

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE E. CHRISTIAN (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: THOMAS H. BAKER

November 11, 1968

B: This is the interview with George E. Christian, the press secretary for Mr. Johnson. Mr. Christian, to start with, what were the circumstances of your appointment to this job? How were you contacted about it?

C: I was first contacted about coming to the White House in May of 1966 by Marvin Watson, who was then the President's appointment secretary. Mr. Watson told me that the President was interested in me, and wondered if I might be interested in coming to Washington. I told him at the time that I did not know, that I didn't really think so.

B: This is while you were on Governor Connally's staff?

C: That's right. I was then working as press secretary to Governor Connally. I was quite happy in my work. My wife and I had plans there in Austin, and she was a lawyer just preparing to enter private law practice after working in government for several years.

B: Was the job as press secretary specifically mentioned?

C: No, it was rather vague at the time as to what I might be doing. I think there was a subsequent call from either Marvin Watson or Jake Jacobson, who was also on the President's staff at the time, indicating that the President wanted me to work at least for a time under Walt Rostow in the National Security Office, working on reports, working on materials for the President, possibly doing some other writing. There was no indication on their part that I would be in the press office, although I got the impression that I possibly would be asked to help some on press matters. Mr. Watson mentioned that probably that I would be doing some press work.

B: I was wondering if there was any indication that early that Mr. Moyers was planning to give up the job.

C: I don't recall either of them telling me that at the time. I think right after I came to Washington I heard from someone here that Bill Moyers was interested in doing some other type of work here, that Bob Fleming had been hired as Deputy Press Secretary, and at the time had been identified by the President as his press secretary. So I assumed at the time that at some point Moyers would probably go into some other line of work here at the White House and that Bob Fleming would, for all practical purposes, the press secretary and probably be designated to that title.

B: What did you come to Washington as?

C: I came here as Assistant to the President, assigned to Mr. Rostow's office. For several weeks I was actually on the Defense Department payroll as a consultant at a per diem figure. This was after I consented to come up in the latter part of May 1966.

B: May I ask what decided you? You sounded a little reluctant there at first.

C: I was reluctant. I didn't really want to move my family mostly. I finally decided, frankly, that I couldn't very well turn it down if the President really desired me to come and if I would be making some meaningful contribution.

B: Did you discuss it with Governor Connally?

C: I did. He left the decision strictly up to me. I was told by Marvin Watson not to tell anyone that I was even being considered for a White House place, that they had to run FBI checks and that sort of thing, and that they didn't want any leaks on it. It rather handicapped me in talking with anyone, although I did of course talk to the Governor. He advised me that I should come if I possibly could. He said he pretty much left the decision up to me.

He said he had a lot of projects under way, that it was coming at a bad time for him, but that if they were anxious to start it, why I had better probably go on. Right after that, I got a call from Marvin Watson indicating that they needed me and that if I was going to come, he needed me to come that particular Friday because on Monday Secretary McNamara was leaving for Viet Nam and the President wanted me to go with Secretary McNamara to Viet Nam. So I had to get my shots and passport and all of that stuff. I think that probably decided me right away to come on up rather suddenly, which I did.

B: You mean the idea of--

C: I didn't see that I had much choice. As it turned out, Secretary McNamara's trip was scrubbed that weekend, so I didn't do that; but by then I was up here and talked to the President and had gotten reasonably settled.

B: You had known Mr. Johnson for some time before all this, had you not?

C: No, not intimately at all. My father was District Attorney in the Hill Country when President Johnson was a boy, in the early 1920s. He knew my father just as a young boy would know an older man. The President at that time was apparently attracted to courthouse proceedings and that sort of thing. He has told me many times of various trials he witnessed as a boy, and he knew my father by reputation and all. I didn't know him except through the governors I worked for.

B: As I said in the preliminary conversation, I think later we ought to go into some of the details of that. But to move on now, after you were up here, you were then later approached with the idea of being the press secretary?

C: I worked with Mr. Rostow for two or three months, then was asked by the President to work with the press office to spend time here to get better acquainted with the press operation, to help Bill Moyers, and to try to

develop into a briefing officer. He wanted me to begin some briefings.

I've forgotten precisely when I began briefing, but I believe it was in August.

B: What exactly is a briefing officer, briefing whom on what?

C: The press office has two briefings a day for reporters--two news conferences a day--at eleven and four, at which the various press releases are distributed. Questions are taken and answered at that time.

B: During this time that you were working in the press office with Mr. Moyers, did you get the idea that you were being tested?

C: Yes. Things were in somewhat of a ferment then. I knew by then that Bill Moyers desired to leave. He hadn't made up his mind completely, but he had had an offer from Newsday which he was considering. He was interested in staying on the one hand, and being more or less tugged on the other hand by the financial rewards of going with Newsday, plus some family problems which developed right after that. His brother died and it was necessary for him to take on the support of his brother's family, and I think he was already supporting his parents. So he just needed to make more money, I think was the net of it.

B: Was this his brother James?

C: James Moyers.

B: Did the President know at this time that Moyers was considering leaving?

C: Yes, he knew that there would probably be a change in the press office sooner or later, and I think he was more or less looking for someone to take Moyers' place. He never made any commitments of any kind to me or anyone else as far as I know, but I did feel that I was being tested to see if I could handle the job.

B: Does that make for an awkward situation because already in the press office was Mr. Fleming, who had been at least publicly mentioned as the press secretary?

C: It could have been awkward. I think both Bob Fleming and I set out to prevent it from being awkward. We wound up sharing an office here in the White House. We became good friends. We still are good friends. I'm going out tonight to eat dinner with him. But by working together and, I think, by the fact that Bob Fleming is a man of some stature and understanding, and I think he probably realized at that time that it wasn't in the cards for him to be the Press Secretary. I think his intent was to help whoever was going to be the Press Secretary. That's always the impression I got, anyway.

B: Did you have any opportunity to see Mr. Johnson's reaction to Mr. Moyers' leaving?

C: Some, but not all. I think at the time that Bill left, it was fairly harmonious, although there were some rough spots in there. I got the impression that the President had thought at one time that Bill would be staying through the 1968 election. That had more or less been the President's understanding. However, I think the President understood his situation, and I think it was a matter of a little difficult time in there. There was a lag between December and February before Bill actually left the White House.

B: This was in December of '66?

C: '66 and '67. I took over the office in December '66. Bill stayed on the staff until the first of February. There were the usual transition problems involving personnel, and there was a fairly tense period in there because of the transition.

B: You mean by difficulties, tenseness, rough spots, you mean in the relationship between Mr. Moyers and the President, or between you and Mr. Moyers?

C: There were no difficulties between Moyers and me. Bill had recommended me as his successor. This was in December, I guess, which I appreciated very much. I had worked with Bill during--well, from August to December, including some overseas travel. We worked well together. As far as I know, there was never any acrimony between the two of us. There were some problems here in the press office which were rather apparent to a lot of people around here, including the President, in which there was a good bit of loose talk, a good many problems caused by people other than the press secretary talking to reporters and giving them inside information from the White House which might or might not have been accurate. And they were just generally talking pretty loosely around reporters, which sometimes caused the President quite a bit of grief. It also is the type thing that creates credibility problems, because the reporter thinks he is getting correct information from somebody in the press office when actually he is not getting the correct information. Then when something does develop in the opposite way there is a tendency to blame the President for it.

B: Is this kind of thing coming from, say, the assistant press secretary level or the secretarial level?

C: I think it was happening more at the secretarial level than it was at the other. It was a practice that I think had built up in here that had just sort of gotten out of hand. It wasn't just that, but that's one example.

B: This had been allowed to go on for some time?

C: It had just grown up, and it had gotten to the point where the President was quite distressed by it; and it was not a very happy situation here for awhile during that period.

B: Was this directly related to Mr. Moyers. It has come up in connection with his leaving.

C: It wasn't a cause of his leaving or anything like that. It was just during a transition period, all of the things that are in the nature of problems usually are examined and if you are going to make changes in an operation that's the time to make it. So there were some changes which had to be made during that time and we made them.

B: Which means, I assume, the people involved in this are no longer with the Press Office.

C: Some aren't, but beyond that, those that stayed got a clear understanding of what they were supposed to be doing and what they weren't supposed to be doing.

B: How did President Johnson offer the Press Secretary job to you?

C: As I recall, we were in his bedroom. He asked me if I was willing to become Press Secretary. I said I was. He said, "Do you think you can handle it?" And I said, "I think I probably can." He showed me a letter that Bill Moyers had written him in which Moyers said that he had hesitated to leave during a long period because he was not satisfied that the President had a man on his staff who could move in to the satisfaction of the President. And that he felt that I had the President's confidence and did know the operation, and that I should be the one to replace him. The President just showed me that without any comment, and that's about the way it was. He told me later, either later that same day or a day or so later, he told Bill to make the proper announcements and take care of it, so it was done.

B: Did he then, or anytime about that time, discuss with you his philosophy of dealing with the press or, in less dramatic terms, some of the problems that he had had dealing with the press?

C: No, not really. He told me about some of the problems he thought existed in the Press Office.

B: Is this the thing you were referring to a moment ago?

C: That and other matters. He wanted me to try to correct them.

B: What were the other matters?

C: Mostly that. Because of our physical arrangement at the time, we felt that a lot of more-or-less confidential information was too visible to the press, that the press had too much ready access to items that the secretaries were typing, for example.

B: Is this the matter of the location of the Press Office?

C: Mostly it was just location. It was just the way things worked, and we discussed how we could correct this. We all recognized it as a problem, but didn't know how to correct it because of the physical plant. We finally, over a period of time, rearranged the office some, to where we could create another separate secretary's office, which we took from a hallway. The President himself came out one evening and measured off the hallway with his feet, just stepped off the space that he felt might be converted into an office and just made the decision himself to create an extra office for my operation. When we did that, it enabled us to have girls in this office where they could transcribe sensitive, highly classified materials, where they could have some privacy from probing eyes. So we now have a dual office in here where we have some secretaries out visible and some that aren't.

B: The idea behind this is to arrange the mechanics so as to prevent leaks?

C: Mechanical problems, yeah, because a lot that is handled in the Press Office is of a sensitive nature, and it doesn't relate to press matters really. But because of our physical location it's awfully hard to deal with that type thing when you have such an open arrangement.

B: What sort of thing do you handle that isn't related to press matters?

C: We always attend the security meetings, and a great many of other meetings the President has on foreign policy and others. My assistant, Tom Johnson, also does. Tom takes notes on most of these meetings. They have to be transcribed by our secretaries, who have top security clearance, in some of the more sensitive matters in the White House and the other things-- logistics material for trips, various things which aren't in the public information field exactly.

B: When you were approached with the job of press secretary, did you ask the President--I know one does not put conditions on the President--but did you ask the President or did you know the answer without asking, whether or not you would have adequate access to him?

C: I told him that I desired to have as complete access as possible, that I could not work as Press Secretary without access. He said I would have no problems there at all, that I could come into his office any time I wanted to, that I could come to his bedroom any time I wanted to. He said if there were more than two people in his office and I was curious about what was going on, to walk in; and if he didn't want me in there, he would throw me out, that I ought to have the right to go in.

B: Has it worked out that way?

C: Pretty much. I don't, obviously, go barging into his office, but I do have total access to his meetings. If he is meeting in the Cabinet Room with just almost any group, I can walk in if I want to. If I don't, Tom Johnson frequently does. We try to keep up with his activities. Sometimes I've gone in when he is meeting with a Cabinet officer and stood there waiting while he talked with the Cabinet officer, just to know what the subject is so that if it is of any news importance, I can report it.

B: Does this ever irritate him?

C: No.

B: You have never been thrown out?

C: No. I usually send him a note. If there is something going on that I think I ought to be in on, I will send him a note. Does he want me in there? Most of the time he does, so that there are no problems.

B: This applies to everything. Is there anything to your knowledge that you have not been in on pretty much from the beginning. For example, what about the rather delicate negotiations with the Vietnamese bombing halt of this month?

C: I think Tom Johnson and I attended every meeting. I may not have attended one simply because I was doing something else, and Tom sat in on it and I read his notes later. The bombing decision started out, began, as a very closely kept matter for a day or so, among the President, the Secretary of State, and Mr. Rostow. Nobody else knew except our negotiators in Paris and the people who handle the cable traffic. It was kept that closely for a day or two until they could see what it was before anyone else was brought in, Mr. Clifford or the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs or the CIA or anyone.

B: Would this have been--

C: This was, oh, maybe a Friday, the eleventh of October, before the meetings began on Monday in which Clifford and others were brought in. From Monday on, actually I knew what was going on. The President on the plane to Texas Friday night gave me enough information on it--that I knew something was developing. I didn't have the specifics, but he told me enough about it so that I knew what was happening.

B: Then in the almost two years you have held this office, you don't feel that anything has been kept from you?

C: No, anything I want to know, it's my fault if I don't get it. I have that type of access.

B: How about the announcement of the President's withdrawal from the 1968 campaign?

C: Well, of course, I knew about his intentions and his hopes for many months before he did it. I worked with him on the matter back in the fall of 1967 and during the latter period when he was making the decisions, final decisions on the matter, I was with him a great deal during that period.

B: You mean that as early as the fall of 1967, he had contemplated this?

C: Yes, actually before that, but--

B: How far back?

C: I don't know. I think he started giving serious consideration to it, though, in the late summer of '67, when he really began to zero in on the proper time to step aside. There was a question of timing. I think he had always, the first day I came up here, I guess, he seemed to lean against running in '68. I don't ever recall getting a direct impression from him that he was seeking this office in 1968. His statements always seemed to be, "My term ends January 1969." He just didn't seem to have a clear focus on anything after that. Now, this didn't mean that he had decided not to run. It just meant that he was maybe taking things a step at a time and that he was not intent on running in '68. There was a very clear impression all along that he really hoped that he would not have to run in 1968. That's the best way to express it.

B: Were there any occasions earlier, say, in the fall of '67 when the announcement he eventually made was contemplated earlier?

C: Well, in the fall of '67 he had me write a statement announcing that he didn't intend to seek reelection. Here again it was because of timing that he didn't

know when the proper [time] would be to do this. He considered doing it in December of '67. He sent me to see Governor Connally and the Governor and I drafted a statement, or I got a lot of thoughts from the Governor, on how he might phrase the statement; and then I wrote it from those thoughts and my own. I put together a statement, I guess as early as December.

B: What was the occasion then?

C: He couldn't really find an occasion to make a statement. He thought about doing it in a news conference. Then later we thought of doing it at the State of the Union address, and actually by then shaped up a final draft for him. By that time, he brought Horace Busby, one of his former assistants, into his confidence on the matter, and Busby wrote a draft. I took Busby's draft, and combined the two--combined mine and Busby's--and gave the President that in January to use at the State of the Union if he chose to do so. He decided against doing it then, so from January to March it was a question of when. I think all during that period the President was seeking a time when he could make this announcement.

B: How many people had the kind of prior knowledge of this that you had?

You've mentioned Governor Connally and Mr. Busby.

C: I've got no way of knowing, and I think--

B: It appears to have been a very well-kept secret.

C: There must have been two or three staff members who knew that he was giving it deep consideration. I think Marvin Watson probably knew it at an early time. Back in the fall, late summer and early fall, outside of Marvin Watson and maybe Marie Fehmer the President's secretary, and Governor Connally and Mrs. Johnson and me, I don't know of anybody else at that particular time. Now, later in the fall and the winter, about December, that's when Busby

came into it and Tom Johnson. Over in the bedroom one morning, the President just dropped it out in front of Tom Johnson. So from then on I worked with Tom on the thing. I never said anything to anyone about it, as I recall. I don't think I ever mentioned it to anybody because I didn't know who knew and who didn't, and particularly from that January to March time, we kept it awfully close because he really hadn't decided what to do. You know, he could have been forced into this race by circumstances.

B: You mean Viet Nam, or domestically?

C: Yes, by that or by domestic political situations. I think he did not want to leave the impression that he was being run out of the race. This was a problem because the primaries had begun. He made a conscious decision not to let them enter his name in the New Hampshire primary, which was the first one, so they ran a write-in campaign. His name wasn't on the ballot in New Hampshire. He carried the popular vote in New Hampshire, but as you recall McCarthy's name was on the ballot as the only Democrat, I believe, and most of his delegates were elected. Johnson had the popular votes by a slight margin, but McCarthy's delegates were elected. But that's an example. He could have allowed his name to go on the ballot and didn't. He didn't actively campaign himself in New Hampshire.

B: Were Robert Kennedy's activities involved in this, too?

C: Well, partly because he didn't know whether Kennedy was going to run or not--although he suspected it for many, many months that Bobby Kennedy would make a run for the Presidency in '68. The Party was becoming quite divided after the McCarthy-Kennedy movement during that period. I think the President finally decided that he could not close ranks in the Party and still work in a non-partisan way toward a Viet Nam settlement, and

be a candidate at the same time--that he had to eliminate that or he could not succeed on any point.

B: Is it your opinion that there might possibly have been more behind the decision than that?

C: No, I think I worked with him closely enough during that period that I feel confident that the general reasons he gave were the reasons. Age might have been a slight factor simply because he would have been 60 when he was inaugurated. That, though, was not a primary factor because a lot of Presidents have been that old.

B: There is speculation that Mrs. Johnson might have played some part in influencing him doing it.

C: Mrs. Johnson never really influenced directly one way or the other. Mrs. Johnson's attitude seemed to be that she hoped it wouldn't be necessary for him to run, that she hoped, whatever he did, he would make a clean decision, and wouldn't be dangling. I think she felt all along that he probably wouldn't run unless events forced him to run, and I think she was quite satisfied with that attitude and quite--she understood it and I imagine was for it, but she didn't push him. She didn't pressure him. She didn't try to influence him in that way. I think she pretty much left the decision up to him. She's not the kind of woman who just works on him and tries to bend his decisions to her will. She doesn't do that.

B: Is there any specific thing that prompted the timing of the announcement?

C: The fact that he was ready in his own mind to make the partial bomb halt decision.

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By George Christian

to the

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