INTERVIEWEE: HALE BOGGS (Tape #2)

INTERVIEWER: T. H. Baker

March 27, 1969

B: Sir, we covered last time up to the time of the assassination. Immediately afterwards, that night, you were one of the group of legislative leaders who met then-President Johnson out at the airport, weren't you?

Bo: Yes, I was.

B: Did you all assemble and go out there together?

Bo: I went out to the airport with Senator McCormack to meet President Johnson and also, of course, to see Mrs. Kennedy and the other people who came back with President Kennedy's body. The Speaker and I rode out together--and I greeted President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson when they got off the aircraft. Then we returned to the speaker's office. Later a joint leadership meeting was held downtown, if I remember correctly, at about seven o'clock or seven-thirty, in the Vice President's office in the old State Department Building.

B: Was the conversation at that meeting just general or did you go into any specific plans for what would happen next?

Bo: President Johnson, like all the rest of us, was obviously shocked at the assassination of President Kennedy. His main concern was that the country carry on despite the terrific shock of the assassination of the head of state. He talked about the fact that the last thing on earth that he could want was to be in the position that he was in as a result of an assassination, and he asked the leaders of both political parties to assist in making the transition as firm as possible and to keep the country on an even keel. At that time there was still some question about whether or not there was a conspiracy and so forth.

B: Did this come up at the meeting then?

Bo: I don't recall; I don't really think it did. The meeting was very somber, of course. It didn't last long. We were all crowded into the room with the President.

B: These were the leaders of both parties?

Bo: Both parties, and I think each person there pledged his cooperation.

B: How soon was it before you began having--Well, if the word is proper, more or less normal leadership meetings, that is, dealing with the process of legislation and the handling of Congress?

Bo: Almost immediately.

B: During the next week?

Bo: Yes. You may recall, if my memory serves me right, after President Kennedy's funeral, I believe that was on Monday, President Johnson addressed a joint session about Wednesday, and we had an enormous amount of work to do because we had not finished the work of the Congress; and we had to finish it and start another Congress in January. So we were here until Christmas eve.

B: Yes, sir. I remember you were here until Christmas eve. That got to be a pretty wild night.

Bo: It sure did.

B: Were you involved in the idea of having a party that night for members of the House?

B: The President called me about it and asked me what I thought. I said, "Well, everybody's tired out. I think it would probably be a good idea." And I remember the night because it snowed, and it was a rugged night, but I think it did dispel some of the tension.

B: Was Mr. Johnson making something of a point of honor of the passage of that bill--I believe it was the Wheat Sales Bill, wasn't it?

Bo: Yes, he was. I don't know whether it was a point of honor, he felt that the bill was necessary for his Administration, to carry out his foreign commitments, and it was quite a battle, as you know. We had to round up members of the Rules Committee from all over the country, to get them back here to vote on a rule because the Republicans just wouldn't give. We got them back, they voted on it, and we voted on the measure about four o'clock in the morning on Christmas eve.

B: And there were some members, at least, who were mildly

unhappy about what they called the pressure.

Bo: That's an understatement. Everybody by that time was worn out. Their breaking point had been--in some cases--had been passed.

B: One thing that happened before then. You were asked by Mr. Johnson to serve on the Warren Commission investigating the assassination. Could you describe how that came about?

Bo: Yes, the commission idea itself was mine, and it came about in this fashion. The day that President Kennedy's body was here in the Capitol in the Rotunda, a newspaper friend of mine in whom I have great confidence--his name is Edmond LeBreton--called me aside and noted that various groups were proposing investigating the assassination, both in the House and in the Senate, and also the Texas authorities and of course the FBI was already investigating, and he said what we really need is a blue ribbon commission. Well, I immediately agreed with him, and I went to the Parliamentarian in the House, Mr. Deschler, and ascertained whether or not I needed any specific kind of resolution. We decided that maybe that was a good idea, so I introduced a resolution calling for the appointment of a commission. It developed, however, that the President had the power to do it under his broad executive authority. So before we ever acted on the resolution, the President appointed the commission.

B: Did you discuss this idea with Mr. Johnson?

Bo: Yes, I did. And he called me almost immediately and asked me if I would serve on the commission, and I told him I would.

B: Was Mr. Johnson--did he ever seriously consider the idea of allowing the Texas authorities to conduct what amounted to the investigation?

Bo: I really don't know. When he appointed the commission, our mandate was to find the truth and do whatever was required to ascertain the truth, and we had the full cooperation of the Texas officials.

B: Did you advise Mr. Johnson on other possible members of the commission?

Bo: No, I did not.

B: The Warren Commission, of course, has been pretty thoroughly covered in books, newspaper articles, everything else. Did the members of the commission itself really work hard on the commission?

Bo: Yes, they did.

B: As opposed to the staff?

Bo: The staff worked hard, and the members worked hard too.

B: There has been some criticism of the methods involved. You, of course, are an attorney like many other members of the commission were. Did you feel that this was not exactly a judicial process, to follow the same type rules of evidence the courts follow?

Bo: I think that our inquiry was completely adequate, that it was very thorough, and if we couldn't get the truth, who could! We had all the resources of the federal government--all the agencies, the FBI, Secret Service, intelligence agencies, the CIA, the Department of Justice--the Attorney General at that time was Robert Kennedy, the brother of the President who was assassinated, and certainly he wanted to find the truth. In addition to that, we had the Texas authorities in Dallas; they were all cooperative. I said at the time that the report was issued that anyone who wanted to believe otherwise could still believe that way, but it was my total conviction that we had found the truth--that Oswald had assassinated President Kennedy, that he had done so acting alone.

B: No second thoughts since?

Bo: No.

B: Has the fact that you represent a New Orleans district in the city in which District Attorney Garrison has been creating a good deal of furor about the assassination and the Warren Commission report created any awkwardness for you?

Bo: No, because all of us took the position when the report was filed--it was unanimously agreed to, but we had completed our work--that the report and the documents that accompany the report spoke for itself. And I've taken that position ever since then, and so have the other members of the commission. There have been many efforts to go back and unravel the work of the commission by people scattered all

over the world, and that hasn't happened. I think the work will stand, and I think the longer and the more time passes, the more the work of the commission will stand out as a complete and very thorough job. Some of the people who were critics were critics long before we finished our work, and we invited them to appear before the commission.

B: Have you ever discussed--

Bo: The idea that anyone would want to cover up or conceal is something that any objective person would reject offhand.

B: Have you ever discussed this with Mr. Garrison?

Bo: Not really.

B: Does that mean that you couldn't discuss it with him?

Bo: No, it doesn't mean that, but I've had the policy of not discussing it with anyone. Many people have wanted to discuss it. I get letters all the time from people, and I feel that if different members of the commission should start off on a separate route without staff and all the other facilities we had available that we would destroy the work of the commission, and that's why I never discuss it.

B: That appears to be at least tacitly a general agreement by members so far as I know.

Bo: That's the way it has been. One member who was on the commission is now dead--Mr. Dulles, although all the rest of them are still alive.

B: To get back to the work of Congress there in '64 and on into '65, there had been even before the assassination a change in leadership on Mr. Rayburn's death. Did that make much difference in the operation of the House?

Bo: No, because Mr. Rayburn had been--his illness had been incapacitating him, and his team just moved in--John McCormack, Carl Albert, and myself. The last year that Mr. Rayburn was here, none of us realized how sick he was. Oftentimes when you are very close to a person, you just don't see it; it's insidious, and he would complain about things--he nearly always talked about a pain in his back, talking about having lumbago which was an expression I hadn't heard in years, kind of a country disease; but when I realized how very ill he was in July of that year, the year that he died, I went down to Tennessee with him to the

county in which he was born where they named a bridge for him. And he loved to fish; we went fishing in one of the Tennessee Valley lakes, and he was just miserable all the time. I knew that he was very sick, and we had anticipated his passing.

B: Mr. Johnson, I gather--

Bo: Mr. Rayburn was a great leader, and his influence is still very much felt in these quarters.

B: I've seen it said that the difference between Speaker Rayburn and Speaker McCormack's techniques is that one was largely an individualistic process and the other was more of a group or collegial kind of system.

Bo: I think that's true.

B: I gather Mr. Johnson had no difficulty in working with the leadership under Speaker McCormack.

Bo: Not a bit. Not the slightest.

B: When you would get together in leadership meetings to discuss strategy in the House, how active a part did Mr. Johnson take in the details of this kind of thing?

Bo: When we were talking about passing legislation that he was interested in, he took a very active part.

B: Was this down to participating in the vote count himself?

Bo: Sometimes. And of course he maintained pretty much the same staff, Congressional staff, liaison staff, as President Kennedy had. Larry O'Brien and Henry Wilson and Mike Manatos. Henry left later, and Barefoot Sanders took his place, but it was a superb team, and they worked very well together.

B: Was the legislative liaison function as good after Mr. O'Brien himself left and Barefoot Sanders took over the whole job?

Bo: I think so. Barefoot was a very effective person. By that time he had been thoroughly coached and broken in, and Mr. O'Brien continued to help even after he was Postmaster General. He attended all the meetings, worked right along with the President.

B: This doesn't really pertain to Mr. O'Brien himself, but the mention of him brings it up. There was talk at the time, and since, of some rivalry perhaps even amounting to friction among the Kennedy group and the Johnson group around the Presidency. Did you see anything of that?

Bo: Well, it was hard for me to see, but I guess it was there. President Johnson kept a great many of the people who were very close to President Kennedy on his staff, but apparently there did develop a feeling between Robert Kennedy and the President.

B: Was that just a clash of two powerful ambitions?

Bo: We could speculate on that all day. I don't know. I suspect that is mostly what it was.

B: To what do you attribute the rather remarkable success of Mr. Johnson's, or the Kennedy-Johnson, legislative program in '64 and on into '65?

Bo: Well, Johnson brought tremendous energy to his job. It was amazing how hard he worked. I got the impression that the man never slept. He was, particularly at that time, very close to Congress, and he would see members constantly and would talk to them, persuade them. I think the assassination of President Kennedy gave a lot of momentum to the Democratic program. The feeling was that President Kennedy wanted these programs, they were important to the party and to the nation, had sort of a unifying influence within the Democratic party.

B: Then what happened beginning towards the end of the session in '65? It seems from the outside looking in that the impetus was lost. Is that a fair assessment?

Bo: Well, if you go back and check the records of the 89th and 90th Congresses, that would take you through '65, through 1968, I don't see how anyone could say that the impetus was lost because in every field we passed an enormous amount of legislation. In the field of health, for instance, we passed more bills than had ever been passed in all the rest of history of the country put together. Same thing in the field of education, conservation, water pollution, air pollution, and so on.

B: Did you participate in briefings and discussions on the Vietnamese war?

Bo: Yes, I participated when other members of Congress participated.

B: Well, I meant on the Congressional level.

Bo: Yes, surely.

B: Do you feel that Congress was adequately briefed on all stages of that involvement?

Bo: Yes, I think so.

B: Did the increasing involvement in Viet Nam create in Congress something of a malaise among Congressmen?

Bo: Well, it's strange that reaction in the House was considerably different from the Senate. There was much more support in the House than there was in the Senate. But obviously the growth of the war and the spread of the war and the cost of the war made our job much more difficult in providing the domestic programs.

B: You were Parliamentarian at the 1964 Democratic Convention, weren't you?

Bo: Yes.

B: Did you participate in the compromise of the seating of the Mississippi delegation? Did you help work out the compromise?

Bo: Just on the outside. That was worked out pretty much by the Johnson forces working at the convention.

B: How was Johnson received in Louisiana in the campaign that year?

Bo: Well, he was very well received in New Orleans; he carried New Orleans, but Goldwater carried the State.

B: In New Orleans, he made what has since become a rather famous speech, the one telling the anecdote about the man who was going down and give one more Democratic speech because they heard Negro, Negro, Negro all their lives.

Bo: That's right.

B: How did that go over in Louisiana?

Bo: Well, it went over very well with the audience that he had there which was very pro-Democratic, but Louisiana and several other states voted for Goldwater, so obviously it didn't. The State in 1960 had gone for President Kennedy.

B: I've seen it written that that was an act of political courage to do that-- to make a speech like that in Louisiana. Did you know beforehand that it was going to be that kind of speech?

Bo: I had no idea what the President was going to talk about. I had been in charge of the Lady Bird train--we met the President in New Orleans. By that time we'd been quite a few days on the train from Washington down through the South and into New Orleans, and we met in New Orleans at the end of the train; had an enormous crowd in New Orleans. If I remember correctly, the President made the speech pretty much off the cuff.

B: Who thought up the idea of that train?

Bo: I don't know.

B: Was it a success?

Bo: May have been Mrs. Johnson. In any event, it was a great idea.

B: Was it as successful as it seemed?

Bo: Yes, it certainly was.

B: It must have been some job, though, getting the various local politicians to come along.

Bo: Well, it was, but it was well managed; it was advanced by a group of knowledgeable people. My son was very active in that, and wherever we went, we had a wonderful outpouring of the local political leaders.

B: Mrs. Johnson herself seemed to be a first-class politician.

Bo: We had Mrs. Johnson and both the Johnson girls, and they did a remarkable job. I was sort of an emcee; I introduced Mrs. Johnson at most of the stops.

B: Did you play an active part in the campaign of '68?

Bo: No, not particularly. I had plenty to do at the convention,

and then I had a very stiff campaign of my own which kept me at home trying to get myself reelected.

B: Some have said that during Mr. Johnson's Presidency and perhaps dating back even into Kennedy's Presidency, the Democratic National Committee had fallen on hard times, that it became just not as efficient an organization as it should have been. Do you share that assessment?

Bo: Yes, I think that's true. I never have understood why President Johnson at least appeared to let the committee become almost dead, but it is a fact that during his Administration the committee was very inactive.

B: Did that circumstance date back to the Kennedy Presidency too? What was his attitude toward the committee?

Bo: That's a hard question for me to answer. I don't know. I just don't know. You would expect, just on form, for President Johnson to be more interested in the political organization per se than President Kennedy, and yet I'm not so sure that President Kennedy wasn't more so than President Johnson.

B: It is curious because you hear so much about Lyndon Johnson as a political man, and yet it seems fairly clear that the hard organizing work of the party did fall apart under his regime.

Bo: That's right.

B: Did this affect the campaign of '68 seriously?

Bo: Well obviously it did. I think when Larry O'Brien went in there he had to almost start from scratch. He had so little time, practically none.

B: Another thing that you see often about Mr. Johnson in terminology--I'm not sure it is really suitable--is the question of his image problem with the people generally. Have you found this to be true in New Orleans and Louisiana?

Bo: Oh, I would think that probably is so. To me it seemed always strange because I knew Mr. Johnson, know Mr. Johnson so well, and he always impressed both my wife and myself as a man of great earnestness and sincerity, devoted to his country. It was hard for me to imagine people thinking otherwise, but apparently some of them did.

B: Many people say that it's the difference between knowing Mr. Johnson in person or in a small group and seeing him on television.

Bo: He apparently was very conscious of that. He tried to feel very much at ease on television; I'm afraid maybe he tried too hard.

B: It seems to have backfired on him.

Bo: Well, you can try so hard that in place of giving an appearance of being completely at ease you give the opposite appearance.

B: It also seems to be that in the South in those years, and I lived in the South myself during most of that time, there was really just an irrational hatred of Mr. Johnson on the part of many people that may have derived from his civil rights activities. Would you agree with that?

Bo: I don't know how to assess it otherwise. In my judgment, it was an irrational type of dislike. I don't consider myself competent to know why. I would think that the reason you give is probably accurate, although I'm not sure in my own mind.

B: Do you think there might have been other factors?

Bo: Could have been.

B: Such as what?

Bo: Well, failure to communicate, his image problems.

B: Did this affect you personally or politically? Did your public close association with Mr. Johnson--

Bo: Yes, it was the basis for at least two campaigns against me. Well, it was about the only basis for a campaign against me.

B: Did that create an awkward situation for you?

Bo: Not awkward, but it was one I had to face and overcome, had to campaign very heavily.

B: Did you ever discuss this kind of thing with Mr. Johnson or he with you?

Bo: He laughed about it.

B: He must have known that this kind of political circumstances existed for you and for many others.

Bo: Oh yes, he knew that, but he was very understanding, very sympathetic really.

B: Did he understand that perhaps in campaigning you might have to disassociate yourself somewhat from him?

Bo: Sure, he understood that. Mr. Johnson understands politics; he's a great, great student of politics.

B: Did he ever tease you? I can imagine Mr. Johnson, say, suggesting that he come to Louisiana and campaign for you.

Bo: Yes, that's right. He teased everybody which, I think, made people like him.

B: Sir, is there anything else that you think should be added to this? For example, would you like to, or could you, give a kind of thumbnail evaluation of Mr. Johnson's strengths and weaknesses?

Bo: Where is this going?

B: It's going in the Johnson Library for the use of future scholars under your terms. If you wish to restrict its use to, say, nobody can use it for so many years, or nobody can use it without your permission, and we are assured that such restrictions apply to Mr. Johnson himself. These are standard archival restrictions.

Bo: Yes. Well, Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were so close to my wife and myself that it's really very difficult for me to be too objective about the kind of questions you ask me.

B: That, incidentally, would be understood by any scholar using it.

Bo: Sure. In my judgment Mr. Johnson was totally dedicated. I think he responded to problems immediately and intelligently. If I were to talk about weaknesses, I would say I really believe he tried to do too much, that many of the things that he did personally he could have delegated.

B: You mean specifically in his legislative program and relations with Congress?

Bo: That's right. And other things as well. Then, of course,

Viet Nam became a consuming thing. I don't know how it could have been otherwise, because he was so--he inherited Viet Nam and he was so anxious to bring about a successful conclusion to that war that it became a constant source of frustration to him.

B: To the exclusion of concern with domestic matters?

Bo: Well, certainly up to a point it had to, because night and day his major attention was diverted and devoted to Viet Nam.

B: Did it create an obvious frustration in him?

Bo: Yes.

B: Then people like yourself who were close to him could see him being tortured by this thing?

Bo: Yes, definitely.

B: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Bo: I often wonder what would have happened had he sat down with a group of people and talked about his decision of March 31 not to run. I think most people would have tried to talk him out of it.

B: Were you involved in that in any way prior to it?

Bo: No. Not a bit. I don't know of anybody else.

B: Among other things we are trying to do in this is talk to everybody who might have had something to do with it, and maybe some day scholars will be able to have a clue. Do you believe he could have been reelected?

Bo: Yes.

B: That seems to be the crucial point of the thing.

Bo: I think so.

B: May I ask you one more thing, and this really verges on the personal, and perhaps even the impertinent. You're a southern Congressman from a district that is not reactionary generally on the conservative side. What is your personal opinion of Mr. Johnson's civil rights program beyond your recorded votes on it?

Bo: Again, that's a hard question for me to answer. I think Mr. Johnson was desperately trying to bridge the gap between the races. I think he tried probably harder than certainly any President in modern times, and I think too that he was disappointed; that he felt that in spite of all of his effort that he had not succeeded. I think this was one of his great frustrations.

B: Do you think he did enough as far as legislation?

Bo: Oh yes.

B: Too much perhaps?

Bo: That's hard to say. It's possible that he did so much that there was a great hardening of attitudes of one side which brought about a similar reaction on the other side.

B: Most of the major civil rights bills of this period have been pretty obviously aimed at the South. Did you ever discuss with him what was to be done about the race problem in the cities?

Bo: He talked about it at great length at our meetings, leadership meetings. This too is one of his feelings of--I hate to keep using the word "frustration", but he had instituted a great many programs, the poverty program, model cities, housing program, and so on; and yet there was a group, particularly in the United States Senate, who kept saying that we weren't doing enough, that much more money ought to be appropriated and so forth and so on. This became a source of great annoyance to him, because on the other side of the coin, of course, many were saying that that's all he was doing, devoting his interests and energies to the racial situation rather than so many other problems confronting the nation. So he was obviously frustrated about that.

B: Anything else you feel that should be said, sir?

Bo: Maybe I'll think of something, but not right now.

B: Thank you very much, sir.

Bo: You're quite welcome.

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By Hale Boggs

to the

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ACCESSION NUMBER 73-12

Hale Boggs Biographical Information:

Congressman; b. Long Beach, Miss., Feb. 15, 1914; B.A., Tulane U., 1935, LL.B., 1937; admitted to La. bar, 1937, engaged in general practice of civil law, 1943, 1946; mem. 77th, 80th, 81st, 82d, 83d, 84th, 85th-87th, 88th Congresses, 2d Dist. of Louisiana; majority whip, 87th-91st Congresses; majority leader, 92nd Congress; Vice chmn. Demo. Nat. Committee, 1956; disappeared while on a campaign flight over Alaska, October 16, 1972, and presumed dead.