INTERVIEW IV

DATE: April 24, 1981

INTERVIEWEE: DOUGLASS CATER

INTERVIEWER: Clarence Lasby

PLACE: The LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

L: Let me identify this tape first. It's the second [fourth] interview with Douglass Cater, on April 24, 1981, at an office in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and our focus will be on health legislation and activities during the Johnson Administration. Perhaps we could start with the President's health. Let me preface it by saying this: I read just this morning an article that the late Michael Halberstam wrote in ***Esquire*** called "The Coronary Culture." He argues that the fear of a heart attack in our society is so profound that there are many people who draw back from life because of that. But then he says this: "For others, such as Lyndon Johnson, a heart attack means only a step-up in their already hectic lives." I wondered if the President showed any sensitivity to the heart attack he had had in 1955. Was there any--?

C: Yes. You know, that's an interesting observation that Halberstam makes because it's--I myself had open heart surgery three years ago to correct a mitral valve. I did not have a heart attack; when I was a child I had rheumatic fever, which left a faulty valve that began to deteriorate in its efficiency, and it was an elective surgery. Since then I have discovered that there is a certain unevenness about one's attitude toward energy, one's own energy. There are some periods that you feel supercharged and there are other periods that you feel really depleted, and you don't know how much of it is physiological and how much psychological, especially when you are doing intellectual labors that require the discipline of writing. Sometimes you wonder if [it's] all in the brain, that it's not in the heart at all.

On Johnson, I came to call on him--it was one of the first times that I really got to know him--when he was recuperating from his heart attack down on the Ranch. A story had appeared in the ***New York Times*** that he was at work building a southern conservative coalition with which he hoped to come back and run Washington, and I came down as a political writer for the ***Reporter*** magazine to ask him if that story was true. It led to a story that he liked, interpreting Johnson and his attitude toward national politics. But I remember then his commenting that there were days when his heart felt like lead; he was stressing then that he did not have personal political ambitions, that he did want to go back, but he was not trying to build some sort of coalition with which to run the nation.

Then this occurred again in 1960 at the opening of the Congress. I happened to run into him in the hallway outside of his office. He invited me in, and this was the period when Washington was abuzz with the possibility that he might jump in the race. I believe [John F.] Kennedy and [Hubert] Humphrey were already declared at that period. If they weren't declared, it was certainly known that they were candidates. In response to a query from me, he went to unusual lengths to marshal the reasons why he had no burning passion to be president. One of them was that he said, "I am a legislative man. My father before me was one. I don't know whether I would be good in the executive." And he was unusually candid. But the second one he said, "There are times when my heart"--and he put his hand over his heart--"feels like lead. It's as if it's pushing down." I left that room convinced that he really didn't have a strong hankering other than the knowledge that he had been doing the best political job in Washington of any of those aspiring for the office and that there were others who were pushing him and that he was the logical candidate. Even Kennedy said to me in private that the only person he felt that the man clearly qualified--if quality alone counted--to be president was Johnson. So the health thing came up again then.

He did not mention during his White House years, in my presence, the fear that his heart might suddenly give out on him, although I believe after he had announced the decision [not to run again]--I can't be absolutely clear on this--that he made allusions to health as being a factor that had caused him to weigh pulling out long before the Vietnam thing had sort of brought that to a head. And indeed we know from various evidence, including rather broad hints he gave to members of his staff, that he was thinking from time to time that he might not stand for another term. We didn't take it seriously, and there was counter evidence, people being consulted about the race and all that, so I don't know anybody on the White House staff proper who can say that he had a clear knowledge that Johnson wasn't going to run. But in retrospect, I was asking the other day if there had been an autopsy and what it showed about his heart, and I gather there was, and it showed that his heart was such that no regimen would have extended his life expectancy.

L: I see.

C: It's surprising to me the degree of sustained emotional and physical energy that he expended during those five years in the White House, where you really can't goof off without somebody knowing it. I mean, when you're vice president or when you're senator, you can take periods of hibernation. When you're president, your daily presence is noted.

L: Yes. I found a good deal of material on President Eisenhower after his heart attack, and he was very sensitive about things like cholesterol, he never smoked again, he watched the fat in his diet. Did President Johnson ever give any indication that he was paying attention to a regimen of that sort? For example, smoking. The official letters that went out to people who wrote in concerned about the President said that he stopped smoking in 1955, but I saw a report somewhere that occasionally he would continue to smoke.

C: I don't remember his ever smoking again, certainly not in my presence. And it was interesting because he could be demanding on other things, but he did not object to other people smoking in his presence. But I don't remember his ever lighting up a cigarette during the White House years.

He was always consuming diet drinks. He was always fighting his weight problem. One could see him at a mealtime lose a momentary battle when some particular dish like rice pudding just struck his fancy so that he had to have a large second helping in spite of murmurs of disapproval from Mrs. Johnson. He did not--I couldn't swear it, but in all those years after his heart attack, if he drank liquor at all, he drank very watered-down drinks in which there was just a tremendous amount [of soda]. But more often than not, as I remember it--and I need to be corrected because I wasn't sitting around taking notes on what I think he was [drinking]--even at parties, he was drinking this various diet stuff, and the rest of us again--he had no objection to other people drinking in his presence. He didn't inflict his regimen on us.

L: Did any of you ever worry about the stress and the pressure and how hard he was pushing in light of the fact that he had had a heart attack earlier? I suspect this was simply not something that you would think about or talk about, at least.

C: No, I don't remember ever having a conversation with a colleague in the White House or with my wife to the effect that I think the President is on the physical edge or that he may have a breakdown. He himself kept stressing--he was always positive about the virtues of the White House--that since he lived and worked in the same establishment he could go get in his pajamas and take a nap after lunch, which he did fairly faithfully, so that he had two work days. And it's true that a president does set--people come to him, he sets his schedule. It can be changed at short notice. So that, I guess if you look at it historically, not too many people have died of overwork in the White House. In fact, it seems to--the presidency, except for a few people like Woodrow Wilson and I guess Harding died of something. We don't--

L: [We] don't know for sure yet.

C: We don't know for sure. But for most presidents, they not only have enjoyed good health in the White House, but they have enjoyed it after they left the White House. I guess Johnson is one of the--

L: One of the exceptions.

C: --one of the exceptions on that latter rule. But there again, I think the evidence shows that his heart had really sustained a lot of damage.

L: Yes. Well, maybe we could turn now to another topic I had, the administration and what has been called the health syndicate, the noble conspiracy, the benevolent plotters, at the center of which was Mary Lasker. I noticed that among the first memos to President

Johnson that you wrote as a health adviser--this was in February of 1965--you wrote a note to the effect that you would be happy to meet with Mary Lasker. It appears to me that you were closer and more involved probably than anybody in the administration with Mary Lasker and Mike Gorman, and I wondered had you been briefed, when you began to take over health activities, by Myer Feldman about Mary Lasker's interests, or were you aware when you came in to work in health about her contributions? In other words, did you perceive of her as a leader of a group who had a forceful interest at that time?

C: I can't remember with any precision how fast my knowledge of her role developed. I am sure Mike Feldman must have mentioned it to me, although I don't remember that he gave me an elaborate debriefing as he left, and I sort of picked up that particular portfolio. In fact, Horace Busby had handled the health message of 1965, and I had worked on the education message, so that for the time Busby was there--I have forgotten exactly when he left the White House--I moved in on that health portfolio--this says February, I don't know, February, 1965. I don't quite remember what prompted me to write the President that memo other than that the President had asked me to watch his schedule and that anything that I wanted to sit in on, just to let him know. He had sort of given me an open sesame to do that, and for some reason or other, I decided that--well, I guess health and education both fell in the same territory.

Now, his relations with Mrs. Lasker were interesting to me in the role I played. I noticed in effective operators on the Washington scene that they try to establish direct relations with the president, but they realize that they can't overuse the direct line too much and so they want fall-back resources, too. Mary was not interested in me because of the color of my eyes. She found that it was useful to have someone who she could use as a communication channel. I encouraged her. I found that her interests were wide and, from my point of view, good, that the President had a high admiration for her.

My own interest in health, aside from my personal experience, had been that Mr. [Lister] Hill was my senator, coming from Alabama, and that Hill, of course, was known as Mr. Health on the Hill for many years, so that gradually they kind of developed a little bit of a coalition-building in which these things happened.

In regard to Mary Lasker, she would sometimes pass him [Johnson] ideas. I remember the idea of going out to NIH and evaluating the progress they were making toward applying research to useful things--

L: Exactly.

C: --she gave that to him as he was--it may have been at lunch or seeing him--she gave it as a formal little aide-memoir, and he was coming in to give a statement in the Cabinet Room, as I remember it. It could have been in the East Room. He just pulled it out of his pocket and added it to the remarks he was making, so that in a sense he kind of set the policy that way, and he loved to do that. He rebelled against the idea that he was a creature or a creation of his staff and that unless we had vetted an idea that he didn't have the

independent good sense to see whether he thought it was a good idea himself. He didn't do this promiscuously and he very seldom got into trouble by speaking off the cuff. In fact, I can't recall any major instances when Johnson misspoke himself and we had to go through all the elaborate effort to redefine what the President had meant. This happened on occasion with Truman. It happened with Eisenhower, but I don't remember it happening with Kennedy, and it didn't happen with Johnson. There were only two times that I think that he conveyed impressions that stand in my memory that were not intended or were carried further than intended, [and one] was when he talked about nervous Nellies in connection with the Vietnam War.

L: Yes, I remember that.

C: His nose was rubbed in that from then on out because it conformed to a stereotype of a bellicose president. But on domestic policy he had a native shrewdness that knew how to be both daring and at the same time not taking political risks.

In relation to that NIH proposal, he did go out and call on them to serve as his personal counsel on setting the nation's health targets.

L: Yes, I think I found some notes where you had actually helped prepare some comments, and there was one sentence in there that "research is good, but results are better," which was a very appropriate point of view. I think many of the biomedical scientists were upset with that.

C: Well, yes, and I think you have a memo from John Gardner that evaluates some of the concerns. We didn't take it all that seriously, but a year later I suggested to the President that he make a return visit and that he listen to their reports, and then we had drafted the statement that--and I hope my memory isn't playing a trick--what was it, the year later that he called it a billion-dollar success story?

L: That's right. Yes.

C: So that it was intended to offset the fears that he was being a hard-nosed accountant trying to say, "How many dollars worth of gains have you gotten from this dollar's worth of research?"

L: I wondered about that. There is a definite change between the first visit where he's saying, "I want you to try to speed up the results of research and get some practical results," which is very much what Mrs. Lasker had been saying for a long time, there is a change from that to the second visit where it is more praiseworthy. I wondered if that reflected more a political situation, that is that we do need to try to keep these scientists happy or quiet or show some understanding. Or was it a change in his philosophy, that is, did he really come to believe that research should have priority over an emphasis on results?

C: No, he was not--I think he had the kind of canny shrewdness that he was willing to carry it so far, but he wasn't prepared to sort of take Mary Lasker on his shoulders and lead her into battle. So when he got cautionary advice from somebody like John Gardner, he was prepared to downplay it a little bit; he didn't want to make it into a big crusade that seemed to be saying, "Applied research or nothing!" Mary was always pushing in these little areas of appointments and of directives and of things to--she had a respect for Dr. [James] Shannon, but he was approaching retirement, and I think she wanted to just keep the heat turned up on NIH, even though she had been a great friend and supporter of NIH, and she had special causes like the Eye Institute, which she would work away on. I always found that I was trying to look at it from the President's point of view and maintain a proper nexus not only with her but with HEW and with John Gardner. I think it would be interesting if you could get Wilbur Cohen on tape as to how they regarded Mary Lasker as a--

L: I hope to do that within the next--

C: Because they would never--and [it] wouldn't be in memos, and I don't even remember in oral discourse any kind of a derogatory attitude. On the other hand, they could be somewhat persistent, as they were in the business of the successor to Shannon, that they wanted to put their person ahead of her choices and Lister Hill's choices apparently. And I did not profess to be a professional expert on who was the most worthy in this field. I in general felt that when one had a secretary of a department that one had trust in, unless there were overriding reasons, you followed his advice ultimately even though you called attention, his attention, to the fact that others felt there were other candidates more worthy.

L: Was there a sense or the feeling that, however you worked with Mary Lasker and tried to soften relations or work it out between the two, that she always had the congressional power working as well that had been working so long in terms of budget and all at least that--?

C: Yes, but it never came to the kind of threats that I have heard going on in the more recent administrations in which a congressional chairman would say, "Unless I get my appointment as assistant secretary, I'm not going to get a dime out of here for you." We never, in my areas--oh, there may have been a couple of occasions when Adam Clayton Powell, who was really a Peck's bad boy in Congress, could call up Marvin Watson and try to do some sort of deal, really behind my back, because in dealing with me on education legislation, Powell was pretty straightforward and generally effective, but then I would discover he had called Marvin and bring up some need that he had. But he was the only one of them that I came across that was really unabashedly trying to make that kind of wheeling and dealing. For example, Wayne Morse, who was chairman of the subcommittee on education, I had very close and cooperative relations with him all during the period when he was leading the fight against the President on Vietnam, but he never mixed the two, and I didn't either.

L: Yes. Did you ever have occasion to work at all with Senator Hill or with Representative [John] Fogarty?

C: Yes.

L: So you would sometimes meet with them?

C: Yes.

L: I see. How would you characterize the two of them? I mean, obviously they were very important in their fields and all. Did you find one of them more intelligent, acute, up on his field than the other?

C: No. Let me think. I'd known Hill for so many years, and he always talked a more corn-pone role than he had. He was a very bright man. Coming from Alabama, he had had long ago to accommodate himself to the necessities of his constituency, and I think the reason he turned increasingly to health rather than to education was that it had less political risks attached to it in terms of the whole fight over desegregation. By the time I got to the White House, Hill, of course, was getting quite senior. He was still in good shape, but I don't remember his ever having some sort of burning issue or passion that he wanted the President to carry out. As these memos would indicate, he did on occasion join with Mary Lasker in some sort of request, but by and large our relations with him were quite easy and affable. I don't remember any time that they reached some sort of head. I do remember one occasion asking John Gardner if he would go with me to pay a call on Hill in order to conciliate him or get him to go along. Whether it was on this matter of the appointment of Shannon's successor, whether I wanted to head off any kind of crisis there, I can't remember what the subject of the call was. I do remember we made the call together and it was pleasant and agreeable, and whatever it was we wanted to avoid, we managed to avoid, but that's where the memory plays tricks. I can't remember why we called on him.

L: And John Fogarty, did you deal with him much at all? Or another one that is sort of a shadow figure in here is Mike Gorman. Was he ordinarily--did he deal fairly frequently with you?

C: Mainly only to--I don't remember his initiating anything. If we were having a health review meeting, we would invite him to be present, but in many cases he was sort of acting as subaltern or surrogate for Mary Lasker.

L: Exactly.

C: He seemed to be a bit shy in initiating himself into the picture. I don't remember his beating on the door at any particular time, but if he did, I didn't hear it. (Laughter)

L: You didn't hear it. (Laughter)

Are there any other thoughts you have on Mary Lasker or this relationship? Was the President fully aware of the struggle that had been going on with Mary Lasker and others as to whether the emphasis should be on fundamental research, as Shannon believed, or the primary emphasis on applying what we already knew? Did he ever think of it in that terms, or was it more of a political situation with him? That is, that Mary Lasker was a friend and someone whom he respected and he wanted to do as much as he could of the good things she proposed, but did he ever give an indication that he understood this fundamental difference that Shannon and Lasker had?

C: I recall nothing specific or certainly to the extent that he was willing to stir up any more troubles. He would read my memos, which attempted to deal with this, but I had no difficulty in that the second time he [Johnson] went out to persuade him [Shannon]--and I did it in memo form. For example, this memorandum to me from John Gardner on the scientific community reaction to the President's speech, I would make certain that the President saw that. You don't seem to have a memo indicating that I forwarded it to the President, but--

L: No, no.

C: --I'm sure I would have.

L: Yes.

C: The President--

L: Do you recall whether he had a sensitivity toward the scientific community? That is, it's been alleged that he was sometimes sensitive towards so-called northeastern intellectuals. Did he look upon scientists and doctors in that same sense?

C: No. No. He didn't feel the same kind of--he didn't regard them as--I think he regarded Harvard intellectuals as being a negative, not having the kind of expansive view, and also he had caught enough that he was sensitive to the fact that they were always comparing him with the Kennedys in style and all that. For example, this memo on the Eye Institute that Mary wanted, I personally pushed that with HEW and with the Budget Bureau, but I don't remember that the President ever--

L: Yes. I haven't been able to find anything where he gave an indication of where he wanted to come down.

C: He wanted to stay on top of the thing. The one instance in which he called me and razed me was when I proposed in that memo that we call for a long-term planning effort to set realistic health goals that could be achieved possibly within the decade. Do you remember that memo? It's in there.

L: Yes. In fact, we might want to move on to this area of health goals.

C: All right, if you want to.

L: But yes.

C: I do notice that--if we're still, though, on Mary Lasker--

L: No, that's wonderful.

C: The two things that might be noted: one is this response on a memo about whether he wanted to see her.

L: Yes.

C: "I want to avoid this if you can. I'll have to see her if she just has to, but I much prefer that she give me a memo."

L: I put that in there because the timing suggests that might have been with the Eye Institute. It fits in there with timing, but there's no indication as to what it was.

C: He was unpredictable as to whether he wanted to see people, so it might mean something, or it might mean nothing, that he just wasn't feeling--

L: It was just that he had other things to do or whatever? Yes.

C: Occasionally he would just show indications of being overwhelmed by all the pushing on him, and he would just want to push it away. In that case, it's interesting. He says, "I'll see her if she just *has* to." Well, how in the world would we measure that?

L: (Laughter) As I recall, I did find something, that she was persistent and did get in to see him. I believe I checked the Diary Back-up, and at least within the next week or two weeks, she did manage to get a brief meeting with him. It appears that when she had something on her mind, she pushed it as well as she could, but I was--

C: I gave a description of her, which was I think rather well-stated, when I gave the lecture that she asked me to [give at] the annual Mary Lasker Awards. The President, by the way, was very pleased with that lecture, which subsequently became a magazine article in the ***Reporter***.

L: Was that the one where you deal with [Arthur] Schlesinger?

C: Yes.

L: Yes, that was excellent.

C: Well, if you can find the speech--I think in the article we took out the part about Mary Lasker, but in that I described her role in sort of whimsical terms.

The other thing in this that might be worth noting is the memo in which I said that "Mary Lasker and Dr. DeBakey sought to see you but were switched by [Jack] Valenti to me." That's another occasion in which he apparently just guarded--you couldn't count on him, although generally, if you were having an activity, if you sent him a memo and said, "Mr. President, I'm gathering a small group in the Fish Room, and if you stuck your head in, it would certainly give it a boost," he would do that. He loved things in which he wasn't pinned down. But then you would have a hard time getting him to go once he arrived.

L: But there he didn't have to be pinned down to an issue per se or a schedule--

C: Or a problem--

L: Or a schedule.

C: No. No, it was more schedule, I think, than issue because a lot of these things, I think, he had already [approved], like the Heart, Cancer, Stroke Centers. Oh, well, now, wait a minute! This memo of December 21, 1965 relates to the Budget Bureau cut. Well, he didn't like to get caught in the middle on that sort of thing because he never regarded himself as having to be the item-by-item appeals judge on these cuts. He trusted his staff to bring to his attention where there were serious concerns expressed on a particular item that the Budget Bureau had had, but he respected the fact that the Budget Bureau had to bring in the whole budget within certain totals.

L: That's right. It may have been with regard to this budget or one later. I recall several letters he sent out. They went to Michael DeBakey and Dr. [James] Cain, who was an old family friend and a physician, and a copy to Mary Lasker and, I believe, to Fogarty, explaining that "We have to stick with this. I understand how strongly you feel about increased money, but we have to stick with this," which suggested that he would stand with his staff when he needed to.

Well, maybe we could move on to the health goals area, and there, I guess, the major question to begin with was that after Medicare was passed and after the Heart, Cancer, Stroke Commission and the legislation for the centers was in, did you have a sense that he was excited about any other particular health bills, or was it as passionate a feeling with regard to health as it was with education with him?

C: Yes, I think so, and he was certainly prepared right throughout to continue the development of a rational, total program in the health field although we never faced up to the final thing as to whether some form of national health insurance--unless my mind plays me tricks I don't remember that ever being [suggested]. Do you have evidence of that?

L: No, I've never seen any mention of that. It may be that Wilbur Cohen still had it alive in his mind, or I'm sure he did. But I never have seen that, all the way to the end, even suggested in terms of policy.

C: No, I think that--

L: But I was fascinated by your attempting to get him to think in terms of goals. "What are some practical goals we can set?" And then the difficulty of measuring progress. Was he sensitive to this kind of thing? I mean, was he amenable to--?

C: Well, when I sent that memo suggesting that we call on a--I said, "To set ambitious but realistic goals will require careful planning." I said that in a memo August 3 of 1965. Unless I am sadly mistaken it was the next morning that he called me en route out to NIH. I had not apparently focused on the fact--or had I? Well, I'm not sure whether this was the memo that triggered it or an earlier memo, but he wanted me to get with [Cohen and Lee]. He was actually on the helicopter en route when he reached me--I came in early in the morning, having sent the memo in the previous night--and he said he wanted to have three or four goals he could announce out at NIH. Well, that gave us about thirty minutes to do it, and I quickly got Wilbur Cohen and Phil Lee on the phone, and we stayed on the phone until we had come up with some that were plausible, and at the same time that could be sustained. It was stretching some, but at the same time they were not something we just made up. I've forgotten what they were. It would be worth checking at the time. I don't think the press gave that particular thing a big play. In fact, when he gave the speech, I think he didn't make a big to-do of that. And then--this is another way that memory fades--I don't remember, I think we went ahead with the HEW effort because I had cleared that memo with them before I sent it to him. You would have to check the record to see if we ever did come out with a set of specific health goals. Did we?

L: I haven't ever been able to find them. There are different proposals put forth, as after the health conference here, and many interesting things.

C: What was the date of the health conference?

L: Let's see. It would be--well, there was a health conference in 1965, White House Conference on Health. Apparently, I don't have any record of that here. No, here we are. This has a series of proposals that came out of that, which I found to be far-reaching in this sense that the Mary Lasker emphasis was primarily in the area of somehow finding a way to deal with diseases. But out of this White House conference, I just jotted down a number of the things that were proposed: consumer protection; accident prevention; environmental health; family planning; health promotion; preventive medicine. These seemed to me to be far-reaching for that point in time in terms of the way people were thinking of health. There was already the Medicare proposal of delivering health, but they seemed to be, to me, far-reaching and fit in with the concept that you express in these memos of dealing with goals.

C: Yes. Well, I think we did continue to work on how do you set up that. It led--I think it was the speech, the State of the Union, [in] which this one was addressing itself to preparations for the State of the Union, calling on the Secretary of HEW to provide him with a set of social indicators, just as we had economic indicators, that would measure the quality of life rather than just the quantity of life, and we kept pressure up on HEW in that field. They finally came in with the first report in the final months of the Johnson Administration, because apparently they discovered that setting social indicators was a more difficult task than met the eye. There have been now [three reports]. I was just looking the other day. There's the third report on social indicators that has come out of HEW, so apparently that idea lives on. I had not realized that it had.

L: I noticed here, too, that one of the difficulties that you address in a sense is how do we measure our progress in health, and you mention budget totals, which is one way, and you mention the health laws and all, and it seems to me that throughout the administration there is the problem of showing the people just how much we have done. You mention in this memo of November 1967 the budget totals, and this is dramatic, and it should be highly exciting and satisfying to anyone interested in the quality of life in America, and yet it always seemed to be so difficult to translate these accomplishments in terms of spending, laws passed, and all to the people. Indeed, when I came back to the Johnson Administration [in my research], I was astonished at the number of health bills that were passed, even though I was aware of the large number of activities in this area. It was astonishing overall, but it seemed always to be a problem to get the people to understand just what was being done, how much was being done.

C: Yes. I think one of the major problems of politics is that one takes a fairly recognized crisis before the government is able to come to grips with an area, a problem in a policy area, and then if it's anything of a major nature, just passing a law and appropriating money is only the beginning of a long, hard process. So that the stretch between the conception and the reality is a--there falls a mighty gap. You couldn't expect all these programs to suddenly start making people feel healthier. The problem was how to describe them in other ways than the number of laws passed and the number of dollars appropriated, and all of us, the speech writers, felt sensitive that that was--that there was declining utility in just being able to give a laundry list of laws or sounding out dollar totals, so we had to--

L: From all I can tell, from all I found, you wrote virtually all of the President's health speeches.

C: I would think so, yes.

L: And they are colorful and dramatic. I like them. I like to read them much better than the memos, I mean, not your memos, but the detailed memos and all.

Maybe we could move on to the cigarette--

C: Of course, I think a major job of a presidential assistant was to pursue that tricky course of knowing enough about programs in depth so that you didn't make blunders, but at the same time, being able to sum it up in garden-variety words that could be communicated to people and not getting caught in the mumbo-jumbo of bureaucratic language. That always was an interesting pull-and-tug on a presidential assistant.

L: Yes. The [Federal] Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act. I wondered if you remembered anything about that. It interested me because--I didn't find a great amount of material on it, but what seemed to be clear from 1965 through--I think it's a separate--what seemed to be interesting was that there was obviously a political sensitivity here. The memo of August 1964 of clearing with Senator [B. Everett] Jordan on smoking and health, and what the memo suggests is that President Johnson's position clearly was that he didn't want to get personally entangled in this, that he understood the disagreements within the administration with HEW and NIH and FTC on one side, and Agriculture and others on the other side. I wondered if you remember any kind of in-fighting. That is, did HEW and FTC try to push hard for getting a stronger labeling bill, or were they amenable to state their case and sort of back off? Were there passionate feelings, in other words, about smoking after the Surgeon General's first report in 1964?

C: Well, again, you might ask Wilbur this. I am not aware that they were pushing on the President to join personally in this particular crusade. All they were urging was that he not interfere with HEW's own sense of responsibility to this thing. I think the President's wry remark, "I want to see the overwhelming scientific evidence--"

L: Yes, that struck me as especially interesting because it almost suggested to me what an old smoker, who would still like to smoke perhaps if he could, might say, that "I want to see the proof before I'll go along," because it seemed like the Surgeon General's report had presented the proof, but there's something almost testy here, it seems to me. I'd like your opinion as to--"He hasn't proved to me that cigarettes cause it and that we ought to tell people what they can and cannot do."

C: Right. Well, I think there was a bit of that. He may have just on that have been making a mock of my overstatement there that "The overwhelming scientific evidence makes it impossible for the Secretary of Health to duck this issue." Sometimes Johnson would just get his back up when you made an assertion like that. He was not as fond of exaggeration by other people as he was for himself.

L: (Laughter) I noticed. I may not have included, right behind that was a memo of July 6, 1967. He also circled "The Public Health Service has found that cigarette smoking is associated with--" He was even bothered with--this was a memo to you--the phrase "is associated with."

C: Yes. Well, no, there he might have been saying, thinking that that's a rather evasive way of stating it.

L: Yes. Yes. I see, with his question.

C: I'm not sure [inaudible]. What does "associated with" mean? Do the two walk down the street together?

L: Did you ever recall his saying anything about the cigarette problem or the tobacco problem in terms of--?

C: No. The curious [thing] here, or interesting, that the only one here that has any political implications was from Kermit Gordon, not from me.

L: Yes.

C: And why that would be so is beyond me because--it may have been that Gordon just happened to be in a meeting that it came up, and I didn't, I wasn't at the meeting, so Gordon just stepped in and dealt with what was essentially a political matter there. But we never had developed the kind of antagonisms that apparently lay somewhere underneath the Carter White House's attitude toward [Joseph] Califano. How much of that was influenced by his position in the smoking area and the offense to the tobacco industry of North Carolina, I don't know. It certainly--I'm sure there were plenty telling Carter that he was about to lose a political state on account of that, but I don't have any inside information on that one. But we didn't have that kind of crisis develop on smoking.

In other areas, such as Title VI, suspension of funds, the President never interfered even though we were regularly reported to about HEW's action to cut off funding for schools if they didn't comply with Title VI. Even, I remember, it came when I was getting calls from a congressman from North Carolina--he was head of the Agriculture Committee, I've forgotten his name at the moment--and Johnson didn't raise a peep. The only time that things fell apart on that was when the Office of Education threatened to cut off funds to Chicago, and Mayor [Richard] Daley hit the fan, and then it did escalate pretty rapidly. But I was never aware--I was never called on to play a role of having to make all these kinds of little adjustments to accommodate congressmen. There may have been others in the White House who were having to do that more than I was, and I just was living on a different track. I can't say one way or the other on that.

L: Yes. Well, in a large part your memos seem to be idea memos, initiation memos very often.

C: Right. I tried to put in enough evidence of political cunning in them to show that I was not an amateur, but on the other hand, I was more interested in the ideas than sort of the wheeling-dealing politics of the situation, and I think Johnson looked on me in that term. If he had something political that needed to be done, he would be more apt to ask Marvin Watson to do it.

L: I threw together some miscellaneous little groups here, a few things, and I'd like just to refer to them. It's probably--maybe it's this last packet there. Right. And the first little group I just referred to as telling the HEW story, because what I discovered here again is that you're at work strongly from 1965 onward prompting people to tell their story better, to do more about getting the story across, and I wondered if you ever felt confident that they were doing that, if you were ever satisfied. I noticed, for example, in one of these I believe that there were proposals to have weekly reports from cabinet members and so on, to have them--indeed, I found one memo later today that I may not have included. It's a memo from you in December of 1967 where you noted to the President that you were following his telephone instructions that each cabinet officer personally submit by next Wednesday a list of the ten most significant achievements during the past year. And what I detected here was that you were in a position, because of your knowledge of the press and all, that you were being called upon to try to push the department, especially HEW, constantly to tell their story better, get the word out to the people, and yet as the months went by, it never seemed like they were able to do that good a job with it. I wondered if you thought that it was simply that this was not the kind of task that they were accustomed to or they didn't have the right staff people, or perhaps that they weren't as sensitive to the need as the President and you were.

C: Well, as a former journalist, I saw their difficulties, but I did think they were lacking in imagination in making new kind of efforts. It was a thankless business. One person who did have great imagination in trying to tell the positive stories was Harlan Cleveland, who was assistant secretary of state for United Nations affairs, and he--with the President's support, we planned for International Cooperation Year a whole series of events that would be held in the White House and that the President himself would participate in, and we'd call in the press and give them the briefing and everything, and not one mumbling word would ever appear in the press because essentially the press is not looking for what's called upbeat stories. Now, a skillful PR person in a department of government can pick out juicy nuggets of something that is about to happen, and if he works on a one-to-one basis, he can stimulate a good reporter to maybe do a story, but to hand out traditional releases about what big things we're doing is a sure recipe for the press to file them in the waste basket.

I tried at one point with a journalist who was covering the State Department for the New York ***Daily News***, named Mike O'Neill. He was also writing for ***Medical World News*** on one of the stories about health; he had a personal interest in the health field. I urged John Gardner to consider him, to bring him in as a special assistant to work on this area. O'Neill was a skillful writer. Well, John got his back up and just wouldn't do it, and, of course, I never wanted to be in the position of getting caught on sort of trying to force appointments. I knew O'Neill, I thought he was a good man. He subsequently went on to become editor of the New York ***Daily News***, still is.

I didn't think that we had first-rate talent on the PR side, the public information side. Obviously, as you can see in reading all these memos, a great deal of these events were staged for their public impact. The essential understandings regarding legislation and

funding and developments were going on behind the scenes anyway, but what the job of a president's assistant was was to try to figure out how to bring the important happenings out into the open. I frankly think that we never did a first-rate job of telling the Great Society story to the people and what its potentials were. Johnson himself was not a good television teacher.

L: Were you more sensitive to this, say, by 1967 when the criticism of the war was more intense? I wondered about that because I think it was your memo of December 1967 where it appears that the President really has become interested. "As follow-up to your telephone instructions," you are saying to him, "I am contacting each cabinet officer personally to submit by the end of business Wednesday a list of the ten most significant achievements," and it seems in that that he's in a hurry to get these things out, and I wondered if this reflected in any sense the criticism that was associated with the war and that as a result of that, there was an even greater desire to get the news out of the accomplishments in the health and education fields.

C: Well, yes. Of course, that being December 26, we were also interested in doing it as a preparation for the coming year's election. Now, certainly I didn't know at that time that he wasn't going to be running, but even if I had known he wasn't going to be running, I would have thought it was important to tell the story in terms of whoever was going to succeed him. Yes.

L: You mentioned that you suggested to Secretary Gardner hiring an expert in the area of press relations. Could you describe John Gardner? I think I found just a couple of documents where you had mentioned to the President that "Gardner is not a complainer, and in his own quiet way I think he is doing the best he knows how." Were his relations tense with the President? This was in September of 1967.

C: Yes, that's an interesting sort of precursor of what was to come because, as you know, in December the relations with Gardner kind of came to a head during the--actually, this is funny. They are attached to this memo--oh, I guess you've just got these memos all together.

L: I may have. I think I just--yes, I have them in the wrong order apparently. I have a 1966 memo following this 1967 memo. That's right.

C: But the ***New York Times*** story--oh, no, excuse me, it's not that, it's the--what is that newspaper--? It's to the President from Tom Johnson, and it said it was from the President's middle desk drawer, "Gardner disappointed--"

L: Yes. I couldn't find what paper that was in.

C: I think that appeared in the ***Boston Globe***. Then the sequence there, as best I can see, Gardner came down to the Ranch sometime around late December to appeal certain budget cuts. The President was in an awful pressure because he had had to ask for the

surtax, and he was being told that he had to cut a certain amount out of his budget before they would even give him the time of day on that. And so he was having to cut. It turned out in the discussion that Gardner--that one of the HE--that the Budget Bureau cuts had not been communicated so that the President--they caught that and corrected it, and Gardner actually left the Ranch with less money than he went in, not with more. We rode around the Ranch afterward with the President, and John was very quiet and pensive, and the President was trying to be conciliatory and talked on it. They finally ended up at the plane where John was flying back to Washington. I remember the President putting his arm around John Gardner as he went to get on the plane and said, "Don't worry, John. We'll get this damned war over, and then there will be all the money you want."

The very next morning in the early CBS news, Dan Schorr came on saying that John Gardner was preparing to resign. And I've never known--Dan has never told me how he got tipped off so quickly because Gardner must not have gotten back to Washington until somewhat late in the evening. Then the ***Boston Globe*** picked it up a few days later. I was making efforts to work out a conciliation and indeed thought I was making some headway. I was hoping that Gardner could continue as Secretary of HEW and also accept the leadership of--not Common Cause but--the Urban Coalition, yes. He had been offered that, and he was somewhat interested, at least I thought he was, and then suddenly that story appeared in the ***Globe***, and the next morning the ***New York Times*** carried it on the front page quoting the ***Globe***, which I found very mysterious, that the ***Times*** would quote the ***Globe***. It turned out later that Gardner had talked to [James] Reston of the ***Times*** about his concerns, and Reston had felt constrained because he was being approached confidentially not to carry the story himself, but when the ***Globe*** had it, he just picked it up. And by the time it appeared in the ***Times***, it was clear that there was nothing to be done, so I went ahead and negotiated the letters of resignation and thank you and everything.

L: Did you get any of the President's reaction to this? Was he surprised by it, or had he perhaps sensed that this might be coming? Your description of his parting with Gardner sounds as if it must have come as quite a surprise.

C: Well, he knew that Gardner had been deeply sort of saddened, to say the least. They had a meeting, I believe, alone in which I am told--I don't know this for a fact--Gardner told him he thought he ought not to run again and that he, Gardner, didn't feel that he could continue. The President told me this on the phone and he said, "I told him I agreed with him." That was again one of those warning tips that the President might not run, but I didn't take it that seriously.

It was a sad sort of affair. Gardner was never an intimate type of a person. He was not like a Wilbur Cohen which the President could get on easily with. He was an austere man, and I think the President admired him but never fully felt on the same wave length with him.

There was one little episode that was sort of unhappy. When I had worked out the two letters of exchange, I took the President's over to him to sign it. He was at lunch, and I sat at the table and then got the letter and had prepared to head over to give it to Gardner. As I walked out of the room, the President said, not belligerently but sadly, "A year from now no one will ever have heard of John Gardner." That was a kind of hurt, and wrong, prophecy. He felt that Gardner was just jumping ship in an unfortunate way, but he accepted it and indeed had Gardner over to a social gathering after that, so it was not a--they maintained the civilities. I always regarded it as a great loss. It was the first indirect loss of an [official] at the top level over Vietnam. Now, Gardner made it clear to me, I don't know whether he did to the press, that it was not specifically over Vietnam that he was doing this, that he was not calling into question the judgment on that, but that he felt that Johnson's leadership had been effectively undermined and that he was no longer capable of running [for] another term. Of course, what he didn't know, I guess, was that Johnson had reached the same conclusion himself.

L: Yes. I had noticed in this memo you wrote in June of 1966 where you talk about having discussed some new ideas with Gardner after a cabinet meeting that he had thought it would make good sense to bring in a man of stature as a number one expediter for peace, and it appears that you are favorable to that, but I notice that the President said no. I wondered if maybe even that early there was a beginning sensitivity simply over what were these--

C: What was the date on?

L: This was June of 1966. His check of "no" may simply have been that he felt this was covered somewhere else.

C: At what point did the President make McNamara head of the World Bank? I guess it was not until 1967 sometime.

L: I don't know.

C: I don't know. The President was capable of just saying no on something, and you dropped it at that. You didn't call him up and say why. It was a far-out idea. In retrospect I don't think it would have worked.

L: There are just a couple of other areas here that I had marked.

C: Making him head of the World Bank provided a much longer platform for McNamara in terms of working toward constructive things in the world than having been brought over in an ambiguous role in the White House.

L: Yes. Would the President's association with the AMA, the doctors--you were involved somewhat with the Regional Medical Program, getting that started and all. The sense of it is that, for the most part, he played this politically very well; he was open to the doctors,

he would listen to them, but nonetheless, he decided on certain things to go ahead. Indeed, on one of his memos--I seem to have the memos all mixed up--but he writes on the bottom with regard to the president of the AMA that "Tell him for weeks we've been seeing these would-be stalling tactics. We will work with them for these, but they stalled many health items for years, and we must act now and coordinate later, or spend all fall trying to help." That sounded like a strong statement, but it worked because in fact he did have the votes to get the bill through. I wondered if you were very much involved with these meetings with the doctors or present at any of them?

C: Yes, well, I would be the one that arranged it when he had them in. And we did have them in in the period after the passage of Medicare and before the launching. The expectations--it's always curious the battles that you prepare for that you don't actually fight--were that there might be lines of people outside hospitals waiting to try to get in after passing Medicare and Medicaid. In fact, they were able to accommodate the first impact pretty well. In retrospect, I wish we had given, or been able to give, more attention to the problems of cost inflation in the whole picture. But in bringing them in, he would seize the initiative and do the talking, and he could be very effective and subtly communicated the message that he was not about to make any deals on these things. I remember--did I mention one occasion where--John Gardner had met with them and suddenly called and wanted--they had reached an impasse on I guess it was the Heart, Cancer, Stroke or the regional centers--and he wanted to bring them over to meet with me, and I felt that was not appropriate, that I would in a sense be a judge over the Secretary, so I quickly sent in a memo to the President saying if we gathered in the Fish Room, would he join in. He did and turned it into a presidential meeting in which again he--that may have been the time he stood up to them. I don't remember.

L: Yes. I don't think I do have that story at all. Were there any other things on health that you can think of that I may have missed with the memos? What kind of feeling did you have by 1968 about health? There was a confidence all the way through of great accomplishments with Medicare and with the Regional Medical Program. Did you have this sense of accomplishment, that even if the war was going bad in terms of public opinion and there were these kinds of problems, that education and health both were great accomplishments? Did you feel good about them at that point? Or did you think of them in those terms particularly?

C: Yes. No. I thought that--and I think there was less second-guessing about the impact of some of these things than there is now. No, we felt these were substantial achievements, and we were not--it's hard to put yourself back in the image of the time, but you remember that Nixon came along, and [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan, with the idea of a family maintenance program or FAP, Family Assistance [Program]. There was not that sort of pressure--I guess the war may have been part of this--to sort of come in with a total package. We were, in those days, pretty content with making our breakthroughs as we could make them, and then his philosophy was once you've got something on the book, if it was worthy, it would grow, and that it would develop its own momentum. He frequently told the story about the old farmer who saw the train for the first time on a track. He

was sitting there, and he said, "They'll never make her go." And suddenly the train began to puff and huff and moved off, and he shouted out, "They'll never stop her!" That was his attitude toward what we were accomplishing.

Of course today the question is, in the new mood of America with the concern over inflation, concern over productivity, whether the spirit of the Great Society will be fundamentally done damage to or whether what is worthy will remain and perhaps be pruned but move ahead. It is certainly true that, in my estimate, just as Roosevelt never got a full test of the New Deal in terms of the critical masses that might have lifted the country out of the Depression, that we never got the full test of these categorical programs because the Vietnam War and then the subsequent Nixon victory did not permit the programs to grow at the pace that would have been more effective, in my opinion. Lingering questions, though, about how you administer these things better so that you don't get all the bureaucratic stagnation and dismay, those questions remain with us, and yet most of the turmoil that was caused by bureaucracies was because they were attempting to carry out the laws of the land in connection with civil rights, in connection with food and drug standards, in connection with the quality of the environment, and all those things. So that the bureaucrats are partly deserving of abuse, partly made the whipping boy of other people's faults--not faults--other people's purposes. I'm writing and thinking now on what lies beyond the Great Society and the so-called New Beginnings of the Reagan Administration. Where do we go when once again there is a sense that government has to play a leading purpose in the country?

L: Yes.

C: I don't think--

L: There are not very many people thinking about that.

C: There's not a whole lot of--it's a lonely territory.

L: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Cater.

C: Okay.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV

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