INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 27, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD BOLLING (with occasional comments by Jim Grant Bolling)

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Congressman Bolling's office, Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.

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M: Let's begin by simply identifying you. You're Richard Bolling, Democrat from--

B: Democrat from the Fifth District of Missouri and Kansas City.

M: And you've been in the House of Representatives since 1949?

B: Correct.

M: Which is, as coincidence would have it, the same year I believe that Mr. Johnson went to the Senate. Did you have any occasion to be acquainted with him closely in those very early days when you first came to the House?

B: I have no memory of it. I'm sure I must have met him, but I have no memory of it. Because when I first came to the House I was not "in" with Mr. Rayburn as I was very soon thereafter. I have no memory of meeting him, although I'm sure I must have.

M: You became fairly quickly a regular in the so-called Board of Education with Mr. Rayburn.

B: That's correct.

M: And I suppose by that time Mr. Johnson was first minority leader and then majority leader after that.

B: Well, actually--I'm not sure of my memory on this--but I probably was in the Board of Education before he became minority leader and probably met him there before he became minority leader, but casually. Again I have no memory of it, but my memory of that is I was going to that probably in 1951 and 1952.

M: You didn't waste any time getting into the leadership yourself then.

B: Well, I wasn't in the leadership, but I was with the leadership. But I wasn't on the same terms with Mr. Rayburn in the early years, 1951-52, as I was in 1953-54 and increasingly. By 1955, by the time that Mr. Johnson became the majority leader, I was one of the three member regulars--the other two being Texans. Frank Ikard, who is now the president of the American Petroleum Institute, and Homer Thornberry, who is now on the Fifth Circuit Court, were the other two regulars. I think by probably 1953-54 I was a regular, and by 1955 surely I was. That's when I have my first real awareness of Mr. Johnson as a leader. I'm sure we had contacts in 1953-54, but he was the minority leader and I just don't have any particular memory of it.

M: What's your impression of the relationship that Mr. Johnson and Mr. Rayburn had in the Board of Education? What role did Mr. Johnson play in the decisions that were made there?

B: Well, my impression--and it may have been simply because I was a Rayburn man and I certainly was, both in terms of legislation and in terms of attachment--was that the strong man in the group, of the

pair, was Rayburn; that Johnson was very clearly Rayburn's protegé and that in terms of policy decisions Johnson was very clearly the second man. At the same time it early became apparent to me that Johnson was--I suppose it's all right for me to call him Johnson, I don't want to call him President Johnson--

M: You can call him Lyndon or whatever you want to call him.

B: No, you know, I've got the same problem that everybody in politics has--that once a man is the president, he is the president. It very quickly became apparent that Mr. Johnson was faster afoot than Rayburn as far as the legislative process was concerned. He was much more of a broken field runner, legislatively, and of course he worked in a different institution where you could function differently than you can in the House. The House and the Senate are totally different as legislative institutions. And Mr. Johnson gave me the impression of being a person who had never been fully at home in the House with its procedures. I have no reason to disagree with my early assessment that he never was as effective a House man as he was a Senate man.

M: As Senate leader, did he have any relations with House members as a general rule?

B: One of the unique, almost unique things about the Texas delegation, even today, but particularly in the days when Mr. Rayburn and Mr. Johnson were the respective leaders of their party in two houses, is that the [members of the] Texas delegation, regardless of ideology and regardless of the way that they voted, were enormously close. So he clearly had a relationship with House members through the Texas

delegation. Then he had relationships with House members in a variety of other ways. But he never was really a House man; he always seemed to me to be a Senate man--more comfortable in the Senate and more able to operate in the Senate. I don't think he liked the disorder of the House. The Senate you can count--you ought to be able to go into a tough one knowing exactly how many votes you have. And I think we developed as good a counting system in Rayburn's last four or five years as there ever has been in the House perhaps except in the days of the caucus, in the Wilson days of Clark and Underwood. And we've only been precise on the number once, and that involved four switches, two each way. That was on that Rules fight in 1961, and that was probably the most intensively counted thing outside of the Landrum-Griffin Bill, in my experience. As far as I know, Rayburn always said we did more intensive counting than he'd ever done.

But I just think Mr. Johnson--my impression of him, my experience with him really starts in 1955, my consciousness of the experience.

M: He didn't typically come to the House and use the so-called famous Johnson treatment that he is accused of?

B: Not very often, not very often, because he wasn't poaching on Mr. Rayburn's preserve. I think he had a very strong feeling after Mr. Rauburn died that he wasn't supposed to mess around over here. Now he still came over occasionally after Mr. Rayburn died, but not too often.

M: Not the kind of personal leadership that he is associated with usually in the Senate?

B: No, but on occasion it would happen. My wife raises a point that is a very important point. It's not unimportant that she was born in Fort Worth and lived in Dallas until she came up here with the Kennedy Administration where she was the congressional liaison officer for HEW for three years. This is an absolutely valid point about which I know a good deal less than she, but Johnson was a great deal stronger in Texas state politics than Rayburn ever was. Rayburn had great prestige, but he had lost contact to a very great degree. He did essentially what I do, so I am familiar with it. He was a specialist in his own district and that was the power base that put him there; but his power was here, and you know what happened to Rayburn on several occasions--they just plumb wouldn't let him go to the convention, for example. They were very unkind to him. But Mr. Johnson had a great deal more influence in Texas state politics than Mr. Rayburn did, although Mr. Rayburn had enormous prestige before Mr. Johnson did. But as far as this place is concerned, I thought all the way through that policy-wise, with rare exceptions--when they were going in opposite directions, where they didn't reach an agreement--Rayburn was the strong man and Johnson was the second man as far as legislative operation. Rayburn was the line plunger and Johnson was the broken field runner.

M: How frequently did that impasse that you mention here occur?

B: Very seldom. Rayburn would never have acknowledged this, but it occurred to my knowledge only on a labor issue, on the Landrum-Griffin Bill, where I felt and said in one of my books that Johnson crossed us on it. I think he did. I think he did it because of his involvement in Texas state politics, if you want to put it that way, but I think he lost us a bunch of Texas votes. I think he shot the Texas vote out from under Mr. Rayburn for his own reasons. But that's the only case I know of where they had a head-on collision. And neither one of them would acknowledge it in the way of southern politicians which is a little unlike the North, East, West average politician. They papered it over.

M: You still find people who say there was no division in the Texas Democratic party in the 1950s, for example, which is obvious nonsense.

B: Yes, that's right. Rayburn knew what had happened, but he'd never say so. In all truth it made me mad enough so that Rayburn and I used to have some--it's ridiculous to say fights because he could always really tell me to shut up. He'd wait a long time because he gave me a very large latitude, certainly in the last five years. He had listened to me perhaps longer than he wanted to when we disagreed, but we had pretty good fights over Johnson.

The only other time that I know of a real conflict, again papered over and never really acknowledged by Rayburn, but I know perfectly well he disagreed, was when Mr. Johnson decided that it would be in his interest as a presidential candidate to have that rump session.

M: That was after the 1960 convention?

B: That's right. He and I had a really hard time on that--Mr. Johnson and I--because I thought he was totally wrong from his own point of view as well as from the point of view of the Democratic Party. And we had a really tough argument, so tough in front of Rayburn that Rayburn told us both to shut up.

M: And got away with it?

B: Oh, of course. Nobody bucked him very much as long as he was alive. There's a misconception as to who was the powerhouse. Nobody fooled with Rayburn when he--

M: He was the boss.

B: Well, he was the boss in that sense. I mean, we all had freedom to go off in our own directions, that was understood, but in his room it was his room. You had a tough fight. When it got too ugly, he just shut you up. He shut you both up. That happened once or twice.

M: You were frequently referred to as a bridge between Rayburn and the liberal group in the House. Mr. Johnson also needed a bridge of that kind in the Senate. Were you ever it for him?

B: No, Humphrey was.

M: You didn't try to--?

B: No, I never fooled with the Senate. I have made a practice of staying over on this side. I leave it entirely to my own senators. Now, on one occasion on Landrum-Griffin I asked for some help. I asked Rayburn's okay before I asked for help from Johnson, before I knew where he was going. And the help involved newspaper people; I had found out from the civil rights thing how enormously effective he

could be with the press, both in terms of columnists and editors. He was a positive genius with them, despite his reputation with reporters. He had a very close friend in Phil Graham, who was influential. And he had demonstrated to me in the civil rights fight, in the 1957 fight, and I think I've probably got that in the book, how effective he could be.

The present President and the present Secretary of State had made a decision, in my judgment which will never be provable in history, but had made a decision that it would be preferable from their point of view that we not have a civil rights bill but have the issue. And they had had enough influence on Joe Martin so that Joe Martin had shifted around. Mr. Johnson not only helped--not only helped, hell, he did it--turn the press around--it was beginning to go against us, he turned it around--but he also figured out how to get to Eisenhower through Knowland. That's the only reason we ever got that bill compromised and through, because I think Nixon and Rogers, then the attorney general, or the acting attorney general, had decided that we weren't going to have a civil rights bill.

M: That was interesting what you said about getting to Eisenhower. What you've called the rule-or-ruin liberals used to accuse Mr. Johnson of leading in the Senate by surrendering to Eisenhower. Do you think that's a misstatement?

B: I disagreed. I think you can criticize Mr. Johnson's legislative leadership on one basis, and I'll leave it to you all to check it out--I'm going to do it some day, but I haven't got the time or the

resources to do it now. My impression is that Johnson as Senate leader won too often by too large majorities to be most effective as a Senate leader. My own view is that you should never win a tough fight by more than two votes.

M: Meaning that you've compromised too far?

B: Yes, if you win too big. Now, that's not always true. But I think he tended to really want to have consensus, and there's great advantage in this; this is a perfectly arguable point. I happen to believe that politics is a matter of tension and conflict over policy, legitimate, and that an adult politician forgets the wounds of that particular fight and moves on to the next one. I think he always believed, until very late in his presidential career, that you perhaps could have something like consensus. And I think that's what he strove for in the Senate except when he got caught with something like a civil rights bill when he couldn't have it. But even then, it's got to be remembered that he managed the 1957 bill in such a way that you didn't have to break a filibuster. That's not to take away from the achievement, because it was an enormous achievement which paved the way. And I don't think he has ever gotten enough credit for the quality of that achievement because unless we had had the 1957 Civil Rights Act, we would never have had another act. We had to have the first one. All it had to have was a title. And it was a great achievement even though it was a great compromise, and the very intelligent people who dealt with this issue who couldn't say so in the public, like Joe Rauh and Clarence Mitchell, knew this.

M: So some of the liberals were reasonable?

B: Much more reasonable. What we had to do in the civil rights bill--the real genius of the civil rights bill, the first one was--we had to suppress the liberals as much as we had to motivate the Republicans.

M: What about Mr. Johnson as a liberal? Do you know of a reaction he had--other than not joining or not participating--to the Democratic Study Group?

B: He didn't have anything to do with the Democratic Study Group. It came into being after he left the House. The Democratic Study Group came into being really with Rayburn's concurrence and approval. I had a good deal to do with its coming into being although I wasn't a member until much later. We had a problem--we had some bomb throwers, the people who don't give a damn about any effectiveness, they just like to say things and tend to break things up. We had to sort of contain them so that they wouldn't go off on their own--twenty-five or thirty of them--and made it impossible to do anything. That's why McCarthy's marauders turned into a formal organization--in order to contain the people who, I would say perfectly frankly, were the irresponsible liberals who didn't care about deeds and only cared about words.

Mr. Johnson had a very fundamental contempt for the talky liberal, and I used to have considerable trouble with him in my early experience because he was very very nasty about some of the people who happened to be my personal friends. But he matured. (Laughter) He developed and ceased to be that way. He began to see that the

Paul Douglasses and the Tom Hennings of this world, while at that stage of the game may be not very effective legislators, were very useful citizens and very sincere people who just simply hadn't grasped some of the fundamentals of the legislative process and its intricacy and difficulty. Mr. Johnson had sort of a tendency to feel that if you weren't with him you were against him. He could be pretty offended pretty fast. He would get terribly annoyed with these people and say so, in not very pleasant terms. That was the reason that I know who served him as the bridge because he had a very high opinion of "Umphrey"--

M: Yes, as he continued to call him.

B: --as a practical liberal, more than a talky liberal, which of course was not the image that Mr. Humphrey presented.

M: What you call a program Democrat is a good term.

B: Yes. National Democrat-program Democrat. I sort of bounce back and forth between the two. But they had a very good working relationship, it was very clear. And Humphrey served essentially, I would say a similar, I don't know that it was the same, purpose because Johnson was his own planner and his own counter. Ultimately Rayburn was, too, but I did an awful lot of his long-range planning with considerable care. Sometimes I did things without consulting him, after I knew him well enough to know what I thought I could get away with, and sometimes I did it very carefully with considerable consultation. But Johnson was his own planner; Humphrey doesn't have a planner's mind, in my judgment.

M: You've written in great detail and, what seems to me for a congressional writing, a very candid detail about the two great legislative battles of that late 1950s period, Landrum-Griffin and the Civil Rights Act. Were there other measures of great importance on which you worked particularly closely with Mr. Johnson, that you had occasion to appeal to him?

B: They were the main ones. One big issue a year in the House is a full-time job, if you really take it seriously. Because, as I think I said in one or the other of those books, you're talking about contacts with members that are generated in the order of not just tens of thousands but maybe hundreds of thousands of contacts. So you're really talking about a major operation. I very seldom fool with the Senate if I can avoid it. I couldn't avoid it on either Landrum-Griffin or Civil Rights, because I had a very, very strong feeling engendered I suspect by my larger knowledge of history than most members of the House on the Civil Rights thing; and the Landrum-Griffin thing was just one of those that could tear the party into umpteen pieces. We tried pretty hard to figure out a way not to. But most others, I just never considered of that level of importance. Sure, you worked a little bit on all the programs that were passed after the 1964 election. We had most of that around in some form or another, and you worked a little, and it would be talked about. But the Civil Rights Bill would be the only one that I remember where we'd stay up until four o'clock in the morning--all of us--in Rayburn's room, trying to figure out how to do something. That happened at

least three or four times where both Johnson and I would maybe get two hours sleep and come back and go to work on it.

M: What about his presidential ambitions? Were you an active campaigner for anybody in the 1960 convention and campaign?

B: Well, it would be inaccurate to say that I was an active campaigner. I was in a position where, when Mr. Rayburn called me over and asked me to help him with Johnson in the convention, asked me to go to the convention, I was in a position to say that I could not and would not; that a man from my state was seeking the nomination and that I'd refused to go on his favorite-son candidacy in 1956; that I didn't feel that I could in 1960; and that furthermore, and I did say this, that I didn't think that he, Mr. Rayburn, or Mr. Johnson had a prayer, that Kennedy was going to win; and that I just hoped Mr. Rayburn would not be--embarrassed was not the word--humiliated by his experience and I wished to God that he would forget about it, but he wouldn't. But I wouldn't go. I just would have nothing to do with it, and I told him bluntly that. I'm pretty sure that the Speaker never told the Majority Leader because he thought I was too blunt anyway, and he tried to protect me from myself.

M: Many of your good friends in the more extreme liberal group, of course, balked at Mr. Johnson even going on in the second place.

B: Well, I didn't have any feelings about it. I was startled, frankly; I misread it. I was startled, as I take it Mr. Rayburn was at first. But it made a lot of sense. I don't think Kennedy would have won

without Johnson; I think he needed his help. And, God knows, nobody needs to comment on what happened later; it happened.

M: Did you act in any way as the liaison between the ticket and some of the liberal community that were balking?

B: Well, I had a sort of a major job; it's the only time I've ever had a major job in a national campaign. But the Kennedys presumably because I had one unique qualification--not only was I a northerner, a northern liberal who was very close to Rayburn, but I also was very close to Truman--the Kennedys, through Bobby, gave me three jobs which were incompatible. You couldn't do all three. One was a unique one--two were unique, I guess. One [was] entirely unique, and that was that I was the chairman of a committee which was called the Democratic National Committee Congressional Liaison Committee, and I was physically in twenty states and I had theoretical responsibilities in fifty states because I was supposed to coordinate four hundred and thirty-seven House campaigns with the national campaign. Clearly, I didn't. Clearly, I didn't work in the Northeast. There would be no reason for that. Clearly, I didn't work in New York. Clearly, I didn't work in the South, because in those days the southerners considered me even more of a traitor than they do today, a traitor to my class or my race--I'm not clear which. But it was quite a unique carrot-stick operation because the Kennedys were brutal enough with themselves to recognize that there were a great many members of the House who were stronger in their districts than Kennedy. And what we were trying to do and did, at least according to them, we were

trying to use the congressional candidates--this is put rather brutally--to strengthen the national ticket. And to do so we had to have both large carrots and big sticks, and the carrots were real--they were things like piggybacking a member on the President's TV show and putting in two minutes--that kind of thing, a whole flock of things that we did that have never been done before. It included things like putting substantial sums of money in congressional districts where you couldn't win so that you'd enhance the President's chances of carrying the state. Playing very rough, practical politics. It also involved developing a stick, and the stick was a myth, and the myth was the assurance that Kennedy was going to win. That was one of the reasons why when we knew perfectly well the thing was sliding out from under us the last ten days, we got more and more confident because we had to keep key guys pushing. And you know that was the line. Well, I didn't. Johnson's responsibility was the South.

M: In the same way in the South?

B: Very much, but I constantly was running into this business about Johnson being on the ticket, and I was just snarling at people. Of course, I had a terrible problem with it, because he was the symbol of the non-Northeast, [non-North]west party to the--not just the extreme liberals, many liberals. Now, there were exceptions. Chet Holifield was always for Johnson, for example. But no, no, he was a red flag. He stayed a red flag except for a few years, because they never came to accept it really, which is sort of ridiculous.

M: What about after the election and he became vice president, did he continue to play an important role with the legislative branch from the vice president's office?

B: My view would be that he didn't. I don't know how he would see it from here. But I could say pretty dogmatically that I was pretty sure he didn't. I think there's objective evidence--what happened in the first caucus over in the Senate--and then based on my experience, I think he found out that the vice president didn't have a lot of power in the House or in the Senate. He was listened to respectfully, but he had very little influence.

M: I noticed in the detailed accounts of the first big fight over the enlargement of the Committee on Rules early in 1961, his name is virtually unmentioned. Did he play no role?

B: No, we tried to enlist him. I couldn't tell you how much of a role he played. I really couldn't, because I think he felt that he didn't have much to do with the House except the Texas delegation. And of course he didn't have as much influence with the Texas delegation as Rayburn did, although he had a lot of influence. That would be a closer question than who was the dominant person policy-wise. But I don't think he had much to do with that. You see, we had a very tight operation in that one. I can't believe--I know we called on him, and every time we thought he might help we got the word to the right people, the right person was the obvious one, and the President got the word. We weren't messing with going through Rayburn on some

of the odd ones, although he would know what we were doing. Sometimes we would go to Rayburn, but most often we would go through the White House.

M: Go to the one that had the best influence.

B: You'd think so, yes. That's right. I just don't know. It may have showed up somewhere, but Rayburn's the one, you see, that had all those chips to call in the House. He's the one--he was working on the South and he got some votes. And then we were doing the other operation. We were using the new administration with the O'Brien group, and then we had the DSG group and we had a bunch of outside support--the civil rights groups, the labor groups, you know, the standards.

M: There's a very detailed write-up of that in the [Tom] Wicker book JFK and LBJ. Is that accurate?

B: No. No, not in my view. I think Tom's pretty superficial in that. I read it, and Mrs. Bolling did, too, and I'm pretty sure that it's not accurate.

M: He just doesn't go deep enough into the--?

B: I don't think he knew enough. Sadly enough, because this is what didn't do me a damned bit of good. Probably the most accurate description of how it was done is a Time article that appeared without a by-line, written by Neil McNeil who was sitting in on the Thompson-Bolling counting, and that probably gives you the flavor of what was going on. I don't think the Wicker description is particularly accurate. I'd have to reread it to tell you in what respects I

consider it inaccurate. The impression that I'm left with is that he didn't know what was going on really. But we weren't telling a hell of a lot.

M: It wouldn't have helped your case any?

B: No.

M: Once the Dallas assassination occurred then, did Mr. Johnson immediately contact the upper echelons of the House such as yourself?

B: He didn't immediately contact me, but he contacted the upper echelons of the House. I imagine he had some concern about which way I was going to go, not in relation to him but what was going to happen in the House. I think he would have gone through channels. He was always a channel man, and he should have been. But he had communication with me quite early, because very early I put in something that would help pry the Civil Rights Bill loose; and I instinctively believed that he was going to do what he did, and that was reverse the two priorities--the two top priorities.

M: Put the civil rights first, you mean?

B: Yes, ahead of the tax. And he did. I put in the resolution on which you could base a discharge petition which is a leverage job, a propaganda job and a leverage job, and he called me and talked to me about it. I'm sure he contacted his--you see, he had a tremendously good channel into the House through Thornberry who was, I think, his closest personal friend that I know of in politics. And, God knows, they were very close. Maybe there is somebody closer, but I never caught up with them. I'm not talking about the people

back home or in something else, but I'm talking about the people who were in congressional politics. And he would know very well what the people just below the formal leadership were thinking and saying, because Thornberry and others were very good and totally loyal Johnson men who could yell at him, too. I always thought Thornberry was a very good influence because, despite his reputation, he was not a sycophant; he was a head-to-head arguer. I've seen him fight with Lyndon almost as much as I did on occasion.

M: In your most recent book, you are a good deal less complimentary about the Johnson legislative record than perhaps the myth has sometimes suggested. You tend to blame the leadership which I'd like to ask you about after a while. But doesn't Johnson bear some responsibility for this?

B: Yes, sure he does. You see, that all goes back to the House business. I don't think he was ever a House man; I don't think he was ever particularly effective in understanding the House business. I don't think he was a very great wheeler and dealer in the House after the honeymoon was over. I personally believe that what we got out of the Goldwater Congress, as I've always called it, was much less than was there. You don't have that kind of a majority and throw it out the window the way we did. I don't really think it was Johnson's fault. I think he had to play it sort of the way he did. And he had incompetent leadership and knew it. Of course, he would never admit that, I doubt even in secret. He knew it. And he just did the best

he could, and he was smart enough to know that he had to deal through them and worked out a modus vivendi. They worked out a modus vivendi that was okay. We have an awkward thing in here at some point--I don't know how much you know about it, but he and I had a fight on a personal matter. The President and I had a real knock-down-drag-out which got to be a real knife fight.

M: Do you want to go into that?

B: No, I don't. It's personal; it's not professional. It was around December of 1963 and into January of 1964. It was a brute. And he made peace--how many months later--a year?

JB: February, 1967 [1965?]

B: A year later he made peace in typical and again, southern way. And I'm not interested in going into this. This was personal. And it really has no part of the professional aspect, but it colored our professional relations for a year.

JB: And then Foot came after that.

B: You see, what he did was--

M: Did you say Foot?

B: Barefoot Sanders. Well, you see, years ago Mrs. Bolling was the finance manager of Barefoot's campaign against Joe Pool in Dallas, and Barefoot and she have been friends for many years, and he and I are friends, became friends very quickly.

But in any event the President and I buried the hatchet on his motion. The President is sort of an overwhelming guy, and if you aren't with him, you are against him. He can get pretty rough, and

I'm just as rough, without the power, and we had sort of an interesting year. But I didn't do him any damage on his program, don't misunderstand me. I was no dog in the manger on the program because I was for the program a long time ago. But when he and I made peace, and I think he has probably in his mind forgotten that year--that's the way people are--Barefoot came aboard.

Now, Henry Wilson had succeeded Larry O'Brien, and I had helped set up what was the Kennedy concept of liaison, which was the best concept that I've ever seen around--not because I had any part in it because they went well beyond my initial suggestion. And it disintegrated in that first year. It was a unique concept because what it did was see to it that there was a Kennedy man, or woman, as top liaison in each of the departments. That doesn't mean that they weren't loyal to their secretary, but it meant that Kennedy, through the O'Brien network, had real capacity to pull together the legislative program. Mrs. Bolling knows more about that than I do because she worked in it for three years.

M: You were the HEW link in this network that was established.

B: Yes. Well, now Johnson never understood this, in my judgment. And Henry Wilson was a great guy. He was O'Brien's second but just never had the force really to take O'Brien's place, and he didn't have the instinct for legislation. We're getting into this mystique now that I'm sure bores everyone outside of the field. But Rayburn used to say that in this business if you can't feel things that you can neither see nor hear, you ought to get out. And there is

something to that. You either have some sort of a feel for legislative processes or you don't. Oh, Henry was good, but he was never good enough. Yes, he was good enough--he was better than average, but Foot happened to be a very near genius at this. He was as good as they come--Barefoot. And very quickly we established a relationship, and I sit on the Rules Committee and there are a great many things that I can do without consulting anybody. And we worked out a sort of an extracurricular kind of a liaison where I suspect, and I'm not prepared to say this, but I suspect a good deal of their intelligence was rechecked, their legislative intelligence.

M: The leadership intelligence?

B: Yes, was rechecked. And at least they carefully took into account whatever I knew. So I had a very close working relationship with the President, but not on a personal basis because I don't believe in bothering presidents. Presidents usually take advantage of the opportunity not to be bothered, especially if they trust the guy that they are working with. And he obviously trusted Sanders. Sanders became, I think, probably the ablest single legislative guy that they have ever had in the White House. O'Brien's operation may have been a more extensive and more effective one because he had all these people in the other agencies in a better shape than Foot ever did, but Foot's the ablest <u>single</u> legislative operator I've ever seen down there. We'll see whether Bryce Harlow is as effective. Bryce Harlow has had one run before. He was there for Eisenhower.

M: So when you are critical of the legislative performance of the leadership and so on, one of the questions I was intending to ask is was it a breakdown of staff work, or were there aides that fall in--?

B: Partly that, but the real breakdown is nothing that the President could do anything about. The real sad truth, and I'm not sure whether you will believe it--maybe you will, but I don't have any personal feeling against John McCormack--I just think he's an incompetent legislator. And I've not thought that since he was Speaker, I've thought that ever since I have known him. And I don't think he ever got the most out of the institution, because I don't think he ever understood it, believe that or not. He has been around here for a thousand years, but I know he didn't understand it. I have evidence that I'm not prepared to produce that the best legislator I ever saw up here agreed with me.

M: You mentioned a while ago that Mr. Johnson as president knew that he had incompetent leadership. Did you ever receive any sort of maybe implicit encouragement in your public attacks on the leadership from the White House?

B: No. Would not, did not, and would not expect any.

M: Any reaction of any kind? Anger or this type of thing?

B: Well, I used to hear that he would get awfully sore, but I never--you see, I don't like the social bit, so I didn't go to the White House any more than I had to. And I didn't see him a whole lot. But I heard that he was sort of unhappy. Incidentally, I should--again,

my wife reminds me--McCormack asked me to stay in the Board of Education after I made my first run at Albert, when I ran against the ticket, which is what I was doing and they all knew it. And I stayed for a year. I didn't get out and start criticizing leadership because they threw me out; I got out because I couldn't stay with them. There was no communication. That's a matter of record; that isn't a matter of my prejudice. So that that's evidence to support my contention that I just think McCormack's incompetent. There isn't any question that the President was smart enough to see what was happening to him, because he knows how you maximize votes and he knows that we weren't maximizing them; that often we were letting people get away that we could have had and that our timing was bad and things like that. But he would be much too smart to ever get out of channels, having once decided to go through channels, and have these relationships through Foot and other people, with other members, so that they would do some checking and do a competen job. He'd have to stay there, and I don't really know what a president would do except work through the elected leadership of his party.

But at no time did I ask anybody to help me, either in criticism or reform or in the run I made. I specifically called up Bobby Kennedy and said, "I do not want help. If I get within two votes of Albert, then I may want help. But until I have a real chance to win, I don't want to mess with you. I just want you to understand that."

So there's never any question of my trying--now if the timing had been different. You see, I had every intention of talking to Kennedy after the Goldwater election. I projected--correctly I believe, although I'll never be able to prove it, maybe somebody will be able to--that Kennedy played his presidency for a Goldwater candidacy in 1964 and for the great action program in 1965-66. I said that before he was shot so I'm not second-guessing him. I would have talked to a Kennedy in 1964 after the election about reform in the House but, God knows, you weren't going to really talk to a Johnson under a very different set of circumstances. There wasn't much point in it. I mean, you were still suffering from the whatever it was, the shock of the assassination a year later, certainly I was and I'm sure everybody else in the country was, and you knew the predeliction and I just didn't see any point in it. We tried on our own and made some significant shifts. That's the time when we first disciplined somebody like, you know, Williams and Watson. But that was a different kind of thing. Now, if we had had a different set of circumstances, if Vietnam and other things hadn't done what they did, I might have been talking to him last fall. But that isn't the way the ball bounces, and you shift and you do what you do in terms of whatever the real situation is.

M: Did Johnson ever indicate any interest or playing a role in any of those reforms that were attempted such as the purge of Williams and Watson?

B: No, he stayed out of it very carefully and we heard different stories, and we hear different stories now than we heard then. We heard stories that he was against our doing anything to them, but we had no contact. By that stage of the game, or near to it, there wouldn't have been any hesitation in getting in touch in one way or another.

M: You all didn't make the effort to enlist his support?

B: No, it was a value judgment that we shouldn't compromise him, given the circumstances.

M: Is the same thing true about decreasing the membership in the committees last year--the Appropriations and Ways and Means, for example?

B: We didn't fool with him on that. You see, about the only way I can describe our thinking is that when I talked to President-elect Kennedy a day or two after the election in 1960 about the Rules Committee and the need to do something about it, I said, "You do understand, I'm sure, that you can't do anything unless you have Rayburn." And I wasn't going to go to Johnson and tell him to try to persuade McCormack when McCormack had made a position clear already, because all you were asking him to do is to make a damned fool of himself. And I consider McCormack not only not particularly effective, but not particularly rational on occasion. And I wouldn't, you know, ask a president to go talk to him. Now, Kennedy handled Mr. Rayburn perfectly, and Rayburn led the fight. He probably wouldn't have won that rules-packing fight without the Kennedy

apparatus, but nobody could have won the fight without the Rayburn effort. Perhaps wrongly, but that would be the way I would react to enlisting Johnson on McCormack.

M: On a more general subject or a broader subject, the same thing, congressional reform, which has been your great public interest at least--had Mr. Johnson ever indicated any interest in any of the long-range reform interests that you had suggested in your various--?

B: Well, you see, one of the funniest things about Mr. Johnson is that Mr. Johnson was a reformer in his own time in the Senate, in terms of committee structure, because he put through quite a remarkable rule which is still maintained which we have never been able to achieve in the House. And that is that everybody gets a good committee regardless of how junior they are; and nobody gets to be chairman of two committees, regardless of how senior they are. Before Mr. Johnson, that was not the case. These seniors would pile up good committee on good committee and they would take every goddamned chairmanship they could lay their hands on, just the way Mr. Patman does in the House.

M: But they still do this in the House?

B: Yes.

M: And Johnson was responsible for that change?

B: Oh, absolutely responsible, completely responsible. It was both sound, and then it was also an attempt to keep the liberals from feeling so badly. But I never tried to enlist him because, as my memory is, I never thought the time was right or that it would be

fair to him. See, more than most, I do get pretty wound up in my own projects. I still see the other guy's role as a different role, and I never thought the President's role--again, if it had been two votes it might have been something else; and maybe I underestimated the thing, maybe I should have gone to him, but I never did.

M: You made the point against the current leadership that they needlessly endangered the careers of some of the Goldwater election Democrats by walk-the-plank issues, civil rights in 1966 and so on.

B: Failure to do anything about campaigns, failure to let them have time home, and so on.

M: But do you explain the fact that Mr. Johnson, who is allegedly a master politician, let this type of thing happen, and how much blame does he have for this?

B: He has none because a president, elected under those circumstances, who didn't forcefully recommend those issues would be nuts. The President has a national constituency, but now if you know Mr. Johnson, you also know that he could very well play his role and then expect you to play yours.

M: In other words, he might recommend them hoping that they wouldn't become a walk-the-plank issue?

B: Well, assuming that they wouldn't.

M: Right.

B: He might have very well assumed that for all I know. That's the way his mind would work, and it's the way it ought to work. It's the reverse of what I said just a second ago about respecting his role;

it's the exact reverse. There is nothing cynical about a president who represents everybody in the country coming up for the repeal of 14B, and then expecting the Congress to knock it down. Nothing.

Now there are people--not I, although I think Mr. Johnson has been able to be devious on occasion--who say that he is responsible for what happened to 14B in the Senate. I don't think that's true. I think the business community in the state of Illinois is responsible for what happened to the 14B. They worked through Dirksen, but that's where it came from. But I think Johnson played the game exactly squarely. He set it up, he made it forceful, and he just didn't deserve the blame. I don't have any problem blaming him when I think he deserves it, but I just don't think he deserved that.

M: How do you square your various attacks on the leadership in the last two or three years with Mr. Rayburn's old oxiom that to get along, you go along?

B: Oh, I disagreed with Mr. Rayburn on that and used to tell him so.

M: Oh, really?

B: Sure, I told him. I used to have some rare fights with him over things that he thought were settled. I tried to talk him into reform on occasion. I never got very far. I never have really been sure--the problem with Mr. Rayburn was. . . . This second book I wrote, Power of the House, was not supposed to be that book, it was supposed to be a book on Rayburn. I had to get my publisher to change in midstream when I decided I wanted another book. I finally concluded that Mr. Rayburn was against reform because he had gotten

along so well by going along, and he just thought the system was all right and he had been around a long time.

But I used to argue with him about how we needed change. You know, probably no man was ever more abused or frustrated by another man than Mr. Rayburn was by the second best legislator in the House, Howard Smith. But he put up with it and he always left the public to believe that Mr. Rayburn, when he really wanted to, could get his way. That was a lot of garbage. He couldn't. Mr. Smith frustrated him over and over again.

M: In your committee?

B: That's right. But he wouldn't move until we proved to him deliberately in 1959 and 1960 that he simply couldn't put up with a Rules Committee like that any more. It was getting too obvious. That was deliberate. Ordinarily a politician on a committee, when he doesn't have the votes, waits to see if he can get them. On every issue in 1959 and 1960--we didn't do anything in 1959 except work on I guess the labor bill, but in 1960 every time we didn't have the votes in the Rules Committee, I would force it to an issue as quickly as I could.

M: Put it to a loss in this case?

B: Yes, so that Mr. Rayburn would see where he was. And he knew damned well what I was doing, but we never talked about it.

M: After Mr. Johnson and you reestablished personal contact in February of 1965, were there any other legislative issues on which you had very close White House contact?

B: All of them. From them on, wouldn't you say?

JB: Yes.

B: What's this? Oh, yes, that's right. Mrs. Bolling reminds me that I did try to help the Johnson image, the Johnson presidency in terms of his relationship with the liberals in the House, because they were still extraordinarily suspicious of him.

M: This is in the first year, even when you were in a personal--?

B: Yes, even then, but particularly after. You see, what we did, this is personal, but what he did was call in an old check. When we buried the hatchet, he reminded me of an old commitment we'd made each other that when we really needed each other we'd come to the other's rescue. You can't turn a president down when he comes up with something like that, so I went pretty hard to work for him as soon as we had gotten through the hatchet stage. But I had been working for the legislation before.

M: Was this an issue thing with the liberals such as Vietnam, or was it general?

B: It was a personality problem. They never have been able to understand the Johnson personality which is probably as complex a personality as that of any president in the history of the United States, as I'm sure you must have discovered. I don't know anybody more complicated and more confusing. You have to be sort of a guy with a long view to finally understand it.

M: That's what the project we are engaged in hopefully will make possible.

B: It's going to be a damn interesting problem. He's a very, very curious and interesting man. Maybe the most interesting one I've known.

M: You cast the tie-breaking vote on the open housing civil rights act. Was this one which the White House was closely--you were in close contact with?

B: Oh, sure. But you see, there again you get into this relationship business. The White House didn't have anything to do with that decision. I told them of my decision, as I remember it, in advance. I told them that, in my judgment, we had to adopt a softener in order to pass the bill. That's the one where I was misled. I was misled by the Justice Department, and I've forgiven that guy in hell. He's a very prominent man, by the way. He promised me that they could get that bill up in the Senate, the son-of-a-bitch, and they never even knew--they didn't have any commitment at all.

M: Which left you holding the bag.

B: Well, it left me a participant in making guys walk the plank. The people that lied to me about 14B were different people, but this one happened to be a very high official of the Justice Department, not the highest, but pretty high.

But we always had a problem. Mr. Johnson was--we didn't have any problem in that kind of thing. I'd make up my mind and tell him. I don't mean to sound arrogant about it, but I trust my own judgment about the House more than I trust anybody else's when I'm working on something, except Rayburn's.

M: And he wasn't there by then.

B: No, he was dead. Once he left I got so that I didn't really have anywhere to go. And I was convinced, and it turned out to be right,

that we had to soften that to pass it. We clearly did. I mean, if you study the legislation you will see that we did do it; if we hadn't passed it, we wouldn't have made it. The thing that was funny about that was that I am one of the rare people in the House who'd ever had the opportunity to be trained in that experience in casting the tie-breaking vote, because I've chaired so many times that I've had to do it many times on minor bills so that it didn't come as a shock; it just came as a problem. But I knew what I was going to do long before it happened.

M: You mentioned earlier that you were a close friend of Mr. Truman's. Mr. Johnson always made at least a great deal publicly about consulting with President Eisenhower and Mr. Truman. Was there a worthwhile practical contribution that Mr. Truman was making to the Johnson presidency?

B: His horseback opinions are worthwhile. Mr. Truman in recent years has been very old. We go out and see him and talk politics with him occasionally when he is well enough. His mind has been better than his body. I would think that he would feel that Mr. Johnson was coming out not really to consult him, but more or less to do him honor and also to enlist his image; and Mr. Truman would almost surely understand this and appreciate it and enjoy it. I mean, the old man was very touched when the President came out and gave him the first Medicare card. It's sort of a high level kind of public relations, which shows respect and enlists the support. I think they were useful in that respect. How much new thinking an ex-president

who has been out of the White House for X years like Eisenhower or Truman could give a man who had been briefed by all the resources available to the United States government before he got there, I would think that there would be damned little. But I think it is worthwhile; I don't see any harm in it.

M: Many of the analysts of Mr. Johnson's presidency, or his career, have compared his congressional to his presidential career and found a basic change of direction from conservatism to liberalism. You are in a particularly good position to have a perception of that. Do you think that's true?

B: Mr. Johnson is about as much of an ideolog as this.

M: Referring to a glass statue of a donkey.

B: He has the same sort of basic commitment to the welfare of the people that Rayburn had, in my view. He comes out of what I consider a Populist tradition, that's where Rayburn came from. He came up here as a New Dealer and a Roosevelt man. I think he's extraordinarily pragmatic. I think he consistently tries to do within his concept of the need for a politician to have power to function, in other words, to be elected. I think he has pretty consistently tried to do what he thought he could do that was in the interest of people. I think he has done that in his whole career. I haven't always agreed with him as to the outer limits that he could touch safely when he was a senator. In other words, I sometimes thought he was too cautious as I've already said, but I would think his motivation was consistent. He wanted to help the folks, and when he had the

opportunity and the national constituency, I didn't see him do any of the things that he could have done to lessen the size or the quality of the program. He just didn't turn out to be a legislative genius, but there have been very few presidents that have been able to be legislative geniuses. He happened to be saddled with incompetents and quite weak permissive leadership on both sides of the Hill.

M: You've served now through four presidencies up here. I don't know whether you play the game of president ranking, but do you have a general estimate of Mr. Johnson's presidency among those you've known?

B: Well, I don't have any hesitation under the circumstances described by you and described in his letter. I wrote the President yesterday in reply to an extraordinarily nice letter I had from him just before he left office which I waited to reply to for a long time. I wrote the President yesterday and told him what I believe. I think he's going to be ranked as one of the great presidents. I happen to be one of those people that's in the substantial majority in the country, but not in a substantial majority in the intellectual community, who happen to think that his decisions, domestic and foreign, were by and large right. I agree with him largely on Vietnam. I disagree with him in his method of approaching the people on it. I don't think he ever understood really the terrible difference between being a Senate leader and a president in terms of your relationship to the people and what you tell them. But I think he's going to rank as a

great president. Now whether the accident of fate and history will make Truman rank as a greater president because he happened to have the successful years in foreign policy, and Mr. Johnson a less great president because he happened to have the successful years in domestic policy, I'm not prepared to say. I'm enough of a trained historian to know that you're too close to the goddamned thing to tell. But I think he is going to rank as a great president. I'm not going to play the game of saying whether he is going to be greater than this one or greater than that one, but we've had relatively few great presidents, and I think he's going to be a great one.

M: He won by the greatest majority ever in 1964 and then his party lost in 1968. Do you think Johnson had perhaps a permanently or an importantly unfortunate effect on the Democratic Party?

B: No, I don't think so at all. I think that his weakness, and it's something I'm sure he would be incapable of doing anything about, is that because of his skills and abilities and his lacks of skill and ability, he was unable to do the kind of thing with American people that one hears some presidents have been able to do--carry them along on an unpopular cause. The truth of the matter is, and Mrs. Bolling knows more about presidential history back in the last century than I do, I'm not aware of any president in this century who has been able to carry the people along on an unpopular issue, including Mr. Roosevelt.

M: On a genuinely unpopular issue.

B: Yes. Now, unpopularity is a question not only of breadth of opinion but also depth of opinion. You can have a very large number of people who are a little bit against something who will be effective in seeing to it that that doesn't happen; or you can have a relatively small number of people who are fanatically against it and will see that it doesn't happen. And I think that in the beginning, at least, the anti-Vietnam was really the latter, a very small number of people who were very, very vigorous. And I just think that his only real failing was the failing that he shared with Mr. Truman, because Mr. Truman left more unpopular than Mr. Johnson by one hell of a long shot. Mr. Truman took himself out just about the same time, and Mr. Truman had not quite as rough a thing going, but it was pretty rough. It was stranger, really, but everybody's forgotten how long that negotiation took. I think Mr. Johnson's failings were the failings of every other president who got caught in one of those. Maybe he could have done better, but he didn't.

M: When we prepare for these things, we're at the mercy of reading your books and checking your career. I don't want to limit you in any way. Are there some subjects that you think would be important to record that we haven't touched on?

B: I don't think there's anything.

M: Mrs. Bolling?

JB: I can't think of anything.

M: I appreciate you sitting in, too. If you have anything to add from the Texas days maybe.

B: I should tell them in more detail how we tried to help him with the liberals, shouldn't I?

M: Yes, because I think that's important.

B: Now, this is personal profession. We suggested that we might be helpful, and it might be helpful for him to sit down and talk to some of these guys in small groups. We picked some key ones and got the list approved in general by the White House, and then had a small very informal dinner at our house, and he and Mrs. Johnson came. There's no point in describing it in detail, but we made goddamned sure that he had enough people around that he knew well so that he would be comfortable, and we knew what to feed him, so we made him comfortable that way. Then the men hauled off--there were about ten of us, I guess--and went downstairs. We had deliberately enough people to make him comfortable but also people who were very anti-Johnson. It was sort of interesting to watch because he turned it on--he really turned it on--and every one of them really left enthusiastic. And of course that one we were able to keep quiet. One of the reasons we thought we might be able to do a series of these was that we tried to get people to understand that this was off the record. It was completely off the record.

Well, then we tried to expand this operation. (Laughter) We've got a nice place and a nice swimming pool, so we have pool parties. We're not very social people. We had a series of three or four set

up and he came out to the first or second one, I don't remember, and some stupid son of a so-and-so. . . . It was again the same thing; I mean, he came out and he was playing with the kids and sitting around talking with six or eight guys and being very effective and having a good time. He enjoyed it because it was very informal and he was away from the pressure. Nobody was around carrying anything except a guy in the car. It was effective, he was very effective. But some stupid idiot put out a newsletter on it, so it wasn't very private any more. And he started to come out once or twice again but never quite made it. But that's one of the ways--try to set him up with key guys in depth.

M: And that does have a lasting effect?

JB: We were also trying to be helpful to Barefoot, too.

B: Yes. This was partly for Foot and partly for the President. Yes, it has a lasting effect, because it's the same kind of thing that happened when--again, I don't know why I've been playing midwife for this kind of thing for so long, but as long ago as Truman's day I got him to set up a meeting with the ADA board when they were cussing him all over the place. Same thing. Because these guys are pretty straightforward guys even if they are complicated, and all presidents are who have great charm, and they communicate effectively. Even the ones that think that Johnson is mean and devious and so on are impressed by the fact that there is the other side.

M: You said something earlier that I recall now, about his being a master of the press in the 1950s. What happened to that?

B: Well, you see, it was a question of technique. He never got along too well with reporters because he always really infringed on their sense of what was proper, because he would try to make them change the reviews. In other words, in effect he would try to make them change their facts from their point of view, if that wasn't the way he saw it. But he always did well with publishers and editors, and he had this guy in the Senate situation where he had complete control. I mean, you didn't hear what Johnson's plan was until it was revealed. And that's legitimate in a legislative situation. It isn't legitimate when you are down there. And I don't think he ever quite got it, or maybe he did toward the end. But, you see, down there part of your job is open public relations. Your job here is not. My most effective years working with Rayburn were before anybody knew I really worked that closely with Rayburn. Now, they had an idea, but there's a difference between thinking you know and knowing. I wasn't getting shot at by my fellow members because I wasn't getting any publicity. Different roles require different approaches legitimately, and I think he always had more difficulty with them down there. Rayburn was very bad with the press, too. Rayburn's the only man then living who ever had a unique press conference. He had a press conference where everything was off the record unless it was put on--the exact reverse. And that's exactly what Johnson did without ever being able to impose that as an open statement when he was leader.

M: And report it to Life.

B: Hell, no! Of course not.

M: Thank you again, Mr. Bolling. You've been very helpful and you've been very cooperative. I certainly appreciate it.

B: Good.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Richard Bolling

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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Signed Richard Bolling

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Accepted Harold J. Middleton - for
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