INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 17, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: LOWELL K. BRIDWELL

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. McCOMB

PLACE: Mr. Bridwell's office in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: First of all, to fill in your biographical background, according to my information, you were born in Westerville, Ohio, in 1924.

B: That's correct.

M: Educated at Otterbein University?

B: Otterbein College, which is in Westerville, Ohio. It's a denominational school associated with the United Brethren Church. At that time, it was the United Brethren, now the United Brethren Evangelical. The principal reason for going there was because it was hometown and I also had a scholarship.

M: Did you get a degree from there?

B: No, I did not. Then I interrupted education for the war and worked in defense industries and research laboratories up until I went into the army in 1945. Then after my discharge I returned to Otterbein for one semester and then transferred to Ohio State.

M: Then did you finish a degree?

B: I did not get a degree, no.

M: What did you major in?

B: History and political science.

M: It seems like a good subject for what you are doing now.

Then in 1949, according to my data, you began work as a correspondent.

B: Not quite. After I got out of the army in 1946, I went to work as a reporter for the Ohio State Journal, which was at that time a locally-

owned newspaper in Columbus, Ohio, and went to Otterbein College. It's a morning newspaper, so I attended classes in the morning, worked in the afternoons and evenings. I was married in 1947 and when I married I moved from Westerville to Columbus and transferred to Ohio State. My wife at that time was a resident physician in Grant Hospital, which is a local hospital in Columbus. So my newspaper career started in 1946 with the Ohio State Journal.

M: When did you go with Scripps-Howard?

B: Well, I had an intermediate stop. I was with the Associated Press in the Columbus bureau for about a year and then from the Associated Press went to the Columbus Citizen which is a Scripps-Howard newspaper. I successively went from the Columbus Citizen to the Scripps-Howard Bureau, which is a state capital news wire organization for the, then, three Scripps-Howard newspapers in Ohio plus two others in which Scripps-Howard owned a minority interest but were independently operated.

M: And you worked for Scripps-Howard papers until--

B: I worked for Scripps-Howard in the Columbus Bureau until 1957 at which time I was transferred to Scripps-Howard office in Washington, the National Capitol Bureau, and worked as the Ohio correspondent for Scripps-Howard in Washington until--oh, I think it was either '60 or '61, I was promoted to what they call the National Staff. That is, rather than being a regional correspondent in Washington, I was on the national staff writing primarily, politics, covering the White House, Congress, but then a fair degree of specialty in transportation and urban programs, particularly the range of programs administered by HUD which was then, of course, HHFA.

M: You started this in the early 1950s, this correspondence work on a sort

of a national scale.

B: On a national scale in 1957.

M: And you worked in this until what--1962?

B: 1962, when I went into government.

M: And in 1962 you became assistant under secretary of commerce?

B: No. In 1962 I went with the Commerce Department as special assistant to the Under Secretary of Commerce for Transportation. I held that position until--this is going to be a little difficult on dates. I've forgotten the exact date when I became deputy under secretary. It might have been in 1964. During that period I was special assistant to the Under Secretary, I also for six months was the acting deputy director of the Bureau of Public Roads. When the tape comes back for editing, I will fill in these dates a little more precisely. But then I was deputy under secretary of commerce for transportation until the Department of Transportation was formed, during the latter few months of which I was the acting under secretary of commerce for transportation, or the latter few weeks, I guess would be more appropriate. I've forgotten the exact length of time.

M: Then you came in with the formation of the Department of Transportation?

B: Yes, that's correct. When the Department of Transportation was formed, I was one of the presidential nominees for presidential positions in the department, and as highway administrator.

M: I see. Did you gain the title of administrator at that point in 1965 or did this come later?

B: No, I became administrator on the formation of the Department of Transportation late in March. The department came into being April 1, and I actually was confirmed by the Senate and sworn in late in March.

M: Good. Well, that pretty well takes you to the present time.

B: Yes, and I've held this position since that time.

M: Now, to go back, when did you first run into Lyndon Johnson?

B: Well, I first became acquainted with President Johnson when he was the majority leader of the Senate and it was then my role as a newspaperman on the Hill occasionally attending his press briefings, occasionally talking with him on specific pieces of legislation or actions that were current in the Senate at that point in time.

M: Do you have any early impressions of President Johnson at that time, while he was majority leader?

B: Yes, I've always had the impression, that is, at that point in his career, of his being a very hard, very pragmatic, very realistic manager of an obviously difficult political institution. I was always impressed with his ability to get things done, which in the final analysis in any legislative body is the ability to compromise, the ability to cajole, the ability to take widely differing points of view and to bring them into some kind of a reasonable agreement or consensus.

M: Did you ever have occasion to observe his persuasiveness in action?

B: I was never a party to any kind of conferences in which the parties in disagreement were brought together for the purposes of achieving compromise, so that all of this type of information is completely second-hand to me by stories from others.

M: Were his relationships with the press always cordial? The reason I ask this is that he has a reputation of being rather blunt.

B: No, I don't think you could say they were cordial. Johnson, when he was majority leader, had his clear favorites among the reporters and had the reputation of if you were in, you had a tremendous source of information, and if you weren't in, there really wasn't a lot of point in talking to him. We had in our Scripps-Howard office a man, Marshall McNeil, who was very close to the then-Majority Leader Johnson. So when we needed things as a Scripps-Howard organization from Johnson or his immediate staff, Marshall McNeil usually handed this because he had complete entree to Johnson. Johnson also was very well acquainted with a number of Scripps-Howard executives, Walker Stone, the editor-in-chief, and some of the others in the Scripps-Howard organization who also had a southwestern United States background.

M: Did you happen to go to the 1960 Democratic Convention?

B: Yes, I attended the 1960 Democratic Convention, and prior to the convention had some contact with George Reedy and then had considerable contact in Los Angeles with Jim Wright, who was trying to round up delegate votes for Johnson.

M: You were following his campaign then?

B: Yes, I was following his campaign, although that was not my principal assignment. At the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles in 1960, my principal assignment was to cover certain delegations because that's the Scripps-Howard method of operating. The manpower is split up and assigned certain delegations. I had Ohio, because that's my home state. I also had Minnesota because of the involvement, the rather deep involvement, of Humphrey, McCarthy, Freeman, all three. Minnesota was a peculiarly interesting state in the 1960 convention because of the, in effect three-way split among the leaders within the Minnesota delegation.

I also had some contact with several of the other delegations although I don't recall at this moment the specific ones that I was assigned other than Minnesota.

M: What was the nature of the contact you had with Reedy and Wright at that convention?

B: Well, Reedy, primarily from the standpoint of obtaining information because he was acting in a public relations information capacity for Johnson. So it was regular contact with him from a straight news standpoint, plus any information that I could pick up in terms of overall strategy, tactics, or any information about what Johnson was doing or not doing in attempting to win delegate support. With Jim Wright, I tried to keep track of Jim, and I knew him prior to that time because of his membership on the Public Works Committee. I tried to keep track of Jim in terms of what kind of success he was having in terms of obtaining delegate strength in the various delegations which were his assigned responsibility.

M: Were you surprised that Johnson took the vice presidency?

B: Yes, I guess I would have to say that I was surprised because at that point in time Johnson had built himself a tremendous reputation as majority leader and at that point in time the vice presidency was held in such generally low or mediocre political esteem that I was surprised that he took it.

M: You would think that he would have preferred the job as majority leader and the power and prestige that went with it.

B: Yes, prior to the actual selection and his acceptance, had someone offered me a bet, I would have bet that he would not have accepted.

M: Why do you suppose he did accept it, then?

B: Well, I don't know as I really know. I, of course, obviously have heard many stories on the subject. I've never discussed it with President

Johnson nor anyone that I could assume to be reasonably close to him or close enough that I could get what I would regard as a dependable story. I was close to Bob Kennedy at the time, so I do know Bob's views on the subject, and I also was close to some of the members of the so-called Irish Mafia--Pierre Salinger, Ken O'Donnell, Dick Maguire.

M: Can you tell me their point of view about it? Such as Kennedy?

B: Well, I think it was a very pragmatic decision on Kennedy's part, that he believed at the time--and I think events proved him correct--that he had to have a vice presidential candidate that could pick up some support and voter strength, and therefore electoral votes, in states where he concluded he could not win them on his own. Of course, that ultimately proved correct, Texas probably being the outstanding example.

M: Did Robert Kennedy go along with this?

B: No, Bob Kennedy was, without any question, very much opposed to his brother's selection of Johnson as vice president. I have no hesitancy whatsoever in saying that this was not Bob's choice.

M: Why? What were his reasons?

B: Well, Bobby at that stage of the game was probably. . . Well, let's see, let me back off and try to summarize this a little bit better.

Bob, at that time, as you know, was the chief counsel of the Senate Rackets Committee, the McClellan subcommittee--permanent investigating subcommittee--and he had just gone through a period in which he had had rather sensational hearings, which loosely are characterized as the labor racketeering hearings. Bob had a tendency at that stage of the game to see everything in black and white, the good guys and the bad guys. He clearly counted Johnson as a bad guy, and he much preferred someone with

a much more liberal background, with a background and reputation of being a liberal in the sense of social political issues. And, obviously, Johnson did not have that reputation at that time. I don't know. I'm not sure I can say who Bob would have preferred with any degree of certainty, but Johnson certainly was not his choice.

M: Did you have any contact with Vice President Johnson?

B: At that time, you mean?

M: After he was elected.

B: Very little. I had no direct communication with Johnson during the time he was vice president. I don't recall a single instance in which I talked with him during the time of his vice presidency. Now, I may have had--I'm sure I did have a number of contacts with his office, but there were relatively minor in nature.

M: Did he ever comment to you, either at the convention or later, about the nature of the vice presidency, his opinion of it?

B: No, not in a personal conversation, nor did I have any occasion to be present in groups in which it was discussed.

M: Then you entered government service in 1962. How did that come about?

B: At the time that Kennedy and Johnson were elected, through my contacts--I should go back for a moment.

During the year preceeding the convention and the election, I spent a good bit of my time covering the Senate Rackets Committee. So in the process of that I became quite well acquainted with Bob Kennedy, Ken O'Donnell, Pierre Salinger, some of the others who were closely associated with Bob in the committee activities. When Kennedy was elected, there

was an invitation for me then to come into the Kennedy Administration, but no specific position was even mentioned, just rather general conversations with Bob in which he said, "Why don't you join the team?"

Later on, in the latter part of 1961, it became apparent that there were several difficulties building up in transportation area, which was one of my areas of specialty as a correspondent. I had a couple of conversations with Bob Kennedy and he specifically asked me if I would go into the transportation area in Commerce. At that time I frankly wasn't particularly interested. I hadn't really thought very much about going into government, but as I became more involved in the problems from a correspondent's standpoint, the offer became more attractive and I accepted the invitation of Bob and, then, from the Under Secretary of Transportation, Dan Martin, to join the department as his special assistant.

M: Since you apparently knew Bob Kennedy rather well, what impressions do you have of him? Say, as a politician, as a campaign manager in the 1960 campaign?

B: Well, I have, I guess, probably ambivalent attitudes towards Bob. I both admired him, in many ways, and had some reservations. I admired him as a very aggressive individual. I admired him for his inquiring mind. I admired him for his ability to pursue to logical conclusions either questions or problems that he had before him. Bob was an individual, very tough-minded person. I think probably that on the detracting side I always had serious concern about Bob in the sense that he saw things very starkly--starkly in the sense of good and bad, black and white. I suppose I really should take more time to think this through because the comments I have given you are overly simplistic.

M: What kind of campaign manager was he?

B: Well, let me tell you a story that will illustrate the point. First of all, it goes to this business of toughmindedness, being a very hard individual, not a person who worked quietly or worked in an atmosphere in which he attempted to bring contending forces together and worked through the arts of persuasion and compromise, but rather a much more blunt approach to political problems, so he was in this sense of tough-minded pragmatism.

In 1960, Mike DiSalle was the favorite son candidate from Ohio. And at the beginning of the campaign, DiSalle was attempting to maintain a degree of independence up to convention time. The Kennedy forces felt that they had to make a breakthrough in one of the large industrial, metropolitan-type states and clearly bring them to their side in order to make a breakthrough fairly early in the campaign. So there was, in effect, a confrontation between the Kennedy forces and DiSalle, and Bob told me that the approach to DiSalle was either "Join us now, or we will put in another candidate. Either Kennedy goes on the ballot or another candidate, and we'll walk right over you." I don't know as I know all the byplay that went on during that period, but as history will record, DiSalle was one of the early ones that pledged his support to Kennedy, so that even though he continued in his role as favorite son, he was pledged to Kennedy from fairly early in the campaign.

That's an example of what I mean by Bob's very blunt, tough-minded approach to politics--of "Join us, get out of our way, or we will run over you."

M: I suppose this could make enemies--this kind of an approach.

B: Oh, sure. Of course, there are relatively few people that regard Bob Kennedy with mixed feelings. They are either very enthusiastic admirers and fans, or they detested the guy.

M: Does this tough-mindedness, this pragmatism, this attitude of roughshod politics, does this compare to Lyndon Johnson's approach? Is it the same?

B: No, there was a difference. There is a very substantial difference. Now, that obviously does not imply that Lyndon Johnson wasn't a very tough-minded politician himself, but his tactics were considerably different than Kennedy's. Johnson, from my observations, clearly and properly and quite accurately has the reputation of being an individual that can persuade and can cajole, and he does this by giving, or granting, or approving, or going along with, or agreeing with some portion of what many different contending forces want in order to win compromise. Now, certainly there are occasions where I have seen Johnson ride pretty roughshod over someone, but the tactics are much different in that he compromises through the art of having everyone win a part of what they seek.

M: And Robert Kennedy would be more unlikely to give concessions, then?

B: Yes, very much so. Let me give you another example. I was the intermediary. This is kind of silly, most of this has turned out to be an interview on Bob Kennedy rather than on Lyndon Johnson. But another example was when Senator Young, Steve Young of Ohio, was seeking re-election in 1964, and John Glenn, the astronaut, had announced for senator in the Democratic primary. I was the intermediary to see whether Young could be persuaded to step

aside, and Young clearly indicated to me that he would be willing to step aside for a position on the Renegotiation Board. This information was passed back to Bob Kennedy and the offer was clearly refused. Instead there was intended to be a head-on clash between Glenn and Young, and then Glenn had a bathtub accident which forced his withdrawal. But this all was leading up to the point--and what really was the strategy behind it was to have the strongest possible Democratic senatorial candidate on the ticket in Ohio of course, on the presumption that Kennedy would be a candidate for re-election and they wanted to put together the strongest ticket in each state that they could produce. It was generally conceded but not by polls or anything, I think it was just political judgment, political intuition, that John Glenn would have been a stronger senatorial candidate in '64 than would have Steve Young.

M: What kind of connection did you have with Lyndon Johnson at the time that he had to take over the presidency on the death of John F. Kennedy?

B: Well, in the period immediately preceeding Kennedy's assassination and immediately subsequent to that, I had no direct connection. At that point in time, I was special assistant to the Under Secretary of Transportation. All of my contacts at the White House were with the Kennedy people. I had very little contact with Johnson people up until several months after he became president. My first real contact of any significance with the President didn't start until the plans were under way to create the Department of Transportation.

M: Do you have any knowledge of Johnson's attempt to get along with the Kennedy people after Johnson became president?

B: I have no personal knowledge. The only thing that I have is second-

hand or hearsay knowledge, and I don't regard that as particularly appropriate for discussion.

M: I understand.

B: I am perfectly aware, because of my contacts with some of the people, that he did make some rather elaborate efforts. I know that Dick Maguire stayed on, for example, at the Democratic National Committee because Johnson specifically asked him to and said that he needed him.

M: Robert Kennedy stayed on for a while.

B: Yes, Bob stayed on. Here again, my contacts with Bob during that period tended to fall off a little bit, because Bob was so withdrawn from everyone at that stage of the game, I didn't have any close personal conversations with him during that time. I did maintain contact with Dick Goodwin, Ken O'Donnell, several others of the Kennedy forces in the White House, and I am aware of, at least, their side of the story of Johnson's attempts to get along with the Kennedy forces. There's not really much doubt in my mind that he made some rather elaborate efforts to win them over. But, by the same token, my early contacts with Johnson when he became President were primarily through Bill Moyers. I had gotten well acquainted with Bill very rapidly and it became apparent that, on the staff of the White House, there were contending forces for prestige, for positions, and so forth, and the clash was inevitable among the staff members.

M: Since you did have some acquaintance with staff people, both under Kennedy and Johnson, maybe you can explain to me why someone like Bill Moyers would want to be a presidential assistant. What is the attraction in this?

B: Bill is a very complicated individual, and I'm always a little bit hesitant

to give my opinions of what motivates people.

M: Let me ask you this. Is it your impression that it would be easier to work for someone like John F. Kennedy than it would be Lyndon Johnson?

B: Clearly it would be, not in a substantive sense, but in a human relations sense. I mean, there's no secret of the fact that Johnson has a short fuse, that he treated staff members pretty rough at times. So in the sense of the human relationships, I am confident that it would have been easier to work with Jack Kennedy than with Lyndon Johnson.

M: But what is it about Johnson that is able to retain the loyalty of the staff if he is rough on them at times?

B: Well, here again, I have never had an unpleasant personal experience with Johnson. He's always been kind and, if anything, highly complimentary, as far as I'm concerned. I've never had any kind of dealings with him in which unkind words were stated, so that this is not an experience that I have ever personally encountered.

M: So you really couldn't judge from your own point of view?

B: No, not from anything that has happened as far as I am personally concerned. I've never had any connection--direct, personal connection with the President--that I could regard as being a difficult situation.

M: Maybe this question about motivation is more properly asked to the people that are in the position.

B: I think it probably is. Obviously I have opinions, but I think it's really much more appropriate to talk on the basis of personal knowledge and personal intimate knowledge.

M: To get to the formation of the Department of Transportation, how did this arise? Can you restructure the events giving rise to this new department?

B: From the very beginning, Johnson put considerable emphasis on reorganization and a greater efficiency of government structure and its operation, so that at the same time that plans were being put together for the great variety of Great Society programs, there still was the heavy emphasis upon institutional changes which would lead to more efficient organization and operation of government. So at the time that Alan Boyd was selected as under secretary of commerce for transportation succeeding Dan Martin, the President asked for recommendations for transportation programs and for organization. Out of that came studies of the various alternatives that could be put together for institutional changes. They ranged all the way from leaving things approximately as they were at that time, all the way up to changes as radical as creating a Department of Transportation and dismembering both Commerce and Labor and making a new Department of Economic Affairs, which would take out most of the other functions of the Department of Commerce and many of the functions of the Department of Labor, putting them into a completely new Department of Economic Affairs. After going through this period of study and analysis, it was finally brought down to a choice between two alternatives: One, a Department of Transportation, and another was a confederation of transportation agencies under an under secretary in Commerce. Now, the second alternative that I have described was really a modification of what then existed, and the decision was made to go for a Department of Transportation.

M: Who made this decision?

B: The President. He was presented with the various plans, the alternatives, and the pluses and minuses of each alternative, and it was his decision

to go for the Department of Transportation.

M: To get back to the genesis of this, you say that the desire to reorganize transportation facilities came out of an emphasis on more efficiency in government, is that correct?

B: Yes. That's correct, particularly recognizing the rather loose organization of transportation policy and program activities in the government.

M: Now, is this emphasis on reorganization, on efficiency, is this peculiar, do you think, to Lyndon Johnson? Or was this just a problem that was there that everyone recognized?

B: No, I think it was peculiar to Lyndon Johnson to a much greater degree than any president in my period of observing public affairs--without any question greater in degree.

M: Does he have a pervasive interest in efficiency? Does this extend to the whole of the administration?

B: Yes, I think so.

M: And to an unusual degree?

B: To a greater degree than I have observed in any president during my observation of public affairs which started with the latter years of FDR.

M: Do you have any idea why he should have this?

B: No, I'm not really sure that I do know, because I did not have this impression of Johnson during the time that he was in the Senate.

M: But as president--

B: But as president, to a very marked degree.

M: So then Johnson decided to go with the formation of a new department, and presented this proposal to Congress. Is that right?

B: Yes. It was decided to attempt both some improvements in policy and program and the creation of the Department of Transportation all in one fell swoop. So this was all wrapped up in a Department of Transporation

message. As a matter of fact, I am acutely aware of this because during the big snow, when Washington was completely closed down, I shoveled out the car and went down to my office in Commerce and holed up for three days writing a Transportation message.

M: Was this during the winter of '64-65?

B: No, let's see, yes, it would have been. Here again, let me check the dates for purposes of the tape, but it would have been--I guess--February, probably February of '66.

M: And you helped write the message for his address to Congress on the Department of Transportation?

B: Yeh, well, it wasn't the final text--I wrote the draft from which the final text was prepared.

M: Did the proposal have much opposition in Congress? And if so, from whom?

B: No, it did not, but there was a good reason for it. The good reason being that Alan Boyd and myself undertook a program--very deliberately--of attempting to (a) win support for the proposal, but really more importantly was the second part, (b) to neutralize potential opposition. Recognizing that it would be impossible to win universal support for it, our real efforts were generated along the lines that we knew that we were going to have some support for it, therefore, we concentrated on our activities of neutralizing the potential opposition.

M: Did your program extend to Congress only, or was it inter-departmental?

B: No, it was very largely with the private sector where opposition could be anticipated to develop. So it was inter-governmental in part, but very heavily oriented to the private sector.

M: What kind of opposition did you have from the private sector?

B: Well, as it turned out, the opposition came fairly strongly from both maritime management and labor. In that instance, the accommodation that was made was to leave out the Maritime Administration from the Department of Transportation. In other words, the Maritime people agreed that they would not oppose a Department of Transportation as long as the Maritime Administration, that is, the subsidy program--that's what we're really talking about--was left out.

M: This is what they were concerned about--the subsidy program?

B: They were concerned about it in the sense that they wanted, and continue to want, a very heavily increased subsidy program for the existing subsidized carriers plus a substantial segment of the US-flag tramp fleet. Labor was concerned about the flag-of-convenience segment of the fleet, that is, US owned but operated under a foreign flag. The maritime story gets quite complicated. At any rate, short of spending a whole lot of money, there was no way to win maritime approval of the Department of Transportation.

I would guess that the next most reluctant group would have been the inland waterway operators. They were primarily concerned because they felt that a Department of Transportation which would take away from the Corps of Engineers the responsibility for public investment in waterway improvements would result to their detriment. That was very heavily minimized, but was never completely overcome.

Finally, after some accommodation was made, the aviation industry, the highway industry, railroads all supported it.

M: The accommodations you had to make for these people varied from group to group?

B: That is correct.

M: And the accommodation mainly concerned over subsidy programs, grants, relationships with government, or what?

B: Railroads and trucks were always wary of what the legislation would contain on the regulatory side. Aviation was concerned, primarily, on the effect that it would have upon the CAB in the regulatory sense, and, also, what effect it would have upon air traffic safety. Air traffic safety ultimately became the primary sticking point and resulted in a compromise which led to the National Transportation Safety Board.

M: But you finally, through meetings with these people, gained their support. Is that right?

B: Yes. After compromises were reached, we had the active support of the aviation industry, of the railroads, truckers, and then of the other portions of the highway community, such as state highway officials, contractors, material suppliers--all of the people who are concerned with the construction of highways.

M: The support of the private sector, then, would bear on the support of Congress?

B: Oh, without any question, yes.

M: This is what you were trying to do--at least neutralize, if not gain new support for the program.

B: Exactly, and, obviously very successful because the request of Congress and the enactment of the Department of Transportation Bill occurred in one year--in one session of Congress. Obviously, I have a personal interest in it because I was so deeply involved in it, but such a major reorganization of government structure in a period of one year is almost unheard of, and we did it.

M: Was there any kind of inter-departmental difficulty say between Commerce and Labor in setting up this new department?

B: No, we avoided practically all of the intramural, meaning inter-agency wrangling, by deliberately staying clear of the urban mass transportation program which would have involved HUD--this new department which has been created out of HHFA--and left that aside until the reorganization planned this year which brought urban mass transportation into the Department of Transportation. So we deliberately avoided that fight.

M: Will you explain that to me a little bit more in detail? What is the difficulty over urban mass transit?

B: Well, here again, it gets a little complicated, but let me try to summarize it. One factor was just the bureaucratic side. That is, the Urban Mass Transit Program was a newly-created program. It was lodged in the Housing and Home Finance Agency on a decision made during the Kennedy Administration not to put it into Commerce--to orient it much more closely to housing programs--but more importantly because HHFA--or now HUD--has the urban areas, the urban environment, the cities as its constituency. The concern at that time would have been that coming into the Department of Transportation--because of the huge size of the highway program--there were fears that this would have dominated the Urban Mass Transit Program.

M: Was there ever any accommodation between Department of Transportation over this question of mass transit?

B: Not during this period of time when the Department of Transportation was in the process of being put together, no. Let me back off a moment and say that it was our early intention to try to include urban mass

transportation. We planned on the basis on bringing in urban mass transportation, but when it came to the point where there was obviously going to be a very difficult conflict with HHFA, or with then-HUD because HUD had come into existence, that everyone agreed to just back away from it. Here again, this is a decision by the President to not tackle that as a part of the Department of Transportation Act.

M: And, at the present time, it is still--

B: No, at the present time, by reorganization plan, which was sent to Congress this year, the Urban Mass Transportation Program has been moved to the Department of Transportation.

M: So that has finally been accomplished?

B: That has been accomplished. It was effective this last July 1.

M: Apparently one of the goals of your part of the Transportation Department is dealing with safety on the highways. Is that correct?

B: Yes.

M: Is the goal of safety in transportation one of the primary objectives of the department?

B: Yes, the Transportation message that I referred to, in addition to urging the creation of a Department of Transportation, also contained the Transportation message. The subsequent legislation also contained both the motor vehicle safety program, that is the program to develop and adopt standards for the safety of the--involving the manufacture of motor vehicles, and in addition what we refer to as the state/community safety program--the program of grants and aids to states and communities for the conducting and carrying out of safety programs.

M: Has Lyndon Johnson had a continuing interest in this sort of a program--safety?

B: Yes, but I don't know as I would characterize it as something of tremendous special personal interest to him. I don't regard that as [a] particularly significant part of his personal involvement

M: In your work with safety, you have never had any, shall I say, important, or great, contact with him in the development of this?

B: Not in the safety program, no.

M: What about this Highway Beautification Act of 1965? Were you in on the formation of that?

B: Yes, I certainly was.

M: What's the genesis of that?

B: Well, this started out as suggested program to the President from two primary sources. One was within our office in Commerce--that is, the Under Secretary of Transportation--and the other was from a task force which the President created--one of several task forces that the President created in 1964. The proposal for the highway beautification program came as a result of these two rather independent but somewhat loosely coordinated activities--that is, of the task force and the effort within our office in the Department of Commerce. From the beginning, and eventually implemented by statute, were the--in effect--three parts to the Highway Beautification Program--one, outdoor advertising control, [two] the control of junk yards, and then thirdly, the landscaping and scenic enhancement of highways and their immediately adjacent areas.

M: What was Mrs. Johnson's role in this?

B: Well, Mrs. Johnson was tremendously interested in it from the start. During the formation of the program, I did not, as I recall now, have any direct contact with Mrs. Johnson, but rather it was second-hand

information that I received of her interest in specific parts of it. I think at that stage of the game, she was interested primarily in the junk yard control section and in the landscaping portion. This interest gradually grew and developed to incorporate other parts.

M: Is it your impression that she was in on this from the beginning? Or did she get interested in this after the proposals were made?

B: Well, in terms of the Highway Beautification Program, per se, to the best of my knowledge, she was not in on it during its formative period, that she became much more interested in it when it got to the proposal stage. Now, I want to qualify that by saying that it was our very clear information that even in the formative stage that she was interested in some kind of control of junk yards but it didn't have form and content. It was an expression of interest.

M: Was there any difficulty in the forming of this act over deciding what was beautiful and what wasn't? When you talk about highway beautification, you have to have some concept of what is beautiful.

B: Yes, there was considerable difficulty over it, but that wasn't really the significant difficulty. The significant difficulty was, and always has been, and still is, the control of outdoor advertising. The Act, or the proposal as it was originally put together, and as it was worked out in a tentative agreement with the Senate Public Works Committee would have controlled outdoor advertising along the interstate system and upon the rural sections of the primary system. It was at this stage that the Budget Bureau raised a question about whether the outdoor advertising control was comprehensive enough. Bill Moyers got into it personally--very deeply involved personally--in behalf of the President and Mrs. Johnson,

and led to the change in signals--a much more comprehensive program which produced all of the furor in the Congress.

M: Do you still have difficulty over outdoor advertising?

B: Yes, it's by far the most difficult portion of the Act.

M: Is the problem in getting compliance to the terms of the Act?

B: The difficulty is in several dimensions. The first difficulty is in getting state agreements to conduct outdoor advertising control programs. As of this date, I think we have something like twenty states that have signed agreements with us to control outdoor advertising. The second problem is in maintaining any kind of reasonable relationships with Congress on the program. It is one of the programs that is constantly under criticism, and very deep criticism, bitter criticism, on the part of Congress. That reflects in the refusal of Congress to authorize and appropriate funds to carry out the program.

M: What's the basis of the trouble in Congress?

B: Well, a lot of it stems back to the tactics that were used in getting congressional approval of the Act in the first place, and that is overwhelmingly a problem. Then, in addition to that, are the efforts of the outdoor advertising industry to keep a constant barrage of criticism going on the program, primarily on the part of business interests that depend heavily on outdoor advertising, such as restaurants, motels, motorist services like gasoline, that type of thing.

M: In talking about the tactics used to get it passed through Congress, you are referring to Johnson's insistence that it be passed in time for his party so he could announce it, or what? This is a common story about it.

B: Well, there are two phases to it. One is the phase in the Senate in which I arrived at a compromise on legislation with the Senate Public Works Committee which I had every reason to believe was fully acceptable to all parties concerned. Speaking for the administration, [I] told the Senate Public Works Committee that we would buy the compromise package. It was at this point that the Budget Bureau raised the question. Bill Moyers got into it, and the administration repudiated my agreement with the Senate Public Works Committee and changed the program to a much more comprehensive program and successfully forced the Public Works Committee and its chairman, Senator Randolph, to amend the bill on the floor of the Senate from that which had been approved by the committee in order to carry out this more comprehensive program. So this caused a very difficult period and a very embarrassing period for Randolph and several other members of the committee.

After it was enacted by the Senate, then it went to the House Public Works Committee. There were the negotiations with the House Public Works Committee [which] became very, very difficult, very detailed, in which, at this stage Bill Moyers was personally in charge of it. Under Secretary Boyd and myself spent essentially full-time on it for days and days getting it out of the Public Works Committee.

By this time, it was known throughout the Congress and known throughthe city and the country that this was a special emphasis and interest that high priority was being placed on it. So then it went to the floor. The Republicans, at this stage, made the tactical error of attacking it as Lady Bird's bill, calling it ill-considered, and ill-timed, and so forth. This all led up to the day that it was debated on the floor,

and that night was scheduled the reception at the White House for the members of Congress and their ladies.

The decision was made by the President to get final passage that evening. I'm confident, although the President didn't tell me this personally, that his reasons were really much more pragmatic than merely being able to announce it at the White House party. His reasons were clearly that he had the votes there that night, and he wanted the bill while he had the votes. So it was jammed through that night--which went on into a session that didn't end until after midnight, and of course, the party was never held.

Meanwhile, all of the congressional wives were sitting nicely dressed in the gallery waiting to go to the White House and never got there. So all of this led to a very bitter--and even to this day continues to be a very bitter feeling over the way that particular legislation was handled.

M: I see, and on top of it you had the trouble with the outdoor advertising.

B: The outdoor advertisers, yes, and the small business interests who were in legion with them.

M: I have one more question for you, and this concerns the--

B: Let me go back to one other thing that I think is an appropriate part of the record on the highway beautification. Back in 1958 there was passed the so-called Bonus Outdoor Advertising Control Program, that is, in which the states received a small bonus for controlling out door advertising.

One of the very vigorous opponents of that was the late Senator Kerr, and Kerr's efforts to defeat that, in the first instance, and then

to defeat its reauthorization were really quite well-known and quite interesting. For example, during a session of the Public Works Committee during the first reauthorization period Kerr was in the chair when the vote was taken on reauthorization. The vote was an oral vote, and he ruled that it was defeated.

This was the period when I was a newspaperman. I polled the members of the committee individually and a majority of them said that they voted for it. So through a series of newspaper stories, we, in effect, forces the Public Works Committee to go back and take another record vote and it was passed out. Then on the Senate floor, Mrs. Neuberger--Maurine Neuberger--led the fight for it, and succeeded in getting reauthorization.

But the point of the story here is that without any question Johnson, at that time, assisted Kerr in attempting to defeat it. So his position on outdoor advertising is exactly 180 degrees from what it was back in 1958-59, and so forth. At this stage of the game, and for the period since the Highway Beautification Act, he has been a very vigorous proponent of controlling outdoor advertising, but that was not his position in '58-'59.

M: Of course, that raises the question of why did he change?

B: Because, obviously, of his tremendous interest, and I think it is very real, genuine, dedicated interest in the quality of the environment-particularly the quality of the environment as it relates to highways. I know that there have been any number of times, and here again in personal conversations with the President in which he has talked at length about his desires for the development of roadside parks, and he frequently refers back to the time that he was with the National Youth Administration

in Texas, in which they undertook a program of building roadside parks. This obviously had been something that had been very pleasing and gratifying to him and something that he remembered as a particularly high point in that stage of his career. He frequently would emphasize the importance and the desirability of building roadside parks not only for travelers on long-distance trips, to rest, to picnice, and so forth, but as a facility for people within the area to have outdoor recreation picnic-type facilities.

M: Do you suppose this fits into the general concept of the Great Society that he [envisioned]?

B: Oh, yes, clearly it does.

M: Well, one more question, which deals with problems in Washington, D.C. and your position on the Three Sisters Island Bridge versus the subway ideas. My information indicates that you prefer to stick to a worked-out plan for highway development in this area and that this Three Sisters problem interferes with that. Is that correct?

B: Not quite, no.

M: What is the problem involved here?

B: The fundamental problem involved in Washington, D.C. is that it is a city without a government. So all of my position and my strategy and my tactics are based upon that fundamental observation that it's a city without a government. Now, obviously, that literally is not true. But what is true is that decision making in Washington is so diffuse that it's very difficult to make a decision and carry it out because there are so many parties at interest that have some kind of a legitimate interest in whatever the problem may be.

M: This would involve not only federal agencies, but local agencies?

B: That's correct, yes. So back in '66--and I had nothing to do with it, at the time--a compromise plan was worked out for the freeway system in Washington, D. C. As I say, I was not a party to it. As a practical matter, there are some parts of it that I don't like at all. But the problem that faced me was: Do you attempt to carry out the agreed-upon plan or do you tear the thing apart without any clear indication of where this may lead? My position was--and I emphasize was--that I was perfectly willing to stick with and carry out the agreed-upon plan stemming from 1966. As this agreed-upon plan began to fall apart, then my position altered because if it was going to fall apart, then I wanted to see a rational system put together. So we are still in that stage where we are attempting to put together a rational highway system for the District of Columbia and its immediate area, and for all practical purposes, metropolitan Washington.

M: This is a freeway system?

B: Well, no, it isn't. It's a transportation system.

M: That's a broader concept?

B: It most certainly is, because it contemplates the entire highway network plus the rapid transit--the proposed rapid transit network--plus additional improvements that can be made in the bus component of public transportation.

M: Well, what made the 1966 plan fall apart? What was the trouble there?

B: The 1966 plan fell apart because of Negro opposition to the North-Central Freeway. Now, I'm perfectly aware that much of the publicity has been over Three Sisters Bridge. That really wasn't the thing that made it fall apart. The opposition to the North Central Freeway by the Negro

community is what made it fall apart. Then, with that difficulty existing, the problems of Three Sisters Bridge and this big question of 4F of the Department of Transportation Act--again the quality of the environment--added an additional impetus to it.

M: The Negro community objected to the freeway going through their sector, or what?

B: That's correct.

M: And so they put pressure on the moving of that freeway to some place else?

B: That's right.

M: And this altered your plan from 1966?

B: There have been only two fundamental issues in the so-called Freeway Plan. One is the North Central which I have described--very largely oriented to the Negro community. The other one, of course, is the Three Sisters Bridge, which is largely an environmental question.

M: Does this involve the Department of Interior?

B: Yes, and Parkland. That is correct.

M: Did the Department of Interior object to the routing of the traffic through Parkland?

B: Well, the Department of Interior position changed. The Department of Interior was a party to the 1966 agreement which contemplated a Three Sisters Bridge. Then, when Secretary Udall became personally interested in it, then the Department of Interior position changed to one of opposition.

M: So at present you still have a traffic problem and you still are trying to work out some solution to it? Is that right?

B: That's correct. As of right now, there is not agreement on anything

in the District of Columbia.

M: Well, on that sad note, I guess I'd better end the interview. I wish to thank you for taking your time.

B: You're entirely welcome. I don't know how much of it is helpful.

M: Well, that depends on future historians.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Lowell K. Bridwell

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, Clayton Bridwell of Austin, Texas, 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 on October 17, 1968 at Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

D. Clay Bridwell
Donor

25 January 1987
Date

Frank G. Burke
Archivist of the United States

2/11/87
Date