INTERVIEW IV

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INTERVIEWER: Michael L.Gillette

PLACE: Ms. Bonanno's office, Washington, D.C.

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B: I guess as you go into this last period, the two things that always end up being most real in your memories are his trying to make a deal with the Soviets and Vietnam. And it's funny, as I was reading through this [1968 chronologies], all the rest of this really doesn't seem very real to me because in fact those were the two continuing underlying factors. We were always about to go to Russia. I mean, it was just one of those things. As every day came and went, going to Russia was predominant.

G: He really wanted to go, didn't he?

B: Very much. He very much felt that if he could sit down he could resolve it.

G: Did he also see that as a key to Vietnam?

B: A key to Vietnam. Obviously it was a very integral part. Yes, I guess that is an accurate portrayal, that if you couldn't get the Soviets to move the way we wanted them to move that you probably weren't going to get any further on the Vietnam issue. And then all the frustration of the Paris peace talks. Well, I'm jumping a little bit ahead of myself here because I'm getting into post-election and all the last minute negotiating that went on. In July he went off to meet with President [Nguyen Van] Thieu of South Vietnam--I never could say that man's name--again hoping that that was going to move the whole process forward. I think the amount of time he put into like the briefing with Nixon and briefings

for George Wallace, I mean, he really believed that whoever was going to succeed him really needed to know the scenario of events. But I also think that he truly believed that he was going to be able to deliver a package into these people's hands that they would then have to implement. I think he saw himself as the architect of that package, which of course never came to be.

The other thing that was going on at that time, of course, was as we were drawing closer and closer to the convention, the problems with the Humphrey campaign, and Humphrey making these hedge speeches that in fact he wasn't really too sure that escalation was the right way to go, which caused a real rift between the President and Humphrey in the end.

G: Let me ask you to elaborate on that. Humphrey was quoted, of course, as--well, not only his public statements but even what appeared to be leaks to the press that he had been opposed to the bombing, that he wanted to de-escalate the war and things like this, how did the President deal with that? Did he try to talk to Humphrey directly about it? Did he have aides, mutual confidants, that he could go to and discuss that with them?

B: He ignored Humphrey, which broke Humphrey's heart. I always thought it was ironic that Lyndon Johnson felt that if he could sit down at the table with the Russians or the Vietnamese he could make them understand his position, but [he] couldn't accept that that's what Hubert Humphrey wanted to do with him. I also suspect--this is a very personal interpretation--that the more that the President didn't get what he wanted, the harder he became on everybody around him. That was also another factor of dealing with Humphrey, "I'm in control here, and what do you mean you can't really break away from the ranks?" kind of thing.

But there did get to be a point where all dealings with the Vice President were not being done by the President. That's relatively true anyway of vice presidents, but it was even truer at the end. I remember the Vice President coming over one day to meet with him, and for some reason they put the Vice President in our office. And the poor man was sitting there reading the newspaper and the time kept dragging on and on and on and on and on, and the President kept him waiting for about an hour and fifteen minutes. Juanita [Roberts] was getting hysterical because she was running out of polite chitchat. You know, Hubert Humphrey just sat there and kept saying it was okay, he was prepared to wait. Hubert Humphrey was a wonderful man. He was just a very--so different from the President.

G: How so?

B: Oh, a very passive personality and a very cheerful personality. No matter how bad things were he always seemed to put the bright side on them. Hubert Humphrey always sort of reminded me of your grandfather, I mean somebody you wanted to put your arms around and protect, which may have been one of the reasons why he couldn't win the presidency. But in all fairness, Lyndon Johnson didn't help the Hubert Humphrey campaign. He just didn't. There were lots of things he could have done. He could have gone to the convention.

G: Would that have helped Humphrey, do you think?

B: Absolutely. And again, you know, that was one of those interesting things. I'm not too sure one will ever know all the factors why the President didn't go, but that was "we're going; we're not going; pack up, we're leaving; we're not leaving; get the helicopters

revved up; no, I've changed my mind.' And Vietnam demonstrations and safety didn't really have a whole heck of a lot to do with it.

G: Why do you think he decided not to go?

B: I think he felt that he had been betrayed, that even his own party didn't think he was correct in his position.

G: But he did win all the planks, didn't he? He got his Vietnam plank.

B: No, I think he felt he had been betrayed, that they should have--I think the President was afraid he might get rejected at the convention.

G: Do you think he ever hoped that the convention might draft him to run again?

B: Oh, sure. I talked about that in my [last interview]. To this day I am convinced that there was a part of Lyndon Johnson who really wanted to be drafted back, even though he said he didn't. A little bit of the reluctant lover kind of syndrome, Well, maybe if you could talk me into it I might change my mind. Lynda was talking about that the other night in terms of the March 31 speech. She had just seen Chuck [Robb] off to Vietnam that day, and she came back and she knew she was pregnant. Chuck was gone and her life was destroyed. Then she walked in to discover that her father was making this momentous decision.

She thought it was wrong and she tried to talk him out of it. I don't know. I mean, we've talked about this before, but the President was such a complicated man and such a tortured man. I suppose what he really wanted is what all of us really want, is for someone to say "You're absolutely best, the most terrific thing in the world, and we need you and we can't live without you." Number one, that doesn't happen in real life, and number two, that wasn't something that was going to be able to be achieved at that time

in history.

G: One of the questions of course that's been asked over and over again, did Lyndon Johnson have this need that you've just described in a greater measure than the rest of us?

B: I'm trying to think of the Theodore Roosevelt quote that is upstairs in Bill Brock's office, which is "pity the man who doesn't live his life to extremes because he never knows the heights of joy, the depths of despair." That's a terrible paraphrasing, but you probably know the quote I mean. Lyndon Johnson was that kind of a person. I mean, he was a person who lived life to its extremes. He was a person who took risks, personal risks, political risks, intellectual risks. I think the only thing he never risked was financial risks because he let Lady Bird run that side of the family. Did he need it more? I don't think that he needed it more than anybody who's ever been a great leader. I'm always suspect when people start describing great leaders as having these very balanced personalities because in fact I think part of what takes you to that very point is the fact that you dare to be better and you dare to be greater. And once you do that, you have put yourself into needing more than the average person does.

G: Anything else on Johnson and Humphrey during this period?

B: No, just that recollection I have of Humphrey sitting in our office reading the newspaper and Juanita obviously being so embarrassed because she knew the President was deliberately not seeing him, and Humphrey being so patient about the whole thing and looking a little sad. I don't know exactly what happened in that time period. I do know, something that happened in that time period was Okie [Yoichi Okamoto] had taken a very nice picture of me and the Vice President in the Oval Office, and I decided that it would be nice to have Hubert Humphrey autograph it for me. So I sent it over for him to

autograph. And Juanita just gave me hell and told me that I'd better not let the boss see that picture and he'd be really furious with me and how could I do that and I was basically a traitor. And of course I didn't really quite understand. I was doing it because it was a picture of me and the Vice President and I wanted to keep it, and I wasn't smart enough yet to understand intra-warfare. But I guess there were just lots of examples of things like that. The Vice President would call over and we wouldn't return the call for a while, or he'd tell Joe [Califano] to return it or Marvin [Watson] to return it or Juanita to return it and find out what the problem was.

G: What about use of perks? Did he cut down on Humphrey's ability to use, say, the Jetstars or the *Sequoia*?

B: Yes, and I--I'm remembering--when I started to tell you that about not returning the phone calls, all of a sudden one didn't see Hubert Humphrey at a lot of the social things. I mean, obviously he was at those things where by virtue of being vice president he had to be there. But he didn't--and I'm differentiating this from the social events up in the living quarters, because in fact the Vice President and Mrs. Humphrey were never up there when I was around. But just the little gatherings of--I mean I guess there's probably an event a day in the White House, and you used to always see the Vice President and Mrs. Humphrey, and then you didn't see them very much anymore.

G: Presumably he was out campaigning for the presidency. He may not have been in Washington.

B: Yes, but somehow I--I can't remember a concrete order but somehow--of course I also suppose that the aides around the President would have been astute enough not to put him on the list, wanting to keep their jobs.

G: Okay. The latter part of June, [Aleksei] Kosygin and LBJ issued statements on the reduction of nuclear weapons, and LBJ signed the nuclear arms treaty. The next day the Russians released an airliner that was carrying GIs to Vietnam. It had been grounded at the Kuriles Islands. Do you remember any of this?

B: Yes, I do. Go ahead. What were you going to [ask]?

G: Well, any specific recollections about this in terms of his hope for a summit with Kosygin?

B: Well, as I said at the beginning of this, anything that happened was then interpreted as a sign that we were about to take off any second. And then two days later something would happen and that would all be put aside. So I suppose we considered that a signal that we were probably going. Let's put it this way, I never packed or unpacked for a trip so many times in my life as that one.

G: Was it really literally packing?

B: Well, the President was always very dramatic. He'd come out of something like this or he would come up from the Situation Room and he would read what was going on. He'd come out and he'd say, "Well, that's it. We're going to go to Russia this time and we're going to sit down and we're going to resolve this. Get ready!" Getting ready involves a variety of things, including packing the gift box so that there's enough stuff to hand out, to the more substantive things like who's going to prepare the briefing books. And then something would happen and he would go storming out saying "We're not going. Call everything off." I kind of remembered that happening all through that summer and fall. It was just on again, off again. And he'd get very revved up and then he'd get very depressed.

G: Did he ever set a date, do you know?

B: Oh, about four times. You know, "We're going to give them until such and-such a date, and then we're going to go."

A note that I made here--I'm sorry, what did I do with June [chronology]? The signing of the Nonproliferation Treaty.

G: July 1. Yes. Do you have July?

B: Yes. But I made a note in the margin of one of these pieces of paper. Well, the fact of the matter is the President didn't sign the Nonproliferation Treaty. Dean Rusk signed for the United States. The note that I made is because in fact when the--here it is right here. The day that the signing ceremony took place in the East Room, he immediately ordered that personal letters be sent to every member of Congress announcing this major breakthrough. I suppose the signing ceremony was probably something like ten o'clock in the morning, and he wanted those letters on his desk for his personal signature by the end of the day. So I would say probably about four o'clock in the afternoon the first batch of letters came over to be signed. Did I say 435? I mean 535 members of Congress. And he was signing them all, and Juanita and I were standing there collecting them in our hands. Have I told you this story? You're smiling.

I would say that the President had probably signed a hundred and fifty or two hundred of them when he threw down his pen and started swearing, and he said, "Goddamn it, this says, 'Today when I signed the Nonproliferation Treaty,' and damn it, I didn't sign it. Dean Rusk, the secretary of state, signed it, and these letters are wrong and who's responsible for this error? Get me so and so. Get me such and such. And I want all these letters redone." It was just chaos because--Charlie Maguire was pulled up from

the speechwriters' room, and everybody was being yelled at. Then the typing pool all had to be put on. In those days you didn't have the kind of sophisticated equipment you have today, and even though they were robotyped, all the addresses and salutations all had to go in personally. They all went back over and they all had to be redone. He was, of course, furious. I mean, personally signing a hundred and fifty, two hundred things takes a lot of time. He was totally perplexed that his staff could be that incompetent. That's what I remember about the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty agreement. The other part that angered him was that he was so pleased about that. It was kind of like "why can't there ever be anything that I do that's right?"

G: There was a small snafu.

B: Somebody else told you that story because you had a smile on your face. I wondered if it were me.

G: It did sound familiar. I could tell what you were building up to. (Interruption)
The President's reaction to the Czechoslovakian invasion.

B: Just that he was furious because he knew then that there was really no chance of getting anybody to move on anything because the only position that we could be put in was to go against the decision that the Soviets had made, and once we did that, there was no chance that we would be able to sit down with the Soviets. It seems to me, though, now that you're asking me these questions, that there was a certain amount of surprise that we didn't know, that we didn't have any intelligence that Czechoslovakia was about to be invaded. I seem to remember the President was quite unhappy with our intelligence network.

G: He had had a very neutral posture on that. I guess there had been some border tension for

months. Am I right, that he--?

B: Yes, I think--it's funny. You have an interesting way of asking questions that triggers funny little remembrances. I think though that he always looked at the little skirmishes as something that the Russians were using *vis-à-vis* us to get us to back off when we tried to pressure them too much. I'm not too sure that he ever looked at them, or that anybody was telling him that he should look at them, in the context of this maybe being serious. By 1968 the satellite countries--the ones that were like Czechoslovakia and I guess by that I mean Yugoslavia and Romania--had become pretty good at keeping their own autonomy. So I suppose they felt that the Russians probably just couldn't go in and take over, which of course turned out to be absolutely wrong. Of course, I've never understood any of that. I'm always very perplexed as to how the Russians have managed to go in and take over countries in the middle of the civilized world, and everybody always ends up being so surprised that the action has happened. But anyway, that's a personal aside.

G: Did he realize that this would make it impossible for him to go to Russia now, public opinion?

B: Well, I think for one thing it made him be a little skeptical about the kinds of commitments he was hearing from the Russians. Here on the one hand we were supposedly negotiating to come to a table, and on the other hand they were invading Czechoslovakia without anybody knowing about it. He was pretty depressed about that. I think he was also concerned about what that was going to do to the campaign. Americans were so unhappy with us fighting in Vietnam, I think the other major concern was did people think that we were going to go to war over this. What would that mean

vis-à-vis the Republicans or the Democrats? All in all it boxed him in, but then no one has ever said the Russians were dumb.

G: Who did he lean on for advice on this crisis?

B: Clark Clifford. It seems to me that this is about the time that Clifford starts showing up more and more on a daily basis. I think this was probably the point where [Robert] McNamara and Rusk had--I hate to use the words lost credibility with him, I think everybody had lost credibility with him at that point, or he felt that nobody was to be truthworthy [trustworthy?]. But there comes a point somewhere in here where all of a sudden Clark Clifford starts being around every day and on the telephone. So obviously McNamara has resigned and Clifford has come on. But who else? I don't know. By that time Marvin Watson had gone over to the postmaster general's office, and I know that sometimes in those days the President missed Marvin a lot. Marvin was a good sounding board for him and he used to like to call him in and bounce things off of him. While he respected Jim [Jones], Jim was much younger and didn't have the broad political astuteness that Marvin had.

G: Now, let's move on through Soviet-U.S. relations during this period as long as we're on the subject. McNamara that fall visited with Kosygin in Moscow. Do you recall that?

B: Yes. It was in November or something, right? Yes.

G: Did that have any significance with regard to--?

B: Well, this was the last ditch effort, as it says right here, request to set a date for the talks. As I said, I seem to remember all of that fall as being nothing more than two-pronged, Moscow and Vietnam, and how do you resolve them, what do you do, and trying everything that hadn't been tried before. Also it was a sort of--well, let's see, at this point

there isn't the freedom that there was a little bit later on. But once the election had occurred, I would say from November 20 or November--oh, no, the election would have occurred by then. The election that year was November 4?

G: Yes, I think so.

B: That's all really the President concentrated on for the last two months, that and making sure that the Nixon people were fully briefed on everything that was going on and that we be cooperative.

G: Did he and Nixon have some misunderstandings about foreign policy and the fact that he was still president?

B: I would put it a slightly different way. One of the things that I think the President tried to do with Nixon was assure that things would be worked out where there would be a continuing role for foreign policy efforts of the Johnson Administration going into the Nixon Administration. I have a feeling that--again, this is just an impression--but that Johnson and Nixon would talk about things and arrange them, and then [H. R.] Haldeman and [John] Ehrlichman--who always seemed to be around in those days, I mean every time you turned around you were tripping over them--would then convince the President-elect that no, in fact he didn't really want to do that at all. So I think that there was a--not I think, I *know* that there was a lot of misunderstandings and confusion about what the President thought he had gotten and what Nixon was prepared to deliver. But I'm not too sure that that was, as I said, as much a problem *vis-à-vis* the two men as it was *vis-à-vis* the aides.

G: Well, in one case he even really repudiated something Nixon said to the extent that I think Nixon made the statement to the press that LBJ had agreed that no foreign policy

decision would be made without his consultation and approval or something like that. Both the President and George Christian indicated that this was not so. Do you remember that?

B: Yes, I guess I do. You're talking about Vietnam I think versus the Soviet Union. Isn't that here? "Nixon announces that LBJ speaks for him in Vietnam."

G: Right.

B: And he'll support whatever LBJ says about relations.

G: Do you remember anything on that, his reaction to that?

B: Yes. I remember him saying that he was still president. He wasn't relinquishing his responsibilities until noontime January 20, 1969. Can I talk about this in a slightly different context?

G: Sure.

B: We've talked about this earlier, but as the years went by, LBJ grew more and more dependent upon General Eisenhower and President Truman, part of it being nothing more than a very small fraternity of people who had served in the same spot, but also in the sense--and this sounds terrible to say--but I think the President wanted to ensure that he would be used and utilized, if he should no longer be president, by the opposition party. I suspect that what happened was LBJ was trying to get a commitment from Nixon that this would indeed happen, and Nixon in turn was demanding that he have a certain role to play, and that in fact, given the personalities of the two men, Nixon not wanting to be beholden and LBJ not wanting to give up his power, that in fact--I don't know why I keep saying--I put this in the sense of speculation. In fact that's pretty much what was going on during that period. And again, I think the President was truly perplexed. I think he

didn't quite understand why somebody wouldn't want somebody around who had all the experience and knowledge that he did. This also was agitated further by the inability of the staffs to cooperate with one another. I mean, there was no great love lost on the staff level, with people thinking that Haldeman and Erlichman were political hacks and the Johnson people thinking they were substantive policy experts.

G: During the last month or so of the Johnson presidency, there was the proposal that both President Johnson and President-elect Nixon go to Russia.

B: Right.

G: Do you remember that?

B: Yes.

G: Where did it come from and what happened to it?

B: Well, again, I think it came from the fact that Johnson wanted to be seen as the architect of the end of the Vietnam War. The President was no fool. If he brought the President-elect along with him and they got an agreement, obviously Johnson would still go down in history as having been the architect of a plan, even if it was implemented by another administration. But you know, again, I always feel the sense of fairness in Lyndon Johnson. Somehow all these things end up being cunning and Machiavellian, and in fact he was all of those things. But in those last days President and Mrs. Johnson had the staff, the West Wing staff, for dinner maybe two or three days before the end. And he really implored us to be good to our successors and to remember how we had felt when people criticized us and to always look beyond just the news accounts and to try to analyze the basis of how the decisions were made and to be a little bit compassionate, because in fact it wasn't an easy job and he hoped at that point we all knew that. And that

was also a very real part of Lyndon Johnson.

G: In this case was Nixon unwilling to share his prerogative to go to Russia or have his own summit?

B: Again, speculation and for the sense of historians who listen to this. Somehow in all of this, and again, I don't know where this comes from in me; it's probably instinctive rather than factual. One gets the feeling that Kissinger was somehow around in all of this and Henry was standing there saying [with accent], "You want to be the one to do it by yourself. You don't want to be connected to anybody else." I mean, all of this had such a mark of the Kissinger mentality to it, and I don't really ever remember hearing Henry Kissinger say that, I don't remember seeing him; I don't remember reading anything. But I have to believe somehow that if there were someone in the Nixon camp who was anti it, it would have to have been Henry Kissinger.

Also another thing that never comes out in the diaries, and again, you may know more about this than I do, but somehow I think that there were times when Kissinger was in on the discussions with Johnson, maybe even prior to Nixon winning. There was a point there where Kissinger was listened to a little bit. Has anybody ever talked to you about that?

G: No. With regard to the Soviet Union?

B: With regard to Vietnam and the foreign policy and the Soviet Union and all. I guess in those days Kissinger was already beginning to be a pretty outspoken critic of foreign policy, the United States foreign policy generally, so it wouldn't be surprising.

G: Do you recall the President's impression of him at the time?

B: No, but again, for me to think that there must have been something. The other thing that

you never see in here is anything about Nelson Rockefeller.

G: Now, I know he came off the record a number of times and an effort was made--

B: Yes. And see again, in my head, any Kissinger association would have had to have come through Nelson Rockefeller. I mean, the one and only time I saw the President with Nelson Rockefeller was when Archbishop [Terence] Cooke was ordained in New York, and the President met with Rockefeller.

G: He and Rockefeller must have had a special relationship.

B: The President liked Rockefeller, and I think he liked him because he didn't think he was as much of an elitist as a Rockefeller should have been. Of course, the President liked anybody that was smart, and the President liked anybody that knew a lot about foreign policy, so it's not inconceivable that he and Nelson Rockefeller would like each other. Plus Rockefeller was much more of a diplomat than Richard Nixon is. Rockefeller would appeal to the President personality-wise. I don't know, as I said several times, those last couple of months were just a fury of the President so desperately wanting to go to Russia, so desperately wanting to walk out of Vietnam with a victory. It was just the preoccupation of the place.

G: After Nixon's election, did LBJ sense that the Soviets were now less interested in meeting with him and more interested in meeting with Nixon?

B: Sure.

G: How did this translate? How did he [inaudible]?

B: Well, he was a true lame duck. He was not only a lame duck in the sense of the presidency, but his political party, the political party was changing. I think the President never could quite get over the fact that the Soviets had betrayed him. You know, I get

angry when people talk about the disloyalty or dishonesty of Lyndon Johnson, because in fact I think Lyndon Johnson was a very honorable man, and he was the kind of politician that when he cut a deal, he lived up to his side of the deal, and that's the way it was, and you shook hands and a deal was a deal and you delivered. I think it always took him aback a little bit that in fact the Soviets don't play the game that way. For someone not used to losing he was really perplexed, because what do you do when you're up against a stone wall? You put everything you've got out on the table and you assume that they have also, and when you discover that they haven't, you really don't have a lot of negotiating. It's the interesting strength of the Soviets, that somehow they always seem to have the upper hand. Nobody can ever really quite figure out why, but they sit with a finger on power.

G: After Nixon's election, and I gather even before, when he saw that the [Abe] Fortas nomination was in trouble, he thought about naming someone else chief justice, and one of the people under consideration was Arthur Goldberg. Have any recollection of that? Tell me what you recall about that.

B: Well, he knew he was going to lose. Let's see. For some reason it was very important to him that it be someone of the Jewish faith that be put in that post.

G: Well, it was a Jewish seat, Fortas--

B: Yes, was Jewish. I'm sorry, I can't remember anything other than that, other than Goldberg seemed to be the natural person to put in. Now, you are going to have to remind me why Goldberg--his nomination just never went forward, right?

G: No, he left the Court to head the U.N. delegation, remember.

B: Right.

G: And then I think perhaps he regretted having done that.

B: And wanted to go back.

G: And expressed a desire to go back on the Court. Here the newspaper accounts indicate that the President made some overtures to see whether he could get Goldberg appointed. There's some indication that maybe Earl Warren favored Goldberg. But perhaps he did send out some feelers to Congress and the response came back that they wouldn't.

B: If I remember correctly, the nomination never did go forward.

G: That's right, it never did. Yes. He was run out of time. Yes.

B: Wasn't there also I think a feeling from the Hill that since there was a new president about to be appointed that that president should have the right to choose somebody for the Court?

G: Yes. This was especially true of the Republicans who felt that very keenly.

B: Yes.

G: But apparently the President was considering a special session to nominate . . .

B: Where are we?

(Interruption)

G: All right, let's go through it again. This is the foreign trade zone in Maine, the proposal to allow Occidental [Petroleum Company] to establish this free trade port.

B: I think that there were two parts to the issue. One is I think at that point Marvin Watson had already had approaches about going with Occidental after the administration ended, and there was concern about conflict. And the second was the role of Armand Hammer in the U.S.-Soviet discussions and the fact that Hammer had good access to the Soviets and he wasn't coming in on our side of it where he subsequently did quite clearly when

Nixon--Armand Hammer and Don Kendall of Pepsi-Cola became two of the big conduits for the Nixon people.

G: Okay.

(Interruption)

B: Wait a minute.

G: Of course he had the bombing halt in October. This was right before the election, late October. And it seems that the President obtained support in writing from a number of people in advance, from [Averell] Harriman, from [Creighton] Abrams, that this would not impair or endanger our troops anymore than they already were endangered if he issued a bombing halt. Do you remember that?

B: Yes, I do, but nothing that--well, I suppose, again, that one of the conditions of halting the bombing was to get everybody at the table. I mean, we're going back again now to October, right?

G: Yes.

B: And that in fact if he didn't halt the bombing there was no way that anyone would sit down, so it was kind of a *quid pro quo*. Then we went into the next stage, which was everybody thought at that point that we were going to get the Vietnamese to Paris. And I know we've already talked about--we've been through all the ridiculousness of the size of the table and the shape of the table and who would sit where and all of that. At that point it was felt that all the concessions had been met on both sides. But then it all fell apart again, because I remember in this period--I'm trying to see if you've got it in here somewhere--the helicopter landing and Cy Vance and--who else was with Cy Vance?--Harriman I guess and Cy Vance coming in from the helicopter and sort of announcing

that we weren't going to go anywhere and what the latest round of problems were and how there were stalemates and the South Vietnamese were reneging on their commitments to us. It had to be pretty dramatic for the white top to have been used to bring them in from the airport.

G: The white top?

B: Helicopter.

G: Oh. Why do they call it a white top?

B: Because the President's helicopters have white tops, and that's how we knew--when you live in Washington and you see a white top, you know it's the president. It's just the--nobody thought [?] that the helicopters are painted, so they're called white tops.

We were also down to, I guess--and I get confused about this--who's going to speak for which side, I think. Am I right? It's now become the big issue.

G: Yes. Well, in--

B: The allied side in Paris be headed by the Secretary--

G: Thieu issued the statement that the allied side be headed by South Vietnam, and Clark Clifford is exchanging some other strong comments with the South Vietnamese leaders, you know. He's saying that they balked in the last out of the ninth inning. The impression is that they've slowed down after Nixon's election in the hopes of getting a better deal--

B: Deal from the Republicans.

G: --from Nixon, yes. Anything on that?

B: Yes. I think that that--and in fact, when I talk about the white top coming in and Clifford and Vance, I suspect that that may have been the realization that in fact all of these

tactics, like the South Vietnamese heading the good side versus the bad side, was suddenly seen as just one more delaying tactic in order to get this into another administration where they thought a better deal could be cut, which of course in a negotiation is not an unusual tactic. I mean, you always hope that the next group might give you more. More is something that again I'm not very clear on. What they wanted besides--I guess they wanted a total pull-out of the troops and their right to establish their own way of ruling, which I'm not too sure was a realistic--I mean, it's what they got ultimately anyway, but I don't think were realistic terms in the context of the negotiation.

G: Do you recall the President's reaction to Clifford's statements? Remember that? These were pretty outspoken remarks.

B: Yes. Candy ass. (Laughter) Not too sure I want that on tape. I guess the President always felt that if he himself were allowed to do the negotiations that they in fact would not be going the way that they were going, and that there were times that diplomacy wasn't the right way to do things and one should be harder and tougher.

G: But now he's talking about Harriman, isn't he, rather than Clifford?

B: I guess both Harriman and Vance in the sense of northeast elitists. I keep using that term today. But that . . .

G: Well, he did seem to want to play a larger role in the bargaining, didn't he?

B: Yes. I think one of the big debates that was going on at that point was in fact how much of a role should he play, with people feeling that as President he shouldn't be in on the daily negotiations, and with him feeling that if he were in on the daily negotiations he'd be getting what he wanted.

G: What do you think--?

B: I think one of the things that was a problem for the President was that he tended to look at the situation like one looks at taking a head count in the Congress, and in fact that isn't the kind of negotiation that we were in at all. For one thing, he didn't have chips to pull in, and I think that frustrated him. Again, it gets back to the same concept as the Soviets, that you think that you're playing the game one way and you suddenly discover that their rules are very different from yours. In this instance, again, he had been so backed into a corner he really didn't have a retreat position that would recoup anything. I guess, you know, fifteen years ago we're talking about, the fact that the United States was the economic power in the world made it very easy for one to believe that we could basically get anything we wanted. And I suppose that that was the beginning of the era of us losing a lot of our supremacy in the sense that the traditional ways that we had won didn't work in these situations. I don't really remember whether or not we ever talked about economic boycotts, but I'm sure that if we had, people would have said it doesn't make any difference at all, there are people who live off of rice and water and fish and it doesn't really make any difference for them. You always have these food-for-guns kinds of arguments. I don't know. I don't know if anyone has ever talked to him in terms of us trying to bring economic power, trying to use economic power against the Vietnamese.

G: On the other hand, do you think that Harriman and Vance felt that he was tying their hands too much in Paris, limiting what they could do in the negotiations?

B: Sure. He was on the phone every ten seconds. He was reading the wires coming in. You know, he had a very big personal stake in all of this. But the thing about negotiating for your country is that you have to have flexibility. You're the one that's there and you're the one that's reading the nuances and you're the one that has to interpret. I mean,

nothing Lyndon Johnson ever did with anybody ever allowed them that kind of flexibility, and I'm sure that that got very frustrating. I remember the [Rowland] Evans and [Robert] Novak article contending that Johnson was calling the shots. Well, in fact he was.

G: Do you remember his desire to make one last trip to Vietnam during Christmas and maybe even see the Pope?

B: Yes, very well.

G: Would you have gone on that trip?

B: Yes, being a Catholic. That was another one of those trips like the Soviet trip. We were going, we weren't. We were going, we weren't. But at that point the President had really--he was almost fanatical about all of this. He just wanted to get it resolved and over with. He wanted to walk out of that house with a triumph. He was willing to do whatever he thought was necessary to do it. But it just wasn't possible. You know, there are just times when no matter how much personal perseverance someone has, you're playing in a game where there are other people and you don't have the right, or you don't have the ability to convince those people to do what it is you want them to do. And of course he made a very crucial tactical error in that fall, which is he let the whole world know too much what he wanted. You know, I say that again in fifteen years down the road, it's like anything else, when your enemy or your opposition knows you want something so badly, your chances of getting that are pretty limited. All of his on the phone and pushing and contacts and pulling and hauling, in fact, probably ended up being the factor that broke any possibility of hope of anything being accomplished.

G: Did he feel that way do you think, in retrospect?

B: I think afterwards. You know, I didn't see the President very much after he left office, but in my opinion he truly had become one of the world's sad people. He couldn't see all that he had done. He couldn't appreciate all that he had done. All he could concentrate on were his failures. I always think it's one of the reasons the President died so young. He just didn't really have the will power to keep going anymore.

You know, I always had a feeling that the problem with striving for the presidency was that one had to put so much of oneself out on the line that in fact at the end of it you really couldn't end up being anything but a broken-hearted, disappointed man, because in fact I'm not too sure any human being can achieve what he hopes to achieve, in that context, of being the most powerful person in the world. And that the very psychological factors that make up the profile of somebody who goes for that job are the very things that ultimately end up doing them in. I used to be very fond of saying that if we ever had a president who had not gone through all of that, in fact we would probably have a very profitable presidency. The great thing about being young is you're prone to make those kinds of statements. And then we had a president by the name of Gerald Ford, and in fact he had every opportunity to achieve without having to have paid the price, and it didn't work. And part of the reason it didn't work was because he didn't have the hunger. So it gets complicated. I mean, you need the hunger to get there, but the hunger also breaks you. It makes you wonder why anybody would run for the presidency.

I want to end this interview with an anecdote, since that's been a good deal of my contribution to this. As you probably know, when the President announced his resignation on March 31, 1968, there were several young married women on the staff, all

of whom had postponed decisions to having children until after the campaign. And as the summer went on and the fall came into being, we ended up having more pregnant women in the West Wing and East Wing of the White House than ever before in its history. I don't really remember what the number is, but there were at least seven or eight pregnancies that had occurred. So by the time we had our final party, maybe January 18 or 19, it was really very humorous, because here were all these *very* pregnant ladies that came waddling in, all of whom worked right up until the very end. I think Ashton Gonella was the only person who had a baby before January 20, but there were a whole series of births in February and March.

G: He must have commented on that.

B: Oh, yes. He thought it was funny, and he thought it was interesting, and he thought it was touching, and he was moved that all these women had postponed having children for their careers and to get through the campaign for him. But he was very proud and pleased about all those babies being born.

G: That's interesting.

(Interruption)

B: January 20, 1969, eight o'clock. Marie [Fehmer], Juanita, Mary [Rather] and I were all sitting at our desks and there was a very strange sense of what the day would bring because in fact there was night reading to be gone through, and there were messages that had come up from the National Security Council, and there were telephone calls coming in, and the log was still in existence. And yet somehow you knew that at noontime it was all over. Everybody was trying very hard not to cry. The President came over and had on a new suit, which of course everybody had to tell him was terrific looking. Mrs.

Johnson came over. And then the car pulled up, I don't know, maybe about ten or ten-thirty with the President-elect and Mrs. Nixon. I don't know where the girls were. I don't know where any of the girls were, either the Nixon girls or the Johnson girls. President Nixon came into the Oval Office for a few minutes, and Mrs. Nixon went to the Mansion. After about a half an hour, the President got up and he and Nixon went walking out, said goodbye to us and went down the colonnade into the Mansion from the West Wing and they went upstairs to have breakfast or coffee or something. And about a quarter to twelve they got in the cars to depart to go up to the Capitol. At twelve o'clock precisely Mary and Juanita and Marie and I stood up and put on our coats and walked out. That was it. You were never going back again. We went up to the Capitol and listened to the ceremony.

G: How did you go? Did you drive?

B: Do you know, I have no--they must have had cars for us. I just have no recollection of us getting up there. I have no recollection of the inaugural speech. I mean, it's funny. I can tell you where I was sitting when Jimmy Carter was inaugurated and when Ronald Reagan was inaugurated, and I just have no remembrance at all. Then at some point in the afternoon we all went out to Andrews [Air Force Base] to see the President and Mrs. Johnson off, and we were standing out there lined up to say goodbye to them and Lynda and Luci were crying. I'm going to cry.

(Interruption)

The thing that I remember the most about it was not the President's kissing you goodbye and telling you how terrific you had been, but that Mrs. Johnson had a special message for each of us. You know, "I'm going to miss playing bridge with you, Phyllis, and

you're going to have to come down, and you take care of Lynda for me." Each one of us. I thought to myself, somehow she's always been the one that's comforted and what an absolutely incredible woman. I mean, it was the end of her life in many ways. It was the beginning of something new for her. But instead of all of us comforting her, she was the one going down the line. It made me realize all the things that he had said about her over the years, which was that he couldn't have done it without her. I'm glad he appreciated that, because I don't think the public has ever quite understood how much he appreciated her. She was just the most incredible woman.

And they took off, and that was the end of an era.

When Marie Fehmer married Andrew Chiarodo in December of 1969, I was charged with the responsibility of logistics, press and cars and motorcades. Even though Marie wanted it to be a very small and very private wedding, the fact was that everybody knew with the President coming that there was a certain amount of coverage. One of the things that I did was call up the church to see when the wedding before them was going to be over, and it wasn't going to be over until half an hour before the new ceremony. I called Marie and I said, "Oh, Marie, this is going to be a real problem," because the wedding was at a very little church in Georgetown on Gray Street, and there just on a normal day isn't any place for traffic, but [especially not] on something like the President and a motorcade coming and secret service and all.

So Marie picked up the phone and she called the church to talk to the priest to find out what the name of the bride before her was to see if they could come to some sort of an accommodation where Marie would move her time up a little bit and the bride would move hers back. And it turned out that the person getting married before Marie

was the personal secretary to Teddy Kennedy, and it became clear very quickly that there was no way that she was going to do anything to accommodate.

So we were then stuck with this problem that Teddy Kennedy was going to be at that wedding and Lyndon Johnson was going to be walking into the next wedding, and what did we do about it. We worked it out with Joe and Mary Sue [Susan Mary] Alsop, the Alsops, who lived right next door to the church. What we did was we whisked Lady Bird and Lyndon into their house until we saw Teddy Kennedy depart after the bride, and then we brought the President out and moved him in. I think that that's one of the more--I mean, the ironies of Washington, that two secretaries to two prominent people should be getting married a half an hour apart in the same church. And the President thought it was funny.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV

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PHYLLIS O. BONANNO

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Phyllis O. Bonanno, of Washington, D.C., do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted with me on November 12, 1982; April 6, April 7, and May 9, 1983; and February 18, 1984, in Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

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Phyllis Bonanno — January 25, 2004
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