INTERVIEW WITH OMAR BURLESON (D-Tex, 17th District)

Interviewer: Paige Mulhollan

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M: Did you know Mr. Johnson before you came to the House?

B: Yes, as a matter of fact, I knew him before I was a member of the House. I was here for a time. I was here in the FBI, but I was also a secretary to my immediate predecessor.

M: Oh, you were a Congressional secretary like Mr. Johnson, then.

B: That is correct, and I knew him back in those days, somewhat casually, but I'd see him in passing, you know, and pretty often. And I knew, of course, of his work in the NYA in Texas during the Roosevelt Administration.

M: You served in one Congress, I think, with him?

B: That is correct.

M: Do you recall anything outstanding about his activities as a Congressman?

B: Well, not especially at that time. Of course, he had plans of running for the Senate and was spending quite a bit of time in shaping up future actions. As a matter of fact, I had felt back from early days--and I suppose that maybe I was not so conscious of it in later years--but I have a feeling as I look back that Lyndon Johnson, President Johnson now, had always thought of being President of the United States.

M: Is there any particular clue to that that you ---

B: This is hindsight, but in his great drive and his great energies in shaping up his career was somewhat obvious. I was not here in the actual beginning of his career, but in hindsight I think that a great many things observed suggested that there was this ambition (in) his mind that someday that he would occupy the White House.

M: The key to this, of course, was his Senatorial election in 1948. Were you involved in any way with that campaign?

B: No. I only watched it with interest. I was here, of course, and I did observe it, but only at a distance.

M: You don't have any particular insight to the so-called "87 vote landslide?"

B: No, actually I don't. Not any more than anyone else who read the reports of the papers and so forth.

M: Once he got in the Senate, one of the things that I think is going to be wondered about by future historians is his role in Texas politics. It's sort of a jungle to an outsider. How did he fit into the factionalism in the Democratic Party in the 1950's when he was in the Senate?

B: Well, as I recall, I think that was about the last era when we had what might be comparatively very great harmony in the Democratic Party. And I would give Mr. Johnson credit for having kept welded a cohesiveness in the factions in Texas. Although at that time those factions, as we know them today, were not as pronounced.

M: Oh, I see. So he didn't have to take one consistent side against the other?

B: No, I don't think so. The factions then had a different character really than what I think they have today. Back at that time--I use this for lack of a better word--the liberals and conservatives so-called were not as identifiable as they have been in recent years. Now there were other factions on a personal basis and on--not entirely separated from issues. But I think that philosophy played a much lesser role than in more recent years.

M: Well, once that factionalism gets to a point where the members are identifiable--or more identifiable--does Mr. Johnson then play any role at that time, let's say after 1960; after he's Vice-President?

B: Well, here again, I think that by his political ability he had great support from all factions.

M: From both sides?

B: From both sides. And a following that centered very much in what has been referred to as the "establishment." His inner strength, the core of his strength, came out of what we identify as the faction of the "establishment."

M: That would be the conservatives?

B: Well, that is true. What today we would call those under the Connally leadership. But while he was doing that, he also held what we know, I think, as the liberal faction very close to him during those years of an involvement the politics we see in the State at this time.

M: They frequently say that President Kennedy was going to Dallas to help patch up Texas factionalism at the time of his assassination. Do you have any knowledge of what particular task he had in mind on that trip?

B: No, no more than his persuasiveness and with his effort to have a compatibility between Senator Yarborough and the faction that opposed him, which is a sort of an enigma in a way. I mean it's paradoxical. Senator Yarborough's success at that time and even today is probably a minority in that faction, and yet the Senator is able to be elected and reelected. But I think it was common knowledge that the then President Kennedy had hoped to be an ameliorating influence in the State.

M: He could help with the so-called liberal faction?

B: Yes, and he had a great respect and following in the other faction as we know it now.

M: During the 1950's you had been in the Congress several terms by that time and in a position of more responsibility and leadership. How did Mr. Johnson as Senate leader operate in regard to the House? Did he play any role as an influence in the House as he did in the Senate?

B: Well, no, he had frequent contacts with Mr. Rayburn and I think that was a mutual respect and necessary to leadership. Naturally, it should have been so. I mean aside from those two personalities. I don't believe that ever before or since has there been such a close

working relationship. Now as far as Senator Johnson as the Majority Leader, putting pressure on House members of our delegation to vote a certain way and that sort of thing, no. I don't recall that there was ever any more than discussions of issues. And it may work both ways. When I use the word pressure, I don't mean that in the literal sense, I mean the expression of interest in issues affecting people you represent in your own district. You would (find) that as Senator then, President Johnson was most responsive in trying to help his colleagues in the House. Over and over are instances--I know in my own case, and I'm sure in probably all others, I was never treated with more fairness and more considerateness than I was by Senator Johnson in trying to be helpful to me. I'll give you an example of this, if I may.

In 1952 they were to locate a strategic air base some place in Texas. Abilene, Texas--my town--was chosen finally for the location. I had an election on that year and Senator Johnson did not have. He offered to let me announce the procurement of this great facility which meant so much to my community. The people there were so very interested in it and had worked for a long period in trying to get it. And I had worked with them, and so had the Senator. But in his considerateness he offered to let me announce it and I prevailed upon him, saying that my conscience wouldn't let me do that.

So, after a discussion with him, I came back to my office; I prepared a joint telegram; I put his name first and mine second and sent the wire.

M: Still he was considerate to offer?

B: Oh, yes, indeed. That is the thing--that sort of thing that I think is the nature of the man in understanding as to the importance of one's own position and his problems.

M: The Congressmen then weren't subject to the so-called "Johnson treatment" that's so famous in the books about him?

B: Well, I never was. I know he's capable of doing that, especially in his strong leadership in the Presidency. I have had what we ordinarily term as "pressure" to be for or against something. But not unduly so. There were instances when I did not go along with the President; we discussed it, and I've told him at times when he has asked me and when I know he was interested, the reason why. It didn't always please him, either. But we never had any falling out about these things.

M: You've opposed him, I think, on quite a number of the "Great Society" issues.

B: Yes, I have.

M: Does this affect your personal relationship?

B: No, it never has to my way of feeling. When the Poverty Program was first coming into being and the President was extremely interested in it and felt that this was one of his great legislative goals. I was up in the living quarters; he and Mrs. Johnson had a reception that evening for the Ambassadors to this country, and they were to go downstairs at exactly 8 o'clock. This happened to be the evening that they arrested the men in Georgia who had--I've

forgotten the Colonel's name--but who had killed the Negro Colonel who had been on reserve military duty. You'll remember that incident. As I say, I'm sorry I can't remember the victim's name. (Lemuel A. Penn, killed July 11, 1964.) But anyway, during this period of time, the President was dressing and getting ready for this very formal dinner and they had made the arrest. Mr. J. Edgar Hoover called the President; they had a talk; the President then called Governor Sanders of Georgia and reported to him. He also called Senator Russell. In the meantime I was waiting for him to tell me why I should support the Poverty Program. And the time just about ran out and just before he was leaving, I said,

"Mr. President, I know that I'm here for you to talk to me about the merits of this Poverty Program. I'm not against trying to do something for the relief and the alleviation of conditions of poverty, but it seems to me that we're jumping too far in this start to be able to absorb all that's intended here, just can't support it."

Well, he didn't like it too much--I didn't expect him to,--but I knew that was the reason I was there and so by that time they had to go on to the reception. He was not happy with my decision, but I had committed myself already and I couldn't do anything else.

There's another little bit of amusing angle about this. You know it isn't easy to get into the White House. You identify yourself; but particularly when you're going to the living quarters where I was instructed to meet the President, you just don't walk in, you know,

unescorted. But I had to get out unescorted. That was my trouble. We were in the President's residence quarters in the White House. My car was parked on the very opposite side. I had to go through all of the White House and you know, you can get lost in it. But that was one time I had to find my way out and without too much help. Some of those corridors are dead end and you have to switch back one way to get to another one. Well, that's beside the point perhaps, but that's just an incident I recall.

M: You would say then, at least in someone like yourself--a former Texas colleague--not going along with the President on all his pet programs doesn't result in political punishment?

B: Not at all. I've never had anything to suggest that I was being penalized for not going along with the President. I'd never expected to be a "fair-haired" boy, as we say, in the first place, and haven't been. But on a personal basis and personal friendship, I haven't detected any alienation of any sort.

M: You've been one, I think, at least on one occasion on the floor of the House--and perhaps other times as well--who has defended what is sometimes called the "conservative coalition." It was attacked, I think, by Representative Ford a few years ago.

B: Yes.

M: Did Mr. Johnson, as Senate Leader, operate in something that you might be willing to call a conservative coalition? Is that how he was effective as Senate Leader in your opinion?

B: No, not in that sense----Well, first let me say that this term, "the

coalition," as Minority Leader Gerald Ford used it in his speech in May of 1967 in Ohio was a distortion. After it was released I did arise to the floor to comment on it--to say the least. He left the impression that the more conservative Democrats get off in a corner some place or room in the back of the Capitol with the Republicans and talk about legislation. That isn't the nature of the coalition at all. It never has been. What we've done is form a group of the conservative Democrats, just like the Liberal Democratic Study Group--only they have a rather tight organization. The conservative group has never had any organization as such. I've been the chairman--I think it's better to say the coordinator. It's a little bit like the kid with the ball and bat. I happened to be Chairman of the House Administration Committee which had a Committee Room near the House Chamber. It's a place to meet. And that's really the only reason that I have acted as head of this group. We discuss issues--a particular issue that is coming up, and then to determine what our chances are: at amendments, or defeat, or passage--whatever the strategy, or whatever the consensus of the group may be. Then to try to find out how many votes we got. Well, the Republicans vote too. And so we'd have an emissary, perhaps, to go to a friendly Republican and say,

"Now, we think that we have 90 votes against or for something."

And say, "How many do you have? What do you think you'll do over here?" Maybe you'll get a report. And then you base your

actions on what appears to be the possible. That is the art of politics. You know they say the art of politics is the possible. Don't try the impossible.

M: Or you lose.

B: Or you lose. So that is really all that the coalition means insofar as the conservative is concerned. As I said, the Democratic Study Group--they have a rather strict organization and pay dues and have research and directors and that sort of thing. We've never had anything like that in this at all.

Now, back to the President's operation when he was Majority Leader. I think that it was largely on a personal basis. He has a very long arm, and when that is draped around your shoulders, he's a very persuasive man. He has logic; he has reason; and he'll give it to you. And there is no reason why you shouldn't listen. I like to listen. I listen to people with whom I disagree as well as those with whom I agree. And so in this, you can learn. And there just may come (a) time when his logic and reasoning were effective. Perhaps you didn't know all the angles involved, and from his standpoint he tried to tell you. I think it's as simple as that.

M: So, he has led more through personal leadership rather than some kind of institutional leadership?

B: That is correct. That's my impression, to say the least. And that's my observation.

M: While he was Senate Leader, too, do you think that he had to be particularly careful because of the influence of Texas politics? Do you think Texas politics determined his course of action importantly as Senate Leader?

B: No, not as Senate Leader. I don't think so much. Naturally, any man is going to look to his own political situation back home. But I think his leadership was usually compatible with his politics in Texas.

M: He didn't have to worry too much then about the lobbying groups for Texas?

B: No, I don't think so. By that time, I think the President was rather institutionalized, let's say, in Texas. He still is.

M: That's a good way to be.

B: Yes, indeed. He becomes an institution, and people who may not agree with his stand on specific issues or perhaps his philosophy generally furnishes a great personal following in a great many people who admire him for his ability, his great energy, and his dedication to leadership.

M: How did you react when you heard that he had decided to join John F. Kennedy as Vice-Presidential nominee in 1960?

B: Well, unlike some, I was rather happy with it. Because, and perhaps there's a little selfishness here, I supported that ticket; I supported it in my district with what ability I had and did so with enthusiasm. I was glad to see him do it; I know that some thought that he shouldn't have accepted it.

I think today the Democrats won in 1960 by Mr. Johnson's being the Vice-Presidential nominee.

M: You mean that they carried states they would not have otherwise carried?

B: I think very definitely, and I do not believe that Kennedy could have won with any other Vice-President.

M: Does that apply to Texas in your opinion?

B: Oh, I think it applies to the whole country. But I think it applied to Texas.

M: To Texas, particularly?

B: To many other states as well.

M: After the assassination, did you personally talk to Mr. Johnson in the first several days after he became President of the United States?

B: Yes, I don't recall just how many days it was, but I recall twice I was in a small group with him. One time he came up to the Capitol--shortly, maybe a week afterwards, or ten days--and I observed him as being--my impression then--as a man with a tremendous weight on his shoulder and a seriousness which I'd never observed. Of course it was serious times. He was always a rather serious man, I think, by nature. But great involvement in political affairs tends to make a man serious. I observed a man who seemingly had this tremendous responsibility and almost a loneliness about him. And with the attitude that he must pick up the reins and drive and soon and right then. He couldn't wait. And he, I think, sought advice

and sought comfort at least from his friends and asked for their understanding.

M: Did he continue to come down here to, say, the regular Texas caucus, or things like that, after he was President?

B: Our Texas delegation meets each Wednesday for lunch together. One Wednesday we have guests and the other Wednesday we usually have just the delegation. A number of times in that early period, more often than he did later, because as time went on he was so busy it was very difficult for him to do it.

M: But he did maintain close relations with the Texas delegation?

B: Yes, yes, he always has.

M: How did he get all the legislation passed in early 1964 and all the Great Society Programs? The flood of legislation? How did he manage that?

B: Well, I think two things. One I just mentioned. I think that a great many people had a great sympathy for him because it had been thrust on him. And then his, of course, more important I am sure--his persuasiveness again--his modus operandi.

M: Did he still operate personally?

B: Very personally, yes. I think that he did both House and Senate, and he always had time to see anyone who had a problem. Of course, you always had time to see him when he wanted to see you. He worked long hours at these things in which he was so interested, and in a very personal sort of way, too.

M: Could Kennedy have passed all those things in your opinion?

B: I'm not sure. He was a man of great respect, too. He had a way of calling legislators down to the White House and having private or small group chats that were very influencing. You had a feeling, "Well, gee, I don't know. I don't agree with him, but I would like to help him."

M: You're talking about Kennedy?

B: I'm talking about President Kennedy. I knew him very well too. We came to the House together, as a matter of fact. And so did Mr. Nixon incidentally.

M: That was a big year for freshmen, wasn't it?

B: That was a big year. That's right. I knew Jack Kennedy better after he was in the Senate and President than I knew him in the House, because he was away a great deal because of health after he was in the House. He had had malaria and his back injury. He had to recuperate a great deal, because he hadn't been out of the Navy for very long. Like all the rest of us, who had just come out of the service, he was not in too good a shape. But back to his personality, he was radically different than President Johnson. But I think both men had a way of drawing people to them and with a great deal of sympathy for the job, and of course, a man who has been around here for very long has a great sympathy for that job regardless of who's in there. And with the feeling of "Well, gee, it's a killing job, and don't oppose or throw road blocks just to be in opposition

or to throw blocks." You want to help. But of course when it comes down to basic principles and philosophies, then you take your own road. That's the only thing to do.

M: Do you think that Kennedy's staff that Mr. Johnson kept after he became President were influential in determining the direction of his programs?

B: Generally they may have been. I'm not qualified to say. His top advisory people perhaps did have some influence. I'm sure some, but of the degree I'm not qualified to say.

M: Do you think they were loyal to Mr. Johnson?

B: I think by and large, yes. There may have been exceptions, but I think by and large probably they were. They may not have operated in the same, although they both operated in a very personal way.

M: The standard historical or current events type of material written about President Johnson generally pictures him as being considerably inconsistent between his Congressional days and his Presidential days, as far as governmental philosophy is concerned. Do you think that's true?

B: Well, I think that there would be differences. Not radically so. But I would point out that when he was in the Senate or when he was in the House, and particularly before he was Majority Leader, he was representing a Congressional district in the House, he was representing a state when he was in the Senate. When he became Majority Leader, I think his attitude by necessity must have expanded to recognize conditions all over the country; then particularly when he

becomes President of the United States he is representing all the people of all the States, and therefore his understanding, his application of what he does, by necessity must expand.

M: The constituency determines it?

B: This is true. So it's no mystery that he might have been--since he has been President and for the lack of a better word, more liberal in the sense that we use it because that was the trend. After all, he's President of all the people.

M: Why did he lose the so-called consensus that he was so proud of in his first year or so in the Presidency?

B: Well, that is somewhat mystifying; perhaps he moved so rapidly when he did take over the reins. No one had any doubt after a short period of time, after the assassination of President Kennedy, who was President of the United States. Lyndon Johnson was President of the United States, and that was for sure and no doubt. So he moved real fast, and just personally, I think too fast with the Congress helping him. I didn't always support a lot of it, but it was enacted by the Congress under his driving leadership. And when I say driving, I don't mean that the least disparagingly or critically. That is the man. Furnishing strong leadership. We've seen these periods--these personalities in history--of a strong executive, a weaker Congress, a strong judiciary. One of the three branches. We've seen it in history, the effect of one strong part of one-third of this government over the other two. Here is a strong President. And Congress with such a vast sea of legislative business was inclined

to go along with much he advocated. And here again, I'm not disparaging this kind of leadership. I think, looking at it objectively, it's to be greatly admired. Again, to repeat, much of it I did not and have not supported. But looking at it as a mechanism, it's rather astounding. Then after a period of time, I think, at this high speed, much accomplished from the President's standpoint and the standpoint of those who subscribed to these many programs--it has been nothing short of phenomenal--and finally, some of this sort of running out, or when you begin implementing--implementation of programs is less dramatic than the enactment, it commands less attention. There's nothing sensational about it, and I think there's a letdown, and perhaps there comes the President's lessening of popularity. And then, too, of course, the--I think some use it as an excuse, maybe--the Vietnam War. You see, he'd had his ups and downs in popularity, as everyone is aware. But it seems to me that it's unjustified. It suggests a fickleness to me that shouldn't occur.

M: Do you think the press image which has sometimes been not very favorable to the President has been important in lessening his popularity?

B: I think it has been a factor.

M: Do you think the press has treated him unfairly?

B: I think at times it has, and I think at times--I don't know that the President is blameless--maybe he has not always treated the press

in the most fair way. Although I know of no specifics. But I know that some press people have thought they were sort of being put on at times by the President. That he was putting on an act for them. I've heard that. I don't know. But I think that in the context of some of the things that he has said and done that the press has not always been the most favorable to him.

M: Why do you think he decided not to run?

B: Well, I think probably he was tired. It would be my guess--this is something I don't know--but I think Mrs. Johnson may have had a great influence in that decision. I think that Mrs. Johnson was probably hungry for a more quiet life, a closer family life, and that she was fearful that this was going to kill him. I think that he was pretty tired. I don't think he was afraid to run, really. Knowing him as a man, I just don't believe that Lyndon Johnson was afraid to run for reelection.

M: You were surprised, then?

B: Oh, yes, yes.

M: Like all the rest of us.

B: I was greatly surprised except that I did have a little bit of awareness of Mrs. Johnson's feelings.

M: Let's shift over, Congressman, to another subject. In regard to your career in the House of Representatives, the operation primarily of the Foreign Affairs Committee on which you have served from the beginning or shortly after you got here?

B: Since 1950.

M: During the 1950's while you were on the Committee and when he was leader of the Senate, do you recall President Johnson--then Senator Johnson--playing any major role in foreign affairs while Mr. Eisenhower was President?

B: No, except he cooperated with President Eisenhower I think very closely in his foreign affairs, and moved his programs through the Senate. I don't know that he was formulative with President Eisenhower--in foreign policy. But of course, like everything else, he played a prominent role in the passage of foreign policy legislation.

M: Do you recall his taking any specific stand very strongly on any particular issues like Indo-China, for instance?

B: Well, not specifically, I don't recall. Again, the only thing I was aware of then and now was his working with the Secretary of State and the President in their foreign policy matters and getting them enacted.

M: What about when he was Vice-President? Did he take any special responsibilities to your knowledge in foreign affairs while he was Vice-President with Mr. Kennedy?

B: I'm not aware, at least in specifics, enough to really know. Here again, I think that he was a great Vice-President in cooperating with President Kennedy in his foreign policy matters. He played a very great influence in the implementation of the politics enunciated by then President Kennedy.

M: Since he has been President, do you feel that Mr. Johnson has adequately briefed the House Foreign Affairs Committee, for example, on the various international problems which have arisen since that time?

B: I think rather thoroughly. Any time any individual--of course, there were times when you just can't run down and go through the gate and talk to the President any time that maybe you'd have the impulse or inclination--but the President's door was always open to discussion of these matters when they were specific or general. And then if it was not by the initiative of the Foreign Affairs Committee or Foreign Relations Committee, he had us down there quite often in briefings, not only from him, but from the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of the Treasury, and top people all over. You had opportunity to ask all the questions you wanted. And I think that it was an open discussion at any time.

M: His critics have said from time to time that those briefings were more in the nature of advising the Congressmen what was going to be done rather than consulting with them about what should be done. Was that your impression?

B: It was considerable of both. Most of the time was necessarily taken up in proposals or the explanation of something that was to be done, or to be recommended, or something that had been done, already enacted, but a briefing on what had been accomplished and

so forth. Quite often and thoroughly, I think; and then, as I said, you were free to ask any questions. Maybe you didn't have a long personal discussion; that would usually be impossible by the time element. But you had a free hand always in expounding your own views and opinions or asking additional questions.

M: How have his briefings on foreign affairs compared to similar briefings conducted by other Presidents under whom you have worked? Mr. Eisenhower and Mr. Kennedy?

B: Well, I think they were more often and more thorough under President Johnson than any Administration that I've been in. Although, as I say, in both foreign and domestic matters, President Kennedy seemingly always was receptive to ideas, and he would give you his very considerately. Being in the minority and not in the position of being a senior member on the Committee, or Chairman of the Committee in the Eisenhower Administration, I didn't have too much opportunity, although I think that here again, generally those in that position had that opportunity. I'm not qualified to say how thorough. But I know under those two Administrations, it was quite expansive.

M: Have you personally been involved in any of the, what you might call, I suppose, "crisis" briefings, during the Johnson Presidency? Such as the attack on our vessels on the Gulf of Tonkin?

B: Well, yes, we had several briefings on that.

M: Was this prior to the introduction of the Resolution that you were briefed?

B: I don't recall. I know that there was one briefing with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which handled this particular matter first. At that time the Foreign Relations Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, the Armed Services of both bodies, and Appropriations Committee, that is, Military Appropriations Subcommittee members--I think we were all there on that.

M: Do you recall a great deal, or even <u>any</u>, opposition to Mr. Johnson's course of action that occurred in the briefings?

B: I do not recall a dissident voice in that discussion.

M: What about when the bombing in the North started after the attack on Pleiku in early 1965? Is this another instance where extensive briefings took place prior to the commitment?

B: I don't recall whether prior or subsequent to. But I think, insofar as my <u>own</u> briefing and appearance at the White House, it was subsequent to it.

M: What about during the Dominican Republic crisis?

B: Here again, there was a prior briefing--a series of briefings prior to the action in the Dominican Republic. We were kept very well informed on that situation.

M: Again, were there opponents--vocal opponents--in the briefings?

B: I don't recall that there was a vocal opponent in that at all. There were questions and some statements of misgivings in some respects, but I don't recall an out-and-out hard position of opposition.

M: This is a little bit difficult, I appreciate, but I think it is important for someone who has been close to the situation. How would you estimate Mr. Johnson's position on Vietnam?

B: Why, I have been a right down the line supporter of his position on Vietnam. Now, I have differed in this regard. I'm not always the most patient with the terms "dove" and "hawk."

It's greatly over-simplified, and I have felt strongly, and have for two years last April, that we should have used a greater military activity against North Vietnam than we have. Mr. Johnson didn't get us in Vietnam. It was a situation which evolved as you well know and as everyone well knows. I think he simply met the exigencies of the situation, doing that which had to be done. It is one thing to be there; it's another as to how to get out. I have felt and continue to feel that we're not negotiating in Paris, for instance, from a strength and a determination that we're going to do that which it takes to win this thing militarily, if we have to. Of course, no one wants to devastate anybody's country. I would not like to see us have to devastate North Vietnam; we'd probably go in there with our taxpayer's money and rebuild it if we did. That's one thing. After all, they're human beings just like people everywhere. Our own and other places. And many of them doubtless are hardly aware of what this is all about. So, when you just say that you're for broad-scaled devastation in the country, you're talking, of course, about women and children. But you can also talk about the devastation in an invaded people of

South Vietnam. Here again women and children are the victims by and large of that action. But we are there. We have over 500,000 men there, and I have felt deeply that if we didn't do everything within our power, short of using nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, we were not protecting every kid out there in the rice paddies and jungles. So that's my only difference with President Johnson's view. He does have a broad responsibility. He has cumulative knowledge that perhaps only a President can have. But to prolong this thing in these talks--they're not very much of a dialogue either, in Paris--by not doing that which we could do, to let those talks go on indeterminately without taking the action against the Communists in North Vietnam which we're capable of taking, I just don't have that much patience. Again, I can't say that I want to give an ultimatum, but I think that we've got to put a limit. I think if we sit there with our negotiators in Paris negotiating nothing and permit the North Vietnamese to infiltrate more material and men into South Vietnam, we're going to vitiate a lot of what we have accomplished. Because I think the North Vietnamese were really hurting at the time we stopped 90% of the bombing. And now to go along with the so-called "doves," again, I don't like the term but we're using it for lack of a better one in common usage, to stop all the bombing--I just think that we're capitulating when we do it.

M: Do you think Mr. Johnson has listened to both sides of the argument?

B: I think he has. There's no doubt that he has.

M: Do you think that one side has been a great deal more influential in shaping his opinion than the other?

B: Well, I think he has his own opinions, but there's no question, I think, that he has listened to the arguments on both sides. And the side encouraging the cessation of all bombing and bringing our activity to a minimum at this particular period has been much more vocal, and in volume, than those who feel as I do about it. The President has felt that we've got to keep the pressure on some place. Again it's a matter of degree. I would put on greater pressure, but perhaps the President is right. I don't think so--my feeling about it--but nevertheless, I repeat that I think the pressures for a complete cessation of the bombing and to let down other activities in the defense of South Vietnam have been much greater than the other side.

M: A lot of those pressures have come from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee?

B: That is true.

M: Do you think for this reason that the House Foreign Affairs Committee under Mr. Johnson has played a more important role than it might otherwise have played or than it might have historically played?

B: The House side of the Capitol, and the Foreign Affairs Committee particularly, has more strongly supported the President's position than the Senate.

M: Has he then perhaps gone to them first or favored the House side in some way?

B: No I don't know that that has been noticeable or appreciable. I'm sure as an individual that the President might have a greater appreciation of the House side of the Capitol than the Senate.

M: Has there been a peace bloc, if you don't want to use the term dove, a faction in the House Foreign Affairs Committee?

B: There are those individuals, I don't know whether you could call it a faction or not, but there are those individuals who see on that side. But they're in the minority.

M: Have they been vocal in a private way trying to change the general support that has come from the House Committee?

B: Not as great as in the Senate. And not as great as in the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate.

M: I see. Would you care to name some of these people who might be on that side of the argument in the House Foreign Affairs Committee?

B: Well, I think probably, by and large, it's the Republicans who have been more vocal, led by Representative Morse of Massachusetts. (Rep. F. Bradford Morse, R-Mass.) I believe he has probably been the most vocal one on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

M: It's been Democrats in the Senate more frequently.

B: Well, that is true, but on the House side the opposition to the President's policy in Vietnam has been greater among the Republicans.

M: On foreign aid, which is a big topic and one, I believe, that you have been particularly interested in and played a considerable part in from time to time, do you think President Johnson has established a consistent position on foreign aid?

B: Yes, I think so.

M: How would you describe that position?

B: Well, his economic and military assistance program has been developed over the years, but I think it has been pretty much along the line of previous Administrations.

M: No sharp change between say the Kennedy Administration and the Johnson Administration?

B: With maybe changes in emphasis in certain areas. For instance, The Food for Peace has developed more under the Kennedy-Johnson Administration than prior. This was using our surplus in our foreign affairs policy. It has become a rather important part of our diplomacy.

M: What about the Alliance for Progress program? Has it differed markedly under Johnson from what it started out under Kennedy?

B: Here again in perhaps the emphasis. But in the President's visits to Latin America, I think that he has taken some new approaches and those approaches have been largely an expansion on what the Kennedy program was. Nothing radically new, but with again a different emphasis.

M: What about the general situation with regard to the Alliance in Europe? And Mr. Johnson's program for Eastern Europe, which he likes to call building bridges? Congress hasn't always gone along with this--such as the East-West Trade Bill. I think it is now being held up by the Ways and Means Committee. Has Mr. Johnson made a great effort with Congress to promote this type of building bridges legislation?

B: There has been a modest and moderate approach to it. I think he feels strongly that we must have some sort of detente with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. And I think he feels that this is the foundation of that sort of relationship. I think he envisages a Europe with greater stability in both East and West than we've had since World War II, and that by these contacts--by trade and by cultural contacts; by trade intercourse being one of the generators of confidence and willingness to recognize that each of us exists and that neither we nor they can live in a peaceful world with economic disadvantages to either. Now, there's a great deal of emotion involved in this kind of thing, and if it had not been for Vietnam, I think it would have been accepted a great deal more. Or put it the other way--with greater enthusiasm than it is now, because the enthusiasm is not high.

M: Have you generally approved of this approach?

B: I haven't approved in the sense of advocating such a move until we can see more light in Vietnam, because we've felt that Russia could exercise an influence with Hanoi that it hasn't exercised. As a matter of better faith than is being exercised at the time in that they are supplying Vietnam with their sophisticated weapons that they couldn't even get from China or perhaps Czechoslovakia; that they are not showing the sort of consideration that would be conducive to a relationship in trade intercourse.

M: So, your position has been more that now is not the right time rather than that you're against it?

B: That's true. Ideally, I think that we've got to recognize that we're all living in one world.

M: This is the hardest question on foreign affairs there is. Do you think that Mr. Johnson really makes the foreign policy decisions, as opposed to a sort of automatic nature of things happening. Does the Presidency now really make the decisions like these?

B: Yes, I think he does if you would include the Secretary of State, Mr. Rusk, in the Presidency. Certainly my impression is, he has a great faith and confidence in Mr. Rusk. And here Mr. Rusk has agreed with his policy in Vietnam. I think he agrees with his foreign policy every place, but likewise I think the President agrees with him and recognizes him as a dependable man and has great high respect for his opinions. I think he has a great influence on the President.

M: You think he then is the most important advisor in foreign affairs?

B: Yes.

M: Who else would be important in your opinion in that field particularly?

B: Well, in matters of defense, I'm sure that Mr. Johnson had a great confidence in Mr. McNamara. I'm sure he has a great confidence now in Mr. Clifford. And I'm certain in matters of economics and trade, he has had confidence in his Secretary of Commerce and to get down to names and personalities, I think he has had some men

around him at the White House, Mr. Califano, and others, who, I think, in matters of economics, has had a great influence. I think he draws on all of these men, their expertise, and that he makes up his own mind, finally, with the collective information he receives from them.

M: In regard to your chairmanship of the House Administration Committee, Mr. Johnson has been noted for attempting to increase efficiency in government. Has he had any particular relationship with that Committee that would give you some insight into how he works in this particular area?

B: I can give you an example. Mr. Johnson has felt as many recognize, if not most everyone, that there is a need, for instance, in the election reforms. This came under the jurisdiction of the House Administration Committee. The Committee passed out a Bill, and that Bill is before the Rules Committee. We haven't received a Rule on it; it has opposition from both conservatives and liberals, and both Democrats and Republicans--for different reasons. So it is not a simple thing because change comes slowly, and with the varied conditions in every part of the country it's most difficult to get something which they feel fits each situation or each area. I think everyone recognizes that we need some reforms in elections. Well, as I said, I use this as an example and the President is very interested in it.

M: You mean he has shown specific interest in this type of thing?

B: Yes. We have discussed it a great many times. They kept very close to the bill while it was in the Committee.

M: This gets down to your subjective opinions--but that's what is important for many of the questions that will be asked now--how would you evaluate Mr. Johnson's Presidency? You've seen what--four Presidents since you have been in Congress?

B: Yes.

M: Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson.

B: That's correct. I think the first thing may be trite to say: that Mr. Johnson is a great leader. Compared to the other Presidents under whom I have served, there's not a great deal of comparison in many ways. I think maybe with Mr. Kennedy it would be a better one. But personalities differ so it's just like we may have the same goals and the same intent, but the method of doing it can vary, as a matter of fact, be radically different.

Mr. Johnson, I think, has kept things more on a personal basis. As I said earlier, his unbounded energy and his dedication and devotion and great strength, both physical and otherwise; of character. He's unlike any President I have ever known. He has kept it on a personal basis, perhaps to greater extent than he should have. This characteristic may cause the ups and downs in popularity he has had. He has been, I think, slow to delegate full authority--maybe shouldn't, I don't know. On the other hand the job is such a tremendous one that, unlike Mr. Eisenhower, he delegated less authority. Whether this is good or bad, I'm not passing judgment.

As I say, here's two different operations entirely, and I think Mr. Johnson's background would cause him to do that as well as his nature.

M: Could you note any, I don't know whether you want to call them, weaknesses. What would you characterize as his chief handicaps in the Presidency, or weaknesses?

B: Well, here again, it is that of one individual judging another. It's real difficult to do even when you may think you know the inside of a man, what his thinking may be, and I'm not too sure that I could pick out any specific weakness. It may be just this thing that we're talking about. Perhaps he has tried to do too much; he has tried to keep too many things under his thumb. And not delegate authority and responsibility. Quite a few people feel that way. They feel that he is too dominant in personality and otherwise. But this is his nature. This, I think, is the way he has always operated.

M: Which is also his strength as well as his weakness.

B: His strength, I think definitely so, if you put it on a scale, how it would balance out; but at the same time this sort of operation may make him more vulnerable to these ups and downs in popularity than otherwise he would be.

M: The polls all say the the Democratic Party is not in too favorable a position right now. Do you think that you could make some comments on the effect that Johnson's Presidency might have on the Democratic Party?

B: I think Mr. Johnson has a place in the Democratic Party that will remain most prominent and high. I'm not one who thinks that the present Democratic nominee running for President (Hubert H. Humphrey) is handicapped by the President of the United States. Now, how much of the candidate, Mr. Humphrey, has called upon the President for his support, I'm not in a position to know. It's a matter of strategy. I would have an idea that the President would have the feeling that he would want to be called upon, and I don't know how much he has been called upon, to throw his support fully into this campaign. Perhaps he has not been asked.

M: One final thing. You've been extremely cooperative in the middle of a busy day, and I really appreciate it. Is there anything further that I haven't touched on that you think might be of importance to future scholars that you would like to add? Just kind of an open-ended climax here, anything that you might like to say?

B: I can't think of anything further in appraisal of the President as an individual and as President of the United States. In a personal way I know there are some people who think the President doesn't have a great sense of humor, for instance. I think he does. He doesn't have the opportunity to exercise a sense of humor as much perhaps as the rest of us have. He's preoccupied with great problems; he has always been a man preoccupied; he was ever so since I have known him because the political life was his very life. That seemed to come about first of everything, after perhaps his church and his

family. I think he has a rather keen sense of humor. I know we've been on fishing trips together. Particularly during the days of Mr. Rayburn. We'd go fishing down on Chesapeake Bay, and we'd have a grand time. There were politics talked, of course, on those occasions. You just didn't get away from it. A lot of times Mr. Rayburn would reminisce on the old political days--always very interesting. A man with a great store of knowledge and a keen memory even up to shortly before his death.

I recall the last time we were down fishing, we always had this little game as to who caught the first fish, the biggest fish, and the most fish. I think that's normal among fishermen. And this particular time, it so happened that President Johnson --then was Senator Johnson--did catch the first fish and the most fish. Someone else caught the largest fish. But back at out fishing shack, while we were cooking fish and hush puppies and sitting around, as we say, shooting the breeze, Mr. Johnson just remarked for Mr. Rayburn's benefit, "Well, you either have it or you don't." Well Mr. Rayburn didn't like anyone who could out-fish him. So in an aside, Mr. Rayburn says, "Why, the fellow didn't know whether to throw in the pole and hold the string, or throw in the string and hold the pole." And of course that was exactly what the President--or what the then Senator Johnson--was angling for, a needle from Mr. Rayburn. And he was adept at needling. And so is the President when you're in that sort of a situation. I think he has a keen sense of humor.

I don't think it's complimentary to the man to say he doesn't have a sense of humor. Because one is constantly involved in the affairs to which they are dedicated and deeply interested doesn't mean they don't have time for some little things--important things in a personal sort of way.

M: Thank you for your time.

B: You're very welcome. I appreciate it.

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By Omar Burleson

to the

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