perhaps there was, I just don't know.

M: Is it your impression that a staff needs someone like Califano who's an activist and aggressive and can put together a program?

B: Well, I think it depends what your goals of your administration are. I think, if I can be political for a minute, the Democratic Party generally has prided itself on being progressive and a leader in social reform and measures that at one time were very controversial such as Social Security and Medicare are now pretty well accepted by all politicians and most politicians in both parties. When you're going to push something through like that that's new and bold and controversial, why, yes, you need a Califano. But if you're going to be in an administration that's going to consolidate and regroup, maybe not bring out any new programs but tailor those already in existence, I don't think Joe could function under a system like that, nor would want to. And I'm not saying that's entirely wrong, I think that every once in a while you should stop, and

instead of having new programs, regroup and do some trimming. But I think, under the situation, he was ideally suited for it.

M: In your work with Barefoot Sanders, just what did you do?

B: I worked with the House of Representatives. Mike Manatos worked exclusively with the Senate, and very capably, too, I might add. The rest of us were divided up, we had the House divided among us. I had the Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama delegations. I didn't do too well with Mississippi and Alabama, I was nearly thrown out of one of their offices one time. But I got along very well with all the Texas congressmen. Although there were two or three that were very conservative and never voted for us, [there were] still very amicable relations. You would ask them for votes, primarily the onus of getting legislation through falls upon the particular department or agency that will be affected by that particular bill and who is sponsoring it. Each department had a congressional relations officer, usually as an assistant secretary. They would be primarily responsible, but we would coordinate efforts of the whole administration's program, and it would kind of touch base again with some congressmen that were waivering, and we would ask for their support and explain the program to them, all very aboveboard. It was the type of operation that was instituted under Kennedy by Larry O'Brien, although I understand that President Eisenhower had something similar to that, but it was not as effective because of the fact that he had a Democratic Congress.

M: Let me get clear about the structure of this: Barefoot Sanders would be in charge of the House and the man at the top--

B: Well, he was really kind of overall man, but there wasn't any conflict between him and Mike. It's just that Barefoot's title was legislative counsel, which in the hierarchy I suppose you could say is higher than Manatos' which was administrative assistant. But there wasn't any conflict there.

M: Then the people that would work with them would be assigned to specific congressmen?

B: That's right.

M: As you were with Texas . . .

B: Irvine Sprague, who's now director of FDIC, had the West Coast, California, because he'd worked for Governor [Pat] Brown out there at one time. We had Chuck Roche who was a holdover from Kennedy's staff, he had the northeastern United States. [It was] broken up generally that way. Gonella had the South and Markman had the Midwest, and Bob Hardesty had some of the northern states. There were several people like, for instance, DeVier Pierson who would handle certain congressmen and certain senators because of his experience on the Hill, but would not really be full-time or even what you'd call part-time congressional relations, but there were some overlapping, duplication of responsibilities. But by and large Barefoot did a fine job, and I think any review of the record will show how very much legislation was enacted.

M: Yes, I've heard that Sanders was very effective.

B: He's a good man, outstanding man. I could count him as a friend, but I admire him a great deal for his abilities.

M: What makes a man in a job like that effective? Personality or work?

B: I think that's right. You have to be able to meet people and to communicate and I found some difficulties because of my age, being so young, trying to convince a congressman who'd been in Congress thirty years, when I was not yet thirty, how he should vote. But you know, it grows on you after a while, and some of them I got along quite well with and feel like I was effective with, others if you have a personality problem, you just might as well give up on. I think it takes just a good common sense, grass roots approach to it.

M: So you'd have a bill before Congress and they would send you up, say, to talk to the Texas delegation, and you would--

B: Find out how they are going to vote on it. Is there any strong opposition to it? If so, what? In this particular time, Texas had five chairmen in the House; it was a pretty strong delegation with very strong individuals, and I think it's amazing that they held together as much for the President as they did with the divergent political views that were represented there.

M: Did Johnson expect any particular loyalty from the Texas delegation since he was from Texas?

B: I think he expected it in the sense that he always was proud when they went along with him. There were always a couple of them, John Dowdy and O. C. Fisher, Clark Fisher, who never voted for us. But that was to be expected; they're very conservative. But you had

certain swing people like Tiger Teague or Cabell or Casey that sometimes would vote for us, sometimes not. Then on the other spectrum, you had Jack Brooks, and Henry Gonzalez--I hate to leave anyone out--and John Young that voted very much with the administration, and not because of pressure by the President, but because they believed in these particular programs.

M: How about George Mahon?

B: George Mahon--I always felt like he and the President were good friends and they had a good deal of respect, but he's a very strong man and would, many times vote his own way, regardless of what opinion we expressed. I don't know, I used to keep percentages on what each Congressman's voting record was vis-a-vis our major programs, and let's say if you had Jack Brooks being a 95 per cent supporter--I've got somewhere what Congressman Mahon was, but I would be surprised in looking back over it, if it were over maybe 60 per cent or something. But the President didn't take it personally. He's said many times that he couldn't blame Congressman X for not voting with him on this particular issue because he said if he did he wouldn't be back next Congress, his people would not re-elect him because it was that controversial an issue. He's been there, he was twelve years in the House, twelve in the Senate, so he knows.

M: Is it true that Johnson was a master at legislative work with the Congress?

B: Oh, yes.

M: You mean he really understood the workings?

B: I think it's best exemplified by when he was pushing for the tax increase. He would have groups of Congressmen over in small groups, twenty-five or so, and explain the tax bill with the charts and diagrams, and he'd have [Charles] Schultze or [Charles] Zwick from Budget there, and [Arthur] Okun or Gardner Ackley from Council of Economic Advisors, and [Henry] Fowler of the Treasury there. But he knew it all and he would get up himself and he could point out all these figures and be very persuasive. Then they'd answer questions and, when they would file out the door he'd stop, he'd shake each one of them's hand and then ask them about their wife or how that certain project was in his district or things that [it was], just incredible that he could [remember]. I mean [he could] really snow you.

M: Did he really remember all that or was he briefed?

B: No, I think he has a tremendous memory, tremendous recall. I don't know about this particular occasion, but I do know that, for instance, on leadership breakfasts in the mornings that Barefoot would generally kind of prepare a memoranda of topics that he might wish to discuss with the leadership, but on things like this, more or less impromptu things, I just think that it was his own resources that he remembered things. He knew the right thing to say at the right time, and it was very effective.

M: Yes. Well, in contacting a congressman, what would you do? Go and make an appointment to see him?

B: No, rarely. Sometimes I'd call. If we were just trying to get a count on how the votes were going to be, I'd just call on the phone

and ask them, you know, "Such and such bill is coming up Wednesday and we'd like your support on it. Are you going to be able to vote with us?" They'd say, "Yes," or "If you need me, but I'd rather not," or "I just don't know yet." Sometimes what I'd generally do is once or twice a week, probably once a week, I'd just go over in the morning after breakfast and spend two or three hours on the Hill and go from one congressman's office to another. A lot of times if you could catch them early before they went to committee meetings, you could drop in for a cup of coffee and sometimes not have anything to talk [about] at all. It worked two ways. Then they felt like ... the White House was interested in them. If they had some constituents that they wanted to get on a tour of the White House or if they had some project down in their district that was faltering and they couldn't understand why, then they could call me and I could say, "What's the matter with Congressman's so-and-so's project down there?" and they'd say, "It just doesn't meet standards." And I'd call back and I'd say, "Well, sir, it just doesn't meet the standards," or this sort of thing, but never anything shady or swinging a deal for certain Congressmen in exchange for a vote. This is what the public likes to believe, you know, that the President says,"All right, you give me a vote and I'll give you a project," and I've never known any of that personally to exist. I'm not in a position to say that it never happened, but I don't know of it ever having happened and didn't witness it or never heard it being told.

M: So then if you were trying to sell a Congressman on a bill, you'd try to sell him on the merits of it.

B: That's right, and I think it was tacitly understood that, for instance, this is just my own observation, no one ever told me this, but this is the way I would feel--if I were a congressman and you were representing the White House or a Department of Transportation, and you were asking for my support on a bill, and I voted on it consistently supporting your programs, I would expect that, if there were twenty-five applications for a given type of program or grant, say water and sewer facilities, and that there was only money enough to fund twenty, you would expect ordinarily, all things being equal, and all of the applications having equal merit that the individuals supporting the program ordinarily would get first shot. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Maybe there is. I think this is what the tacit understanding is and explains the cooperation on this type of basis, but I don't think it was ever [expressed]; certainly I never expressed it that way. But I think it's only natural you help those that support you.

M: You've mentioned earlier that you had some trouble with Alabama. Can you tell me what happened?

B: It really wasn't Alabama, I got along very well with all them--Bill Nichols for instance, a former Auburn football player, and I got along great. He never voted for us, but I enjoyed shooting the bull with him, talking about football, and Bear Bryant. In Mississippi, though, Congressman Tom Abernethy, who's been in that Congress about

thirty years, and I was trying to get him to vote for some particularly sensitive program, like a fool, I shouldn't even have gone by, I suppose. "Well," he just finally said, "I tell you," he said, "I'm the only congressman from Mississippi that voted for John F. Kennedy and publicly said so in 1960. All the rest of them jumped the party, I've never gotten a thing for it." That's what he said. "And Jamie Whitten, who went Republican in his district got a big"--I don't know if it was a post office, I forget what it was. Abernethy said, "We're using an antiquated combination post office and courthouse in my district. We've applied and applied for years to get a new one, and I'm not going to vote for one program of Lyndon Johnson's till I get that new post office. I don't want to see you or anybody from the White House to talk to. It's not personal, but I just don't want to be bothered again." So I said, "All right." And I did, as a matter of fact, check with the post office department about that application and they said that the amount of people that live there and the volume that they handle, it just doesn't merit it on our cost benefit ratio. I told him that, and he said, "Well, I've been hearing that so-and-so and I don't believe it," and so that was it. The reason that Whitten had gotten his, as it turned out, was because he had the University of Mississippi, I think, in his district, or some college at Oxford. But it's things like this that make it interesting. I reported this in a memorandum to the President. We would generally report significant conversations with congressmen or senators--how they were feeling and what were their complaints,

and I sent that in to him. I don't know, I heard in an indirect manner one time that he told Barefoot they were being too hard on me by giving me these Mississippi and Alabama people to break in on, so I think he took a little sympathy on me after I'd written several of those reports about those southerners.

M: Did you catch any heat from those people in regard to civil rights?

B: Yes, oh, yes. They just thought we were going to hell in a hand basket, you know. Backing down to the Negroes and the militants too much, and many people thought it was a very grave mistake to have acquiesced in the establishment of that Resurrection City outside the Lincoln Memorial. This sort of thing. And maybe in some elements of that, I don't know, [there is] some truth.

M: Did you have anything to do with the Fair Housing Act?

B: Only just in the various stages coming up for passage, asking for their vote and everything, but as far as down in working the great details, tiny details of it, no, certainly not in drafting it or proposing it.

M: I was just wondering if these congressmen said anything to you about the fair housing?

B: Well, that and OEO programs in particular. OEO was their favorite target, and the "radicals" they had running the programs down there. I think there was some merit to a lot of their complaints, I don't know, I can understand their position and I think the President did too. I don't think he ever expected Tom Abernethy to vote for him on OEO programs.

M: You mentioned too that you'd done some liaison work with the 1968 tax bill. That's the surcharge.

B: That's right, and trying to muster support for it and, of course, it was tied to various other factors. And then a lot of people felt like we should have asked for it earlier. I think Congressman Bob Eckhardt was an early supporter of it; by the time it finally got around to passage he'd switched tracks because he thought it was too late to do any good. You know, too little too late and this sort of thing.

M: Did you arrange for some of these White House meetings with these congressmen?

B: No, those were handled through Barefoot. Usually any invitation that would go out for a congressman or senator would be handled through him. I had several of them over as my personal guests for lunch or dinner at various times.

M: To the White House mess?

B: Yes, just social occasions.

M: Did you sit in on any of these meetings as an aide?

B: The one like, for instance, where you're discussing the tax programs?

M: Yes.

B: Yes, generally any time they would have congressmen or senators in for meetings like that, or every Congress they have a reception for the congressmen and their wives, and the congressional relations people were expected to be there so the congressmen would see some familiar faces that they knew there, and you'd visit. So, yes, I

attended most of those. We'd have sometimes congressional relations officers from different departments and branches, groups of them would come in, we'd visit, Barefoot Sanders and us.

M: How about on Vietnam? Did you ever sit in on any of those discussions?

B: I didn't attend the Tuesday leadership breakfasts where that was discussed. There was a Wednesday noon luncheon between the President and the Secretaries of State, Defense, Director [Richard] Helms [CIA], and this sort of thing. I didn't attend that. But at other times, for instance, the few Cabinet meetings I attended, especially toward the last I attended several, they were always discussing Vietnam. Then when I first came here in 1967 they were in the process of having a series of buffet suppers and receptions for the new Congress. And, after dinner, when the women were escorted through the White House by Mrs. Johnson, the congressmen and senators would go into the East Room and they would be briefed on Vietnam by Secretaries McNamara and Rusk, and Schultze would give them a run-down on the costs. So I felt like I was fairly current on it. Then I had access to some reports and things, so I felt current.

M: This is a point of criticism in that Vietnam was an undeclared war. And yet the argument on the other side is that the President kept Congress well informed and that they went along with it and supported him in this so-called undeclared war. I was just curious as to how much information was there passing back and forth between Congress and the President on Vietnam?

B: Oh, I think just a fantastic amount, and I think you could look at the amount of time that McNamara spent testifying on the Hill. It would have broken a lesser man, just that duty in itself. I think at very few occasions was there any complaint as to the--well, there were complaints as to the candor involved initially and there was some complaint as to the candor involved as to our successes over there. But I think by and large that most of the complaints were against being there in the first place, just the question of being there, not how it was being done. Although some certainly said, "We ought to do more, and go in there and bomb it out completely," and others said, "We ought to do less," but as far as the information on what was being done, I think the briefings were adequate. An undeclared war situation has a lot of ramifications to it, only two of which I can think of offhand: if you declare war officially, as I understand it, you bring into being a lot of treaty obligations with other countries, when you're officially at war. And these other countries in many cases would not have been willing or able to assist us as they would have been really obligated to do under the treaties. Then secondly, with a country our size being at war with really a third-rate power, it wouldn't look too good officially, and besides we were there assisting South Vietnam and not really ourselves declaring war on anyone, as I understand. I guess that's a very crude understanding or definition of it. I'd served in the Army myself and knew something of military thinking, and I guess I was really neutral on the war. I felt like we were over there and had to do it, and I

never did get really exercized one way or the other.

M: Right. I was noticing this picture of your little girl up here, and for the sake of the tape I might mention he has several pictures on his wall of Lyndon Johnson, one of which shows his little girl in the process of kissing the President. I was wondering, did the President enjoy such meetings with children?

B: Well, he was very good to me. I was divorced and my daughter came and visited me for about three weeks during the summer of 1968, I guess it was. I had mentioned to him one morning when I was over there in his bedroom that she was coming and if there were any opportunity at all for her to see him, I'd appreciate it. He said, "Well, bring her by," and so Jim Jones helped me set it up. I think there was a swearing-in ceremony for a new member of the Council of Economic Advisors and we were standing there in the Cabinet Room. As he walked out, he picked her up and gave her a kiss. The picture appeared all over the country, in UPI. Then he took her into his room and gave her a bunch of medallions and trinkets and this is where this picture was taken. He inscribed it, "For my love, Victoria Ann Blackburn, from her boyfriend, Lyndon B. Johnson," and of course, she was thrilled and still is. I had some copies made and gave it to her grandparents and her mother and all. This was the type of thing that he could do that really just make long hours worthwhile.

M: Made you feel good.

B: Oh sure, sure. He was good about that.

But before I overlook it, I'd like to say that everyone worked long, hard hours and, aside from what you'redrawing in a salary and if you figured out that per hour you really weren't making that good money, there weren't that many ways that you could be given a pat on the back, but he was awfully good about sometimes taking individuals on trips with him. Like if he would go to Germany or Rome, someone would be taken along, and really at no extra expense because the plane would be going anyway. It was sometimes just a little pat on the back or a little vacation from the long grind. It was very good of him. He's very good about that.

M: Did you get to travel with him at all?

B: Yes, I advanced some, so at least ostensibly I did have some function on these trips, but I went with him to Nashville, Tennessee, when he spoke to the joint session down there, and I went to Germany for Adenauer's funeral, was there about five days. Then to Mexico for the Chamizal ceremony, and then I went to Rome on that leg of the around-the-world trip, and then to Hawaii on one of the Vietnam talks, and we saw Eisenhower there. And California at that air base--El Toro, I want to say, but that may not be correct, on the way back. Of course, President Eisenhower died less than a year after that, although he looked reasonably fit at that time, that was before he had his last series of heart attacks that put him in Walter Reed permanently.

M: Was the President deeply interested in the Chamizal?

B: I think so, I don't know, I didn't work that closely; you know, I wasn't around him that much to hear him express it. I think, having been from Texas, and having taught Mexican-American children, and he always liked Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, president of Mexico. He was very warm toward him and felt an affinity probably with the Mexican people and I think [felt] that it was something that was right, that had to be done. I think he was proud probably that it had been done under his administration--a Texan.

M: Was there anything significant about the Hawaiian trip that stands out in your mind?

B: Personally I enjoyed it because it was such a great trip. My function on that, Marty Underwood who was our chief advance man, a fine man, fine fellow, and really an expert, I was working for him on that trip, and I had the airport arrival. You just try to see that the crowds turn out pretty good and that the President gets a good reception and this sort of thing, coordinate with the local military people to ask that bands be there. We had Loyd Hackler, I think, there with the press office to see that the press corps was taken care of. They're pretty much routine, and from then on you're free. And coming back from Germany, Adenauer's funeral, the President was kind enough to ask me to fly back on Air Force One with him. Those of us who had advanced the trip, Marty Underwood and myself and I forgot who the other party was, but we were put on Air Force One which was really nice. So it was just a varied

experience, and I did a lot of everything, I suppose Jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none.

Then after the President announced that he wasn't going to run again--and this really caught a lot of people, nearly everybody, by surprise. I was down at the White House until about ten o'clock that Saturday night talking with Marvin [Watson] and George Christian about prospects for the election. And they were called into the President's office and I hung around about forty-five minutes. They came out about ten-thirty, ten forty-five, and were glum, talking among themselves. I just told Marvin, "I'll see you later," and I went on home. That Sunday I stayed home and watched the announcement. I thought it would be routine and when he said he wasn't going to run again, I got dressed and went down to the office. everybodywas down there and it was like a wake, of course. Then we went up to the President's living quarters, those of the staff members that were there, and he was talking to some of the press and telling about all the thoughts that had gone through his mind before he made that decision. I think, in retrospect, he was right and he had a good analysis of the situation, although at the time most of us wished he hadn't made the decision that he did. I think personally that he would have got the nomination and probably the election, but I feel like he believed that it would just be at such great cost of public clamor and controversy that it wouldn't be worth it and that the country would have a better chance to settle down and unite if he withdrew himself because so much of it had

been focused around his personality and himself and it was clouding the issue. The basic issues were really not his doing; we were committed in Vietnam before he came into office.

So anyway, sometime subsequent to that, he asked Charles S. Murphy, Charlie Murphy, to represent him in the transition. Murphy was a very capable man of great integrity, one of the really outstanding--I guess I've said that about Sanders and Watson too, but at this level you're bound to meet people that are highly capable and have come a long way. That was the chief benefit, if I can digress a minute, for a young man like myself up there to be exposed to these great personalities, world leaders, and the caliber of people that were there. But anyway, Murphy had been on President Truman's staff and he'd been under secretary of Agriculture and chairman of the CAB. He was really going to retire and the President asked him to come over and join the staff. He, having done some transition work when President Truman went out of office and President Eisenhower was coming in, knew the ropes on it. So he asked me to assist him and, by this time, Marvin Watson had become postmaster general and moved out, and I had that much time available. So I worked with Charlie very closely and we flew up to Harvard and spoke with Phil Areeda and some of the Harvard professors who were Republicans on the mechanics of a transition and what should be done, and we read some of the books that had been written and some works that had been put out by the Brookings

Institution on the prior transitions and, really, I think worked at it pretty hard.

M: How early did you start doing this work?

B: I've got two volumes here of material that I kept, memorandums. I think on August the second, as I recall, Murphy and I flew to Harvard with the President's approval and talked to these people. At that time Areeda was back with Rockefeller so we didn't really expect to hear much from those Harvard people anymore after Nixon got elected, and as a matter of fact, we didn't. I think recently Areeda has been named to some government position under President Nixon. But, anyway, we sent out letters over the President's signature--he signed them I mean--to all the candidates, including George Wallace, especially after the Bobby Kennedy incident, that they were being furnished Secret Service protection and that we wanted to cooperate and would give them briefings. The President went way out of his way to be non-partisan and very helpful, and having an old hand like Charles Murphy there too had helped. I did a lot of the legwork and a lot of the correspondence, and I kept memorandums of all the meetings. We had many, many meetings between ourselves and Joe Moody at GSA and Lawson Knott at GSA. We had each department and agency nominate or appoint a transition representative and we were in constant correspondence with them. We had each of these agencies and departments that would be affected by a transition, in other words, where there were political appointees, we had them prepare a comprehensive set of briefing books explaining what their

functions were, who filled what jobs, so the incoming people would know. John Macy was very active in this, in detailing what jobs could be filled by the new administration and who were career people. A great many people spent a lot of time on it, and I think the consensus was that it was probably the smoothest transition ever. President Nixon and his staff came over several times, and we got to meet them and it was just a very great experience for me. You really have an appreciation for the problems that an incoming administration faces because you tend to become blase or at least you take for granted the mechanics and operations of government, but you can imagine coming in cold and not knowing.

M: Yes. Were the Republicans fairly well receptive, that is, Nixon's people that came to see you? Were they receptive to the ideas that you gave them? Not necessarily agreeing, but--

B: Yes. We didn't offer any advice unless it was asked for. We just told them how the things operated, we gave them breakdowns, as I say, of, for instance, the White House, a blueprint of the office space, and how many people, what our jobs were, those of us in the West Wing, what we did, so they could kind of correlate that to their staff. They were trying to build his personal staff. I don't know, as I say, Murphy was the top man, but he and I were the only two on the staff that worked on it. We have identical sets, the two volumes I have here includes everything that he has, and he has everything that I do on it.

M: Did President Johnson ever say anything to you specifically about this? About why he wanted this done?

B: About the transition? Well, yes, he talked more directly about this to Murphy, although I discussed it some with him when I would go over there in the mornings.

But, for the first time, of course, we had a Presidential Transition Act. It was the act of 1963, but it wasn't needed in 1964 because we were re-elected. Funds were provided, some framework within which, for instance, the GSA could operate and be authorized to lend vehicles and the office facilities were provided. It was just that he felt like it was the best thing for the country and the right thing to do. We weren't out there to try to hamstring whoever became president. I think it was just good will between him and President-elect, now President Nixon, more so than I understand it was between, for instance, Eisenhower and Truman. This is an area that I think that Congress was very intelligent in operating in, for instance, in enacting legislation. When President Truman left office I don't think he even had, as far as the government furnishing it, bus fare home. In other words, there was no retirement for former presidents, there was no provision for Secret Service protection or office facilities, and you're still inundated by a great deal of official correspondence. So President Johnson under this act has for a period of six months certain funds and office facilities available to him to help him in this transition period. Then under another act, he has a continuing retirement pay.

M: You mentioned a point in this Life article that you wanted to comment on. You might read that in now.

B: Yes. Just as a preface, I'd like to say there's some hesitancy I think on the part of people who worked with the President to speak freely about what they've done, not that there's anything to hide. It's just that you work in an area of confidence, everybody has top secret clearances, and you wouldn't be hired in the first place if he didn't think that he could trust you to keep your experiences to yourself. So it's disappointing to me to see someone on his staff or who'd worked for him to speak critically or write critically, at least this soon after he's out of office, about him. This is certainly all right and there was never any written or verbal understanding that the individuals wouldn't do that, but one particular article that has aggravated me. It came out yesterday, it's the May 23 issue of Life magazine. It's an article by one of the speech writers for the President. President Johnson had, I guess, eight or ten people that were writing speeches, some of them in different capacities.

M: What's the title of the article?

B: The title of the article here is "Rose Garden Rubbish and other Glorious Compositions" by Peter Benchley. Now Peter was one of the speech writers. He was over in the Executive Office Building. I've read the article twice and I'm really a little disappointed in it. I didn't know Peter that well; his father's Nathan Benchley and his grandfather's Robert Benchley. He of course comes from a long

line of distinguished writers. And he was disillusioned, apparently, from the article, as many people were that he didn't have more access to the President and really didn't cut as wide a swath. I find it a kind of a whining and bitter article and I'm just disappointed that he took this approach to his efforts or his work for the President.

One thing I have a kind of personal axe to grind, maybe, I'm not sure. He makes a statement here about a young--well, let me quote the statement. Quote: "Another man, a member of Watson's staff and an honors graduate from a Texas law school wedged his considerable bulk into a chair one noon and with a single sentence ensconced himself forever in White House lore: 'There's something I've been wondering,' he said, 'What's this NATO everybody's talking about?'" Well, there were only two honors graduates from a Texas law school in the White House when I was there, the other one being Larry Temple, special counsel to the President. Larry, as far as I know, was never considered on Watson's staff, although when he first came there he worked with Watson. I wouldn't describe either of us as having considerable bulk, but this in particular irritates me because Temple and I both are obviously aware of what NATO is, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Having been in the service and being a captain in the reserves, I suspect I know considerably more about our treaty obligations than Mr. Benchley does, and I think this is kind of a gratuitous insult. Aside from personal irritation, because I feel like that anybody that reads it that knows anything about the people that were there will assume it's either Temple or

me and probably me that was that ignorant, the point I think is that he managed to slam not just the anonymous individual, but he said a member of Watson's staff, a graduate from a Texas law school.

Now Peter was typical, I think, of many people, some on the personal staff of the President and many in the administration who were from the eastern part of the United States, what some people euphemistically refer to as the Eastern Establishment, that had no understanding of or affinity with the southwestern United States type of individual, with the President. Some people said he did everything with the wrong accent. I think it's this type of thinking that prompts just a gratuitous insult like this, which is a deliberate lie.

M: From your knowledge then, no statement was ever made to that effect.

B: Oh, certainly not. What I'm telling you is that I know for instance this one fact. The whole article strikes me as being slightly atilt, but this one particular statement I can personally verify from the facts and I just would like to just get that off my chest.

M: Give the contrary statement.

B: Right. I feel certain that we've heard the last from Mr. Benchley because this pretty well summarizes anything he could have known about the White House. He wasn't around that much.

M: Did you ever have much contact with Mrs. Johnson?

B: Well, some, yes.

M: Do you have any impressions about the way she played her role as first lady?

B: I think she's a very intelligent lady, very gracious and a great support to her husband, the President, as he said so many times. No one, I'm thinking that has met Mrs. Johnson you'll ever hear say anything bad about her. I think she's probably as popular a first lady as there has ever been.

M: What I'd heard is that she would support her husband, but always quietly and behind the scenes so to speak and that she would never publicly say anything to him or contradict him.

B: I'm sure that's true. I think that's probably true. I never heard her do anything like that, you know, contradict him, or never heard any sharp words or anything. In fact, I was impressed one of the first times I'd seen them together and been around them was on the Nashville trip. She'd already been down there for a week I think, and we met in Governor Buford Ellington's executive offices there in the Capitol before the President spoke to the joint session. That's the first time they'd seen each other in about a week, and I suppose aside from talking on the phone it was the first time they visited, and they were both interested in each other's health and how they were doing. There were just three or four of us in the room, and it was obviously not a put-on performance. It seemed strange to see these two great world figures talking as much as your own parents would or you and your wife would about pleasantries and inquiring about each other's health. I was impressed by it. That's really all I had to say. I wasn't around Mrs. Johnson that much nor

her daughters, but I was enough at social occasions. She was always very gracious and very kind to me.

M: Then you stayed on at the White House until January 20.

B: Until the very end. I drove home, left at six o'clock in the morning on January 20. President and Mrs. Johnson had a party in the White House for their staff, a farewell party. I was the next door neighbor literally, in an apartment, to Tom Johnson and Edwina Johnson. Tom is a bright young man, very close friend of mine and is now with the President down in Austin. He and I and Edwina went in that night to the dinner, and it was very nostalgic, at least for me. The band played "The Eyes of Texas" and "Hail to the Chief" and "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," and everybody was sad, melancholy. I thought the President, though, held up very well and gave an impression that he was really anxious to get back to Texas.

M: Did he say anything to the group?

B: He made two or three impromptu remarks to the effect that he had made the right decision, didn't have any regrets, and that he appreciated the support we'd given him. He paid tribute to his wife and parents and then to various members of the staff and their loyalty. I think he prized loyalty and appreciated that more than anything else. I'll be very surprised if you see as many books written by true insiders about President Johnson as, for instance, those that wrote about President Kennedy, especially by anyone that would like to retain his confidence and remain his friend because it's very hard to tell anything, especially if you want it to sell, unless you

try to tell a lot of things that it's best not to say. Not that there are that many bad things to say about him, but I think with any individual, you know, you can't just say he's a nice guy and that's it. People won't buy that and it won't sell. So I don't think you'll see too many books out.

I really don't have much else to add to that. It was a great two years, a tremendous education and opportunity for me, the experience to meet all the people and be around them. Once again I don't want to represent that I was any prime mover, but I was there and overheard a lot and visited a lot of people who were prime movers. I'm enjoying practicing law again, but there's a de-escalation period I think it's hard to gear down to again, especially having been up there at that young an age. I think we got along very well with everybody on the staff, and it was a good staff; I think it was effective.

I would like to say that I was always impressed or astounded by the tremendous power of the press and the influence they could have. I think it's unfortunate, I think certain members of the press have become jaded or effete or tired, and I think too much attention was focused on President Johnson and his Pedernales flavor, his accent. I think this will all die away and in the period of a few years when you have to look to the accomplishments and not to the whinings of a few disillusioned, disappointed staff people or underlings in the department, and when you really have got the concrete standards of legislative accomplishments to look at,

I think that he'll really rank very high among the presidents in these areas.

M: With that statement, maybe I should call the interview to a close.

B: I think that would be fine.

M: Thank you.

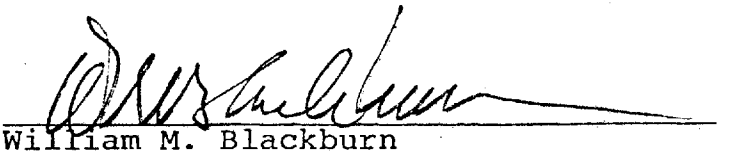
[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

SEE ATTACHMENT

POSTSCRIPT TO MAY 21, 1969 INTERVIEW

In reviewing the foregoing transcript, based upon a conversation nine years ago, I believe it important to state how my perspective has changed on the overriding and pervading influence during the last two years of the Johnson Administration, which coincided with my tenure at the White House, i.e., the war in Viet Nam. On pages 27 and 28, I unfortunately display a rather cavalier attitude toward our involvement, and while I think that that is more superficial than my views at the time, I must admit to having formed that attitude while working in the highly, and obviously biased, atmosphere of the White House. During the following decade, I have been influenced by discussions, pro and con, over our involvement in Viet Nam, and by the revelation of facts unknown to me, and to most of my associates at the White House, during the period of 1967 and 1968. I have been particularly impressed by the viewpoints of David Halberstam in his incisive book, The Best and the Brightest, and by Michael Herr's Dispatches. I don't concur entirely in all of the viewpoints of these authors, but they have added a balance to my understanding of the period of time in question, and of the considerations which any future President must be aware of prior to again committing American troops to foreign soil.

Unquestionably, one of the aspects of this "Greek tragedy" was the assumption that our people, our political climate, and our economy could sustain both a full commitment in Viet Nam and the unparalleled commitment to social problems proposed by the Johnson Administration. These difficulties, combined with the moral questions raised by the many citizens who were concerned over the war, especially by a new breed of young people with whom we in the Administration had no dialogue, inevitably led to disillusionment and discord.



William M. Blackburn

June 6, 1978

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