INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE CHRISTIAN (Tape #3)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

February 27, 1970

F: This is interview number three with George Christian in his office on February 27, 1970--Joe B. Frantz interviewing.

George, let's talk a little bit about your predecessor, one Bill Moyers, who came out of the preacher realm to become Presidential Press Secretary, and move on from there. I know that part of this will be after the fact, but you did overlap, and I'd be interested in his relationship with the President as you viewed it.

C: I think as I saw his relationship it was one of extreme closeness during the period from about May when I went to the White House until well up into the fall. I had the opportunity to work with Bill Moyers for about the last three or four months that he was Press Secretary, and in my opinion he was one of the two or three most valuable people that the President had. Frankly, I think his departure created a gap that really was rather hard for the President to ever fill again. I don't want to denigrate myself as Press Secretary because Bill and I were two different types of people and I think in some ways I served the President adequately as Press Secretary, but Bill had been awfully close to the President for a long time on a lot of things. Bill had developed sort-of a staff within the staff in the White House. I kind of looked upon it as sort of a little White House.

F: Was he kind-of in the role of chief of staff without having the title?

C: Not really chief of staff. Well, I don't think so, not during the time I was there, certainly. In earlier days he may have fulfilled that role

for awhile, but he had been deeply involved in the legislative program--the domestic program--at one point during his time in the White House. He was greatly interested in foreign affairs and had consequently moved into that field a good bit, particularly in regard to speeches and policy statements for the President. I think he had a great interest in this field. He had worked in the poverty program, and also in the Peace Corps. I think he was Deputy Director for a time; but he was also greatly interested in the formation of the poverty program and the other Great Society programs. So his knowledge in these fields was pretty extensive. He had been there at the takeoff, particularly of the domestic program. He had a very strong personal feeling toward the President's Great Society program--felt very much involved in it.

Frankly I was not that involved in it because I wasn't at the White House during the time that it was initiated; and, in some instances, I have to confess I probably had some philosophical differences with some of the approaches although I didn't demonstrate these in any way. Frankly, I consider myself pretty liberal, but I don't believe I'm as liberal as Bill Moyers and some others at the White House.

F: There was no cleavage in the White House staff between, say, liberals and moderates?

C: Not really. The President surrounded himself with people of different philosophies. I think there probably tended to be a division along the lines of sort of the--there was some division between Texan and non-Texan, for example. I think this is a natural division, yet some staff member overlapped.

F: This is just being comfortable, isn't it?

C: Yes. It wasn't a clear thing by any means, because some of the Texans were really Washingtonians more than they were Texans and didn't really divide along those lines.

There was certainly evidence of some philosophical differences, but I don't think this affected in any way the President's divisions or his programs. He pretty well made the decisions based on information given to him, and he might entertain the views of staff members on certain things, but you had to be awfully persuasive to cut through the President's own general attitude toward things. He had very well-formed opinions on most issues, being in government as long as he was; and, frankly, he knew more about most things than his staff did, and that includes Moyers and everybody. I mean, there were certain particulars that a man might be interested in, that he might be an expert on, that the President would get expert advice on. But on broad general policies the President was pretty much his own man--at least he was during the three years I was there.

Bill's value to the President, though, as I said, cut across a whole lot of lines. He was a very skilled speech writer, sort-of what I would call a passionate speech writer in the sense that he wanted position spelled out clearly and with great sex appeal. He had a way with words that I thought was very good in getting the President's point across to the public and communicating.

F: Sort-of dramatized his points.

C: Yes. I think that's the way to express it. As I said, he had a sizable staff of his own, not in the press office as such, but he had people through the government, really, who were his friends and with whom he consulted on a variety of things. If he wanted to know something out of the intelligence

community, he pretty well had his own lines into the intelligence community. He had his own lines into the foreign affairs section. His own lines into the Congress and in a way this caused him some problems. It helped him immensely. It helped him help the President in a lot of ways. It also helped create some problems within the White House and a little divisiveness that was very evident when I came to the White House in 1966.

The White House is a difficult place as far as human relations go to begin with. I don't think it's near as bad as George Reedy painted it in an article--an essay--recently. It was not a place full of vicious intrigue all of the time, although I won't say that there weren't some vicious intrigues going on from time to time. Most of the staff made a real effort to get along with the other staff members, and even when we disagreed, we tried to do it in a civilized fashion.

The President himself has a certain quality that's not uncommon among political figures. It's the use of this bear pit technique that I think I've talked about before in these interviews of sometimes pitting man against man. Certainly Roosevelt knew how to do it, and President Johnson did too. I think he used this, either consciously or unconsciously, as a means of drawing the best out of somebody.

F: Did you get the feeling sometimes he almost consciously gave a man an assignment beyond his experience and his powers just to see if he could make it?

C: Yes, no question about it and he also had a habit of getting staff members to second-guess other staff members. Unless you knew what he was doing, sometimes this caused some dissension. Frequently you didn't know how many people were working on a certain subject, particularly a speech. He might

get a draft of a speech from someone, hand out copies to four or five other people on the staff, and you wouldn't know who all had the copies. He'd say to me, "Put this in Johnson City language," or something, and I wouldn't have any idea who else was working on it and whether the guy that was working on it might be doing the same thing, and whether we ought to be collaborating or doing it individually.

F: You must have written a lot of speeches that never came out recognizable?

C: No, because I discovered that, regardless of how he particularly wanted something done like that, it was generally best to try to find out who else was working with it and try to work on it in a unified way. Otherwise I thought it got completely balled up to where you just had a lot of guys spinning their wheels. I'm not sure other staff members did that, but I've always liked to collaborate with people on something rather than just head out in some direction not knowing where I was going.

But that was a habit. It was a way of getting things done, and it worked okay as long as you knew. Everybody, every public official, has a certain way of operating. It suits him, and everybody else needs to adapt to it.

Back to Bill Moyers--he attempted in many ways to guide the President, and I think on a lot of things he did guide the President. I think when he was gone from the White House there was a void, without any question.

I know a lot of people won't agree with that. I'm afraid, though, that people who say that isn't so maybe let their prejudices get ahead of their common sense on the thing, because he did have enemies within the White House. He had a lot of staff people who, for different reasons, were a little unhappy with him by the time he departed. One was just the fact that you always have struggles within the Palace Guard. Another is the power-play thing. Some

members of the White House staff during Johnson's days sought power; and when a guy seeks power, he's going to step on some toes. People were in and out of power, so to speak. A guy would be in favor for awhile, and then he'd be relegated to the far recesses of the East Wing.

F: You could kind-of run a weekly form chart, couldn't you?

C: Well, sometimes it was difficult to stay in favor for a fellow who wanted to stay in favor by means that got other guys out of favor, and there was a little knifing and a little jousting going on in the White House.

F: Did you get the feeling there was at times a little, say, petty tattling?

C: Some of that, and also a tendency on the part of some people to take the President at his word on what he said about staff members. President Johnson is the kind of man that might make an outrageous statement to your face or about you to someone else, and he doesn't really mean it. I mean, he may mean it partly, but he sometimes overstates it. He might say, "That's the stupidest one human being that ever worked for me," but he doesn't mean that at all. And if a fellow understands that, he can get by fine. If he's sensitive--

F: Just as when he says that "George Christian is the greatest person who ever worked for me," he doesn't quite go all the way either.

C: I take that with a grain of salt, too, because it just depends a lot on mood. It depends a lot on what a man has just done.

F: He talks in superlatives.

C: He does talk in superlatives. It took people who worked for him sometimes a little time to get accustomed to his particular trait, and sometimes you had the feeling you were up or down.

Bill Moyers, I think, felt up and felt down more than anybody I've ever worked with. He would either be at the heights or in the depths, depending

on how the President felt toward him at a certain time. It really was a distressing thing, particularly to me early in the game when I wasn't sure about this habit the President had. Some days Bill was like a son to him, and on other days he wouldn't speak to him, and this affected him very, very deeply.

Frankly, thatkind of thing didn't bother me a great deal. I think I weathered that type of thing a little bit better than some of the others maybe because I had worked for a whole of different politicians and I've gotten kind-of accustomed to that general trait. But I think that did affect Bill, and it very much affected his relationships with the President.

I think the staff dissensions affected his relationships with the President a great deal. He was a very visible Press Secretary--very, very visible, more so than anybody I guess. Well, Salinger was visible in Kennedy's days, of course--but Bill was the first Press Secretary in a long, long time--I guess Steve Early would probably be the nearest one to him--that the press assumed was a man in the very high councils in the White House because he was taken from another position in the White House of being the legislative man, the domestic affairs man, the guy who really had his finger on everything that was in the White House, [and] put into the Press Secretary's job. This was an instant sensation in the sense that the press, for the first time, thought they had access to a guy who was really right there in the inner circle.

F: Kind-of an assistant President.

C: Yes, not just a guy--I mean, contact with the President is one thing; access to the President is another thing. But being actually involved in all of the policy-making decisions in the White House is something else; and they

thought that, "Here we are. We've finally got a Press Secretary who's right there in the middle of all these policy decisions."

F: Did the President sometimes feel that Bill went beyond what Johnson would have wanted him to go, that he arrogated a certain amount of the power to himself?

C: Yes, and I think Bill probably realizes he did that; and I know that the press thinks that. Many members of the press, in retrospect, thought that Bill went beyond what the President's policies or thinking were on certain subjects--that sometimes it was Moyer's thinking rather than the President's. Now a Presidential Press Secretary can get by with this with certain Presidents, I think, but with Lyndon Johnson, unless he really was thinking a certain thing, he never really wanted anybody to say he was thinking that. He was very sensitive on that point, and I think it worked all right for awhile. I think, though, that when the President and Bill began to have conflicts, Bill became very sensitive to this and pulled in his horns a good bit. During the time I was there, during '66, I didn't detect any great deviation from the Presidential line in Bill's briefings.

Now, in Bill's conversations with reporters, his overview of the situation might conform to the President's and might not, frankly. I mean he tried to be as helpful as he could to reporters and give them as much background as he could, and I think the President thought he was leaking a lot of things that he had no business leaking. If it wasn't Bill doing it, it was somebody else on his staff. I mean, this was an irritant during those last days of '66--that he was afraid that the Press Office was just telling the press everything that was going on. If anybody in the Press Office knew anything of any substance, it would soon find its way into the newspapers. This was partly true. And it's the only criticism that I really have of Bill's operation.

Bill was surrounded by extremely loyal people. He is the kind of guy that it's very easy to be loyal to. For one thing, he's as smart as he can be, and he's aggressive, and he's compassionate, and he's a friend. He's a good friend to have. His staff looked up to him as a bright young man who really was going places and who they liked. He confided in his people a great deal more than maybe he should have. This is not just in his assistant press secretary and that sort of thing, but the girls in the office probably knew more than under normal circumstances they should have.

This led to a lot of problems that came home to roost. Some people in the office talked about the President. They what I called bad-mouthed the President to reporters. When the President and Bill were in a particular conflict, everybody in the Press Office was totally aware of it almost immediately, and naturally they stood up for Bill. In standing up for Bill, sometimes they took the President down a peg or two; and this is a very uncomfortable situation in an over-heated place like the White House.

This was a constant irritant to the President in the few months I was there before Bill left. It had a direct effect on their relations, although it wasn't a constant thing, in the sense, that many times Bill was very much in favor and sometimes he wasn't. But I think the final problems between Bill and the President--which were there and nobody can hide them--I think really the problems emanated from Bill's desire to leave as much as anything.

F: Do you think he just wore out in the job?

C: I think he was tired of being Press Secretary. I think he was seeing that he was being eroded some. A good many reporters were sore at him. By that, I don't mean that the press in general was down on him. It was far from it, but he had some conflicts, and he felt he really was caught between the

press and the President, and there was only one way to get out of that, and that was to get crushed or leave. He didn't like the trends; he was not very happy with the President's general attitude toward press relations. He had tried it. He felt he had been a success, but he was ready to leave.

On top of that after his brother died, his financial bind became severe--more severe than it had been. It was a constant pressure on him. He felt he had to make more money; [he] felt he was squeezed out. He, I think, on several occasions had wanted to get free from the White House where he could operate a little more effectively as Under secretary of State or something, and the President never would do this; and I think this was also a problem with him. He finally just felt he had to go, and he was quite plain in his reason in that he had to have more money. It was financial more than anything else, I think.

I think the President resented his leaving frankly.

F: He found his own job? The President didn't assist in this at all?

C: I don't think so. He always told him, you know, "If you have to go, that's fine--you have to go." But I think deep down Lyndon Johnson did not want him to go; [he] felt--and this is hard to explain, difficult to explain. I think the President did not want Bill to remain his Press Secretary. I think that was pretty obvious even before I went to Washington. This was a conclusion that a lot of people reached in early '66 long before he actually left as Press Secretary. I don't think the President was completely happy with that, and somehow he wanted to resolve this problem.

But I think Bill's taking the initiative in leaving caused some problems between the President and Bill because, as I say, deep down I think the President resented that Bill would want to leave. It's as simple as that.

He had been an extremely valuable man. He needed him in a lot of ways, and he rather resented his leaving. So in the final couple of months there, their relationship really got pretty hazardous, and that's about the extent I think of my--

F: Does the President like to keep people around?

C: He does. He wants to decide it. This is not unusual, though. When a fellow hires out to him, I think the President's general attitude has always been, one, "Want his undivided loyalty," and two, "I want to be the judge of when he has completed his job and when he hasn't. I don't object to his leaving if he has got good cause to leave, but I like to have a part in it." That's just the way he is.

F: Don't just give me a month's notice.

C: "I'm not going to stand in your way, you know, but I'm not going to be very happy if I'm in the middle of things that I think are the most important things in the world and you leave for gold." I've heard him use this expression, about half-kidding and half-serious, you know--"the gold is there and you're going after it." I think he didn't really like this to happen.

F: As far as you know did he ever think that Bill had sold out to the Kennedys?

C: I don't think so. I saw some of that alluded to in Sam Houston's book. I think on some occasions he was glad that there was a tie between Bill and the Kennedys.

F: It was useful.

C: It was useful. But as a general philosophy he objected to it. He never was sure, you know, how close it was; and he never was sure whether there might be some exchange of thought, or something, that might cause him

problems. I don't think there was, but I think the uncertainty of the thing did cause some concern.

F: Did he ever sit down with you or other members of the staff and encourage you on whom you ought to get to know, or how you ought to spread yourself around, or did he take for granted that you were going to do that?

C: No, he never did really. He just might make suggestions now and then that he wished I'd entertain more in my home for reporters, [or] that there were certain reporters he didn't want us to have much contact with because he didn't trust them. But, generally, as far as the Press Secretary went, he assumed and expected the Press Secretary to deal with almost everybody.

What he resented was other people on the staff dealing with a whole lot of press people. He did not like for a fellow who wasn't the Press Secretary to be saying much to the press--saying anything to the press for that matter--unless the Press Secretary asked him to do it or unless he asked him to do it. He preferred they stay out of that limelight. He took it for granted that he ought to have one spokesman, and that he didn't have to fiddle around trying to tell ten people what to say, that if he dealt with one man, he was just on a lot more secure ground than dealing with ten.

F: In building your own staff, did he give you pretty much a free hand?

C: Yes. There were two or three people that he preferred not to stay when the changeover occurred; and in a couple of instances, I convinced him some people ought to stay. I kept essentially the staff I inherited. I brought in, oh, I think, one or two people is all; but I kept the male staff in the press office with one exception. Bob Fleming was there when I got there, and he stayed as my deputy. Tom Johnson was there when I got there, and

he stayed as my assistant. I brought in Lloyd Hackler. But other than that it was about the same staff. The President was satisfied that we had plugged up what he thought was the problem, so there never was any other concern about it.

F: What did he think was the problem?

C: I think they just needed to be told not to talk too much. Maybe I was guilty of not telling them everything that I should have, and a lot of them may have resented it. I don't know. I maybe kept things a little closer to my chest than he had.

F: Than Bill had?

C: Yes. And also very meanly [I] laid down the law about conduct, and they accepted it and I don't think I ever had any problem with it.

F: Did the President ever suggest that you find some way of leaking certain information?

C: Yes. Oh sure. Controlled leaks--that's just a way of doing business.

F: How does the Press Secretary do that? Does he just hand it to somebody in another branch?

C: No. You don't really have any problem with it because your door is open, and guys are hammering on your wall all day long, trying to get in and talk to you. If you know that there's a line that you want to peddle, you have every opportunity to do it because they're coming in there all during the day.

F: There'll be somebody from the Des Moines Register who--

C: Oh, hell, you won't have to leak it, I mean. In the sense that you won't have to just say, "Well, I want to give you a nice leak." You just do it in the way you talk to them and the way you answer their questions.

F: Did they respect you pretty well when you requested non-attribution?

C: Oh, yes, there was never any problem with that. The Washington press is so regimented on what's background, and what's off the record, and what's on the record, and what's attributable, and what isn't, that they just do it by rote. They know that if they break your confidence that their source is likely to be cut off, so they're pretty careful about it.

F: Did you go over the list of accredited White House people and approve, disapprove, or how is that handled?

C: No, I let Bob Fleming handle it when he was Deputy Press Secretary, and after he left one of my secretaries handled it. She handled it with the Secret Service and other security people, and I didn't have anything to do with it.

F: Who can join? If I went up there like Wick Fowler from the Denton Record-Chronicle as a full-time Washington correspondent, would I be admitted?

C: Yes. Anybody who's a full-time Washington correspondent. It's actually easier to get accredited if you're just one man than it is if you're a bureau full of people. I mean, CBS might want thirty people accredited to the White House, and we would only want to accredit ten. We just didn't see any point in giving everybody in town a White House pass, and anybody else could get temporary access any time they wanted to. We tried to hold it down to a reasonable number in each large bureau where you wouldn't be flooded with people.

F: Let's talk briefly about this matter of White House salaries. You mentioned Bill's financial problems after his brother died. A White House salary is a pretty good salary in Denton. It's not so good in Washington just on the surface. On the other hand, how much of a strain does it put on you, one, and, two, in a hyperactive Administration like Johnson's--how much time do

you have to spend money? In other words, what are the pressures for you to maintain a certain status of living? Are there dress pressures? Neighborhood pressures?

C: Yes, there are great pressures on that. In the first place, most fellows go to work at the White House for salaries exceeding anything they've ever made. There isn't any doubt about that.

F: Looks good on paper.

C: It looks very good on paper. I mean, when you look like you're getting a third more money than you've made, why, that's great. Except if you move into Washington from some other place, the first thing that hits you--if you've got any size family at all--where you could get by in a $25,000 or $30,000 house in Austin, Texas, you have to have a house in Washington anywhere from $60,000 to $75,000. They just don't build houses up there big enough to accommodate anybody in any half-way decent neighborhood anywhere around Washington for less than $50,000, and you're awfully, awfully lucky to find one that cheap. So automatically you dedicate yourself to high house payments of anywhere from $350 to $500 a month if you're in the $30,000 a year salary range. Well, that's awfully steep. You also probably have to go borrow money to help get you there and help buy the drapes and all that assorted stuff, and you usually wind up with another big bank note on top of that. You might not have enough cash to put in on the down payment, and you may have to finagle that in some way--have to saddle youself with more debt with a second lien or something like that.

F: I presume, in general, that banks will work with you just because of the magic of the White House name.

C: I'm sure it helps. They know you must have something on the ball or you wouldn't be there. But on top of that, your wife has to dress pretty darned

well. You go to many functions, including many at the White House, to which you can't go in a Sears Roebuck dress. That part of it automatically runs up. Your own clothing--the wear and tear on a man's clothing is bad enough; you can't go in looking seedy. You can't go in with holes in your shoes. Of course, you can't wear a sport shirt to work which I have done many times in Texas, if I knew I wasn't going anywhere. You have to wear out a suit. You have to have formal clothes. You have to occasionally eat at restaurants that cost you a fortune. You also have a heck of a lot of drop-in trade when you're at the White House--people you've known and relatives and everybody else pour in to see you when you're up there. It's a great thing to be able to come see somebody in the White House, and that means more expense for food and everything else. It is a high pressure, high priced existence, and there is no way to break even. There's no way to work up there--to me--without going into debt.

F: So unless you've got independent means, you've got problems.

C: If you're not wealthy, you're going to go into debt; and that happened to Moyers, and it happened to me, and it happened, I think, to everybody else that ever went up there I guess. And these great $30,000 salaries melted away pretty quick.

My wife is a lawyer, and she worked while we were there. We needed a live-in housekeeper we felt because we had so many children and she was working. Well, she worked and paid for that. And, also, it's a way of life up there to have live-in help. You can't find temporary help. You can hardly find somebody just to come in and clean your house. They either live with you or you don't get one, is about what it amounts to.

F: Plus the fact, of course, if you've got small children and you're gone enough, you're going to need someone--

C: If you're gone a lot, you're going to have to have somebody. So you run into that problem. They raised these top jobs in the White House from $30,000 to $42,500, I think, and I don't think that's enough because the cost of living is going to catch that pretty quick, particularly, real estate costs and other things in Washington which are outrageous. And unfortunately it's going up in other parts of the country--just about to catch them now.

F: So White House salaries are certainly, [only] a basic underwriting . It's not really living.

C: It underwrites a sacrifice, because there is no way to be a six-bit operator in a dollar climate. You can cut some corners, but there are some you can't cut. It's not keeping up with the Joneses as much as it is just trying to keep up with what's expected of you, whether you like it or not.

F: Did the President ever take part in where his staff should go, what functions they should be seen at, and so on? I'm sure you're overwhelmed with invitations.

C: Yes. Not really. He didn't care as long as you--

(Interruption by phone)

F: Social, is that it? I'm sure you knew where to go on a few other occasions.

C: He never worried about where we were going as long as we were available if need be, and as long as we didn't make a habit, you know. Just every night slipping out at 6:30 and going somewhere, because that wasn't our hours at the White House. Our hours ran very, very late most of the time.

What you tried to do was you tried to sample the Embassy parties as much as you could, particularly because it's the only chance in life you ever get to go to them. It's something your wife just ought to have a chance to do.

I always tried to go to any cocktail party, or anything that some member of the press was sponsoring. I missed very, very few of those. In the first place it's just bad business for the Press Secretary not to be there. He's expected to be there. They want him to be there.

F: They look for him.

C: He's kind of the star attraction, you know, and they want you to be there. It hurts their feelings when you're not. Of course, while he never encouraged or discouraged anything particularly, the President just assumed you were going to do that kind of thing.

Many, many times the President himself wanted your companionship. Lyndon Johnson's cronies were generally people who worked for him. There were very few outside people who ever even came about the White House. If he wanted to have dinner with somebody, he got two or three of his staff people, and their wives, and his secretary and her boy friend, and Mrs. Johnson, and maybe one of the daughters and her husband--Lynda or Luci--and had dinner, and went and saw a movie in the theater or something, and went to sleep during the movie; but just generally had a good time. If he wanted to go out on the yacht--the boat--he generally took a couple of staff people and their wives, and maybe a Texas Congressional friend or two and his wife, and maybe some Cabinet officer and his wife, and maybe even a newspaperman and his wife--Bill White in particular was one that used to go with us a good bit--and just go out to relax. These are cronies. We didn't discuss anything of great import a lot of times. We swapped yarns, and he spent most of the time just teasing everybody. This business of government by crony--I swear he had some cronies all right, but a lot of us didn't have any more influence than a dog as far as the way the government was going to go. But there were social

demands like this that kept you pretty tied up a good bit of the time and enjoyable stuff. You liked to do it and all that, but still it was time away from home.

F: Let's shift in what time we have remaining and talk a little bit about your trips abroad and your setting up press relations for that.

C: Well, we took several overseas trips while I was the Press Secretary. They were a mixed bag as far as being successful in terms of press relations, or not successful in terms of press relations. On one or two occasions, it was just like a Chinese fire drill.

F: What do you mean?

C: Well, once we went to Canada to Expo '67. The President couldn't decide whether he was going to go or not. He had been invited to go up there on American Day, I think, at Expo in Montreal to see the American pavilion.

This was just before the Middle East war broke out--1967--and there were great tensions in the Middle East. They were having the Gulf of Aqaba dispute where we were trying to decide whether to put together a western fleet of ships to break the Egyptian blockade and just force the Egyptians to let these ships through to prove that that was international water. Well, this was a tense situation, and he didn't know whether he wanted to run off to Canada with this about to happen.

Yet he also felt it would be good to talk to Lester Pearson [Prime-Minister-Canada], who had won a Nobel Prize for trying to settle wars in that area. He and Pearson were not the best of friends. He had had some disagreements with Pearson.

F: Were their natures sort of abrasive toward each other, or they just--?

C: Yes. Pearson was pretty soft in international affairs, and the President was not by any measure soft-headed in his approach toward world problems.

Pearson was in some ways kind of a pink cloud fellow. He hoped things were a whole lot better than they really were sometimes. The President didn't agree with him on certain matters, but he did think he ought to talk to him about the Middle East. He thought it might have a good effect on the contestants in the Middle East--the fact that he was working to try to work out something. He needed to show the activity even if he got nothing out of it except platitudes.

We had problems with demonstrators in Montreal. They were just poised to cause a problem if he came to Expo, so he wasn't interested in giving much advance notice if he did decide to go.

The night before he was supposed to go he decided--I was with him and we were having dinner at the White House--and he decided about 11 o'clock "I will not go. It's just settled. I'm just not going. It's just not worth it, and I'm going to get in trouble if I go up there. I don't know what the intelligence reports are going to be in the morning. You've got a press plane sitting out here, and I just think you ought to just scrub the whole thing." I mean, I hadn't told the press we were going, but I had ordered a plane just in case we did.

F: On something like that, do you scrub the press plane, or do you just sit tight and wait?

C: I sat tight. I had been burned a time or two on this sort of thing, and I decided to hang on to that press plane and just take a chance on it.

That same night we had sent an advance team up to Montreal. They had stopped on the U.S. side and gone into a motel, and they weren't even going into Canada unless he decided to go. We had to do that, just to prepare.

Lester Pearson had leaked it in Ottawa that the President might come, which made the President unhappy.

F: He couldn't even trust the Prime Minister.

C: Dean Rusk had pretty well told them that the President couldn't come. It was pretty well the climate of it that night.

Anyway early the next morning the President called me at home about 6:30, I guess, and said, "Well, Arthur Goldberg is just really all over me wanting me to go to Canada to see Pearson and Leonard Marks thinks I've got to go to Expo and this is the best time to do it. What kind of problems is this going to cause you if I go?"

And I said, "Well, lots of problems. I've got to call every dadgum reporter. I held the press plane, I've got it coming in about 8:30 out at Andrews, but it's really going to be somewhat of a problem."

And he said, "Well, let me talk to Arthur again. Let me talk to Rusk, and I'll call you back. Don't do anything until I call you back."

About thirty minutes later he called back and said, "Well, I just think I have to go. The intelligence reports are okay. Rusk thinks I ought to go. Goldberg thinks I ought to go. Unless we're just going to have a press disaster, I think we ought to go on and go."

And I said, "Well, I'll do my best with the press thing."

So I called a couple of my office girls and got them to call the other gals and split up the list of regular reporters and technicians and everybody, and start calling and telling them to get out to Andrews by 9 o'clock, or whatever time we were supposed to take off. And it was just disastrous! Lord, they had trouble getting hold of some of the guys, trying to get to Andrews Air Force Base in the morning from anywnere in Virginia or Maryland or the District is just agony in that traffic. It was dangerous. Guys were breaking their necks trying to get out there. A guy might not get the

call. I mean by the time you called everybody, it might be 8:15 or 8:30 before you ever get the guy. And then he has got just to tear out. (Phone)

C: I think we finally got everybody to the plane with one exception. One guy missed the airplane. We flew them to Montreal, and they raised hell all the way up there. I wasn't on the airplane. I believe Tom Johnson was the only press man aboard.

F: Just over short notice and over the life they had to live.

C: Sure, the way we treated them. In their defense, it was unconscionably short notice. Because I mean a guy could have been killed trying to get out there. The main thing they hollered about was that we would treat them so cavalierly. They just resented being treated that cavalierly. They thought that we should have warned them. They thought the Press Office should have warned them the night before on an off-the-record basis or something. But I'd been so sensitive about this that I had told one or two very much off-the-record that we might do something--just be ready in case we did--but generally I had just not spread the word, at the President's instructions. So they were a lot of them caught pretty much offguard. And they hate to be caught offguard.

If I had done nothing more than told them the night before that--. If I had been telling them we weren't going, that there were no plans to go there would have been speculation that he was going to go, but I pretty well sent them home the night before with the attitude that there was a very, very slim chance of going. And then, when we popped that on them the next morning they were furious, and they punished Tom all the way to Montreal.

We followed the President around through the American pavilion, and then we had to helicopter over to-- let's see, I guess we flew. We flew

the press over to the Ottawa airport from Montreal, and the President took a pool by chopper up to Pearson's lake cottage, and they talked up there and the press pool covered him up there.

Back at the airport in Ottawa, where most of the press were, our press filing facilities were badly inadequate. We hadn't had time to really set anything up for them. We didn't have what they call a mult, which allows radio feed, so the radio people were just furious. Just the general climate when we got into Ottawa. The Canadian Press Secretary and I tried to brief them on the meeting--to give them some extra information they hadn't gotten from the pool. They were resentful. They were down-in-the-mouth, and quite agitated.

F: Life just wasn't very pleasant.

C: Life wasn't very pleasant. I took the coward's way out. Well, actually Tom Johnson and I both took the coward's way out. We both flew home on Air Force One with the President. Tom didn't even want to get back on the press plane.

F: Cut down on your exposure.

C: My excuse was that I didn't want to give them any more information beyond what we had agreed to give--what the Canadians and we had agreed to give them--so it would cut down the exposure. I understand they were unahppy all the way home.

Well, when we got on Air Force One, the President--. By this time he knew this was not a very happy time--and Walt Rostow said, "It's pretty bad, isn't it?"

And I said, "It sure is. Lord, I never had a madder bunch of press in my life. We've just got to quit doing this kind of thing." And I told the President that.

And Walt Rostow said, "Well, you've just got to remember what the Abbe' Siéyès wrote after the French Revolution. The bishop [Talleyrand] asked him what did he do during the revolution, and he said,"'J'ai Vecu. I survived.'" And he said, "That's got to be your attitude toward being Press Secretary." But I did survive it. It wasn't very pleasant.

In some of our other travel arrangements, some of them were not much better frankly. The logistics were always the worst problem we had with the press office, and yet logistics are easy when you have advance information. It's the easiest thing in the world to plan.

F: Does the President have a rhythm on this. That is, at night he felt one way and the next day when he would get up and the sun was shining, he felt another way, or was there any--?

C: No, I just think he was never quite certain. He always wanted to keep his option open to the last possible minute. He felt it was his prerogative as President, and I will have to stand up for him on that.

F: Right. He's not running a press tour.

C: That's right. He doesn't have to worry about that. That's somebody else's concern, and he ought to not have to worry about it. But you know, you just have to try to adapt to what he wants to do.

F: Did you ever get the feeling that a good bit of the press criticism on major policy was caused by this, in a sense, minor inconvenience and irritation?

C: No. Because most of the press who criticized him never had much to do with our trips.

F: They were the people who just stayed home and wrote columns?

C: That's right. What it was a source of, it was a source of disenchantment among the press that covered us. It was a source of resentment toward the

President for not having any--they didn't think he had any feeling at all toward them. He treated them like dogs. They were unimportant to him as people; and by showing no consideration to them, they felt they weren't obligated to show a heck of a lot of consideration to him.

Frankly, I think it was needless. I think we created problems that we didn't have to have. We did have security problems late in the Administration. We did have to keep his options open. We did inform the press on [an] off-the-record basis many times of advance travel in order to keep these problems at a minimum, but we also had a reputation for never knowing whether we were going to go somewhere or not, you know, and the press never did believe our reasons for keeping these options open. They never did believe it when the President told them, "I don't want to say I'm going to Texas this weekend. If I don't go, I don't want it said that I had to cancel it because of some world crisis. And I just don't think it's necessary to advertise these things much in advance--travel." They didn't buy it at all.

Eisenhower had always mapped out his schedules far in advance. Kennedy was pretty bad about it. He did, though, have advance notice. Of course, now that President Nixon has come in, they know what Nixon is going to do several months in advance approximately; and if he decides not to go to California after telling them he is going to California, he just says, "Well, I'm not going for a couple more days," and everything's fine. So now in retrospect, they really think we're a bunch of boobs for not confiding in them more on these things and in on not scheduling ourselves in a different way.

F: The President never saw this?

C: No. And in his defense, maybe he shouldn't. I mean that's his business how he operates, but I think that we needlessly created problems with the press

on travel. There's no question about it in my mind, and any Press Secretary who ever served in the White House will tell you the same thing if he's being honest.

F: Plus all the unheard bitching that must have gone on at home by wives who didn't know.

C: Oh, my Lord, yes! I mean, I took heat from the press that I never told the President about. I didn't always go in and say, "Oh, God, they're killing me," or something like that. But they worked me over pretty good sometimes.

The thing is that there was no way to protect him on this particular thing. In most things, if a President does something that he shouldn't have done, a Press Secretary can protect him by taking the rap for him, which I did on several occasions. I took the rap on altered transcripts and other things to keep it off his neck. He had enough problems without having that too. But on travel, we could not take the rap for him. They knew it was the President. They blamed the President. They were irritated at the President, and they chewed us out for not violating the President's orders, you know, by going ahead and telling them anyway. But they knew that we weren't going to do that. I mean, I had a reputation for being intensely loyal.

F: But you were the only thing they could get at.

C: I was the only thing they could get at with their teeth. Anyway, that was a problem, and we had it on overseas trips. The only really--where we had some good overseas trips in the sense of logistics, Punta del Este, and even Central America was an easy one, despite some flap.

F: I want to come back and talk to you about those, but I don't suppose you want to get into that now, do you?

C: It's probably a little late.

Do you have any shorties you want to wrap up?

Interviewer's Note:

Following the interview, Mr. Christian and I visited briefly. The previous time that I had interviewed him, we must have talked for forty minutes, mainly informally about the President. This time he told me about wearing a tie and the President's looking him over and saying, "That tie is too short for a man of your height," with which the President showed him how tall men should manipulate their ties by cutting them at the center fold and putting a piece of navy blue or black cloth for six or eight inches as a bridge to lengthen the tie. The tie which Christian was putting on on this occasion had such an extension in its center. We discussed the President's interest in details, especially details of people associated with him.

Christian was in the White House one morning talking with the President while the President was in the bathroom. Through the mirror above him the President noticed a thinning spot on Christian's head. "George, you're getting bald," he said. Christian agreed. "It's because you don't comb your hair right. Sit down here and let me show you how to comb it." And with that the President took out comb and brush and for some minutes thereafter very carefully alternately brushed and combed Christian's hair so that it would cover the bald spot. The President seemed quite satisfied with his results and told Christian that this was the way he ought to wear his hair every day. Christian felt that the President's style for Christian which meant combing it pretty much straight forward left him looking like a freak, and as soon as he could get outside the President's view he went back to combing it the regular way with exposure of his bald spot.

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By George Christian

to the

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