INTERVIEW II

INTERVIEWEE: WILBUR J. COHEN

INTERVIEWER: DAVID C. MCCOMB

DATE: March 2, 1969

PLACE: Mr. Cohen's home, Silver Spring, Maryland

Tape 1 of 1

M: This is the second session with Wilbur Cohen. Once again, I am in his home in Silver Spring. The date is March 2, 1969. The time is 2:15 in the afternoon. And I am David McComb.

I think maybe it's time to say something about Lyndon B. Johnson as a personality, as a chief executive. You mentioned on the last tape some of your early connections with Lyndon Johnson and some of the people that were connected with him who had connections with you. You mentioned [Ted] Sorensen as I recall, and connections through Kennedy which also brought you into contact with Lyndon Johnson.

C: Well, my actual relationship with Lyndon Johnson developed before my relationship to Kennedy really developed. I had worked in several activities relating to Social Security that Mr. Johnson was familiar with, and he therefore connected me up closely with the whole Social Security program. This definitely had a very constructive aspect to our relationship because it is my opinion that Mr. Johnson looked upon the Social Security Act which had been engineered by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as one of the great

legislative triumphs of you might say, the century. I believe that grew out of the very important fact that Mr. Johnson was essentially a populist at heart. And one who was deeply concerned about the Biblical injunction of honoring thy father and thy mother. If you'll go back and look at Mr. Johnson's personal relationships, he had both a father and mother image complex, I think. He did very much honor his father and his mother. You can look all through his life and see how he respected them and how he talked about them and how he was concerned about people who became old and indigent and sick and disabled and he wanted to do something about them.

Now, the relationship of that to me was, that I was a participant at an early age in the formulation and development of the Social Security Act always gave me a constructive image in his mind. When my name popped up, the fact that I was connected with Social Security, that was automatically something good. And so long before I knew him in the sense of a personal relationship, he had already typed me, in my opinion. This is conjecture on my part based upon many conversations. That since I was connected with Franklin D. Roosevelt's Social Security program I was a pretty good fellow. And since Social Security and old age were connected with honoring thy father and thy mother and doing something for poor people and the aged, that was necessarily good. So as I came up the ladder in Social Security, he obviously knew about me. He had heard about me, and although we had very little close personal relationship, by the time we did get together, I was somebody who he thought well of. And that was probably maximized by the fact that his close friend Elizabeth Wickenden constantly said to him every time he got on the Social Security program, "Well, why don't you talk to Wilbur Cohen? That's

his field; he knows a lot about it. He's trustworthy," and so on.

So I came to be one of those people whom Lyndon Johnson had confidence in and for whom he felt a trustworthiness and from whom he felt a long connection. Now, when you analyze Lyndon Johnson's personality, you realize how important this is because Lyndon Johnson always paid attention to people whom (a) he had a long connection with; (b) whom he thought were trustworthy; and (c) who had some of the same similar postulates or assumptions about legislation and social matters. So that again I was one who had a certain degree of advantage in my relationship with him as an eventual Cabinet member that I think others did not have. What do I mean by that? I mean that my relationship, I think, to Lyndon Johnson was in a special category. First, he was never critical, abusive to me as is claimed he was with many others on the White House staff. My relationship with him was always on an exceedingly high level. He was praiseworthy of me; he was complimentary to me; he was appreciative of me. I don't recall even when we were in most serious disagreement about matters I could talk back to him. I wrote him memos telling him not to do what he was doing, and it did not endanger our relationship because I think of this peculiar relationship that grew out of my past and his past.

M: Did you ever experience his quick temper?

C: Once in awhile. In the last month when he and I had a couple of differences he spoke sharply to me and I spoke back sharply to him. And I think this was an indication that our relationship was pretty solid, but he was quick on response, particularly like if you recommended somebody for a job that he didn't have confidence in, he'd tell you right off

the bat that that fellow was no good; "he's not one of our people," and so on. And he'd snap right back. That I could understand. He had quick responses to many, many, many things.

M: What about his reputation for being devious? Is there any truth in that?

C: Well, I don't think he was devious in the ordinary sense of that term. I think that Lyndon Johnson's attitude was that every person had some kind of an Achilles' heel that would respond to some particular type of analysis. And I think as a legislator, as the majority leader, his general attitude was "Well, if you want to get that guy to help you, find out what is the element in his personality or his background that will bring him out?" And when people talk about being devious was the fact that he was in his way a kind of junior psychiatrist, I think. By that, I simply mean that he always felt that if you wanted to get the other fellow to work with you, find out what is the element that he would work with you on. Now, people call that devious, and I can understand what they meant, but it was an outgrowth of his long legislative experience and analysis--working with Sam Rayburn and Bob Kerr and these other people, who always felt that you could work out some kind of a compromise or some kind of a relationship with people if you found out what it was that you related to. I never found him particularly devious with me; I did not experience that. I do think that Lyndon Johnson had what I call the principle of triangulation.

M: Can you explain that?

C: The principle of triangulation is that you always try to get three or more sources of information on a problem. And if those lines interconnect, where they interconnect is something that is profitable to undertake because all three agree upon it. It's a principle, I

think, that grew out of his legislative strategy. It was don't do what A says, because it may be opposed to B and C, but if A, B, and C all agree on one thing, then you can do that even though A, B, and C are in disagreement on all other things. You see, that's the art of legislative compromise. I many times found that very distracting to me because I'd come to him with a recommendation and I knew absolutely that he would send it to B and ask C and so I learned to contact B and C before I gave it to him to know that I was going in the direction that I'd get the results. So I think this quality of deviousness was an outgrowth of his own legislative experience. And all I can say is once you understood how he worked, then you could work in harmony with that sort of principle.

M: Speaking of a personality trait, he also had the reputation of being crude in his language--rough. Is this true?

C: Yes, it was true. And yet, he could also be the most sensitive, interpersonal man I know. In other words, he was a complex, contradictory personality. I have heard him, when we were on his ranch going by and watching the animals, refer to all sorts of sexual characteristics of the animals and of people, and then five minutes later you could stand on the hillside there watching the sunset and you'd find a man who was a poet in describing the sunset and the relationship of the land to the people and his hopes and aspirations for people. And it seemed to me therefore that people who talk about this crudity did not understand that this was an earthy man. This was a man like a combination of Boccaccio and Machiavelli and John Keats. So that I found that interesting about him, because I enjoy working with complex personalities. And too many of these people who are critical of Johnson assume that a human being had one

personality trait exclusive of others, and human beings are not usually like that. And he just was bigger and more intense and had more of these qualities. When he spoke about Mrs. Johnson, for instance, or about his ranch or about Texas or about older people or about children, this man was as sensitive and understanding and had as much insight as anyone that you could find. And yet, it is true that he had a language which was descriptive, which was earthy, and there he is! That kind of a person.

M: Was that kind of language, when he spoke in crude terms, was it offensive to you?

C: Well, it was a little unexpected, I'd say. I think that comes about largely because of one's own expectations that a president of the United States should have certain ahuman qualities. And here is the problem. These criticisms grow out of the image that the other person has that the president of the United States should be above human frailty. I have been one for that kind of language but on the other hand, some times it is very descriptive and it is very understanding, and I think it's the circumstances under which it's used and how it's said. But it always is a little bit shocking to anyone to hear it from the president of the United States. My close connection with John Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson led me to believe that while the presidency of the United States, when that mantle falls upon you, changes you from just an ordinary human being to somebody who looks at human and national and world problems in a different light with your responsibility. After all, you're still a human being, and you have many of the same personality characteristics that have developed during your development, and why should anybody assume that you are not going to continue to be a human being? But people do. People do. So, therefore, it's shocking because of what <u>you</u> bring to the situation.

M: Does this reputation for pettiness also fall into the same category?

C: Well, yes, it did. Lyndon Johnson could spend as much time on some appointment to an advisory committee of some person as he would on a big gigantic issue. As a matter of fact, I have had the situation where he took my recommendation on very, very big issues without a moment's discussion and then we would spend hours of differences of opinion on appointing one man or one woman to some twenty-member committee whom he didn't think was somebody that shouldn't be put on. And he'd pay a lot of detail attention to that even after the election [1968] when you'd think that he'd become kind of--saying, "Well, what difference does it make?" I'd have to go back and forth, going over with him in the last days, the appointment of various people to commissions and committees because his stock in trade, I think, was a relationship of people to him and of him to other people. And the fact that he was no longer going to be president after January 20 didn't seem to make any difference in his decision-making as to what to do during that last month.

At the same time, he could deal with the smallest inconsequential matters at the same time he dealt with large issues, and he'd be watching the tickertape and telling people to follow things up. And he was simply a man who had such a tremendous capacity for work and interest that his range was all the way from one extreme to another. To some extent I think this may be the basic criticism of him that he found it difficult to pick out the essential elements that he could make a unique contribution in the conservation of his time and energy. He tried to do all sorts of things all the way from writing the script on a piece of information, to getting the right people, and to having his

input on almost every aspect of a problem that you were dealing with.

M: Did he have a logical mind?

C: Yes, he had a very logical mind. I would say that he had an extremely logical mind in the sense that he could focus in on a question and barrel in on it and keep on that until it was solved from his point of view. Now, when you say logical, he was not a technician; he was not a man who wanted to spend a lot of time on technical details. I think his general attitude was sound there--that he had people he had confidence in and he would accept their judgment on technical details. But on people and on relationships, he felt that that was something that he knew something about, and that was something that he wanted to have his imprint on.

M: Have you reflected any on the difficulties of management that a chief executive would face?

C: Well, yes I have. I think that Lyndon Johnson tried to manage too much. My criticism would be that he tried to get into too many things, and yet he, I'm sure, left office feeling that he delegated a great deal to his Cabinet officers. He mentioned that many times. And again in many ways he did. There were certain areas that he didn't bother with at all. While I was secretary there were whole areas of matters within my department that I would have normally probably cleared with Ted Sorensen if Kennedy was president that I didn't do with Johnson; but on the other hand, there were things that you had to clear with Johnson that you wouldn't have had to clear with Kennedy.

M: Can you tell me what these are?

C: Well, I think they mainly go toward appointment of individuals to jobs. He wanted to

make his imprint on history through qualified people who had a bold and noble view of government. And he wanted to be sure that the people you appointed were good people and they had a broad vision and he wanted you to bring them over. He wanted to talk with them and find out what they thought. He reprimanded me once when I was under secretary for not clearing with him the appointment of Stanley Yolles as director of the National Institute of Mental Health. He said, "Why didn't you tell me about that and let me have some input on it?"

And I said, "Well, Mr. President, I didn't know--"

He said, "After this, you bring those matters to me."

And the point was, you see, that he felt that Mental Health in its role was so important that he wanted to see this man--he wanted to understand him. He would have taken my recommendation, I think, in that. But his conception of the role of the presidency is that he ought to have a significant impact on the bureaucracy.

Now, that's something, I think, we ought to develop. Because, you see, Lyndon Johnson had been in government some thirty-odd years. And he knew from his long contacts with Abe Fortas and with the man Wirtz who was Under Secretary of Interior--

M: Alvin Wirtz?

C: Alvin Wirtz.

M: He's a lawyer from Austin.

C: Yes, and these other people, how important a role the people in the bureaucracy played with Congress, the chief executive, the formulation of policy, and so on. And I think he was sensitive to bureaucracy and its importance and the selection of qualified people.

And he felt, I'm certain, that during his role as president, that that was one area that he wanted to make a great contribution to. So he naturally gave a lot of time and attention. The selection of the women, this whole program that he had to get qualified women. The whole business of the Medal of Freedom. The whole question about the five or ten people who received the Civil Service Awards. Well, he paid a lot of attention to those. He invested a lot of his own time and psychic energy. You really ought to be sure to talk with John Macy about that. Because I think that's indicative of a principle that he had which is going to be increasingly more important, that the president's role is one of having an impact upon the bureaucracy and the selection of personnel. Because the president can't do it all himself, and he recognized that. And if he wanted to have a long term impact he felt that by bringing in qualified, bright, bold people, as president he would have an impact on the bureaucracy and its policies.

M: Was he disappointed in the way people turned out?

C: I don't think so. I think on the whole he felt that he had good people. I think the one area that he felt most discouraged about in my conversations with him was the people in the OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] program. He felt that the people in OEO were disloyal to him. That is the one area that I have heard him say many times, "Well, I don't want to appoint that fellow. He's from OEO. He's disloyal to me. He's a trouble-maker. He's . . ." this, that, or the other thing. He had gotten, I think, from a number of people including Mayor [Richard J.] Daley and from other political people that the OEO people were always trying to undermine him. And I think there is the area that he had the greatest dissatisfaction with. You see, I appointed two people from OEO to key jobs

during my secretaryship. One was Jules Sugarman who was head of the Head Start program, who I made associate chief of the Children's Bureau, and who incidentally now in the transition is acting chief for the Children's Bureau by Mr. Finch's appointment, and Dr. Joe English, who was head of the Neighborhood Health Service. Now, I had a big problem with him in getting those two people appointed.

M: Because of their OEO--?

C: Because of their OEO connections. And I had to assure him over and over again that they were neither disloyal to him nor part of the OEO complex. I also recommended at one time that Bert Harding be the under secretary instead of [James H.] McCrocklin, and he would not accept that recommendation. He would have been much better off, in my opinion, to have made Harding the under secretary instead of McCrocklin. McCrocklin got into a lot of difficulty over his thesis and his wife's thesis, and that's still going on right now.

M: McCrocklin's appointment though seemed to be short-run?

C: Oh, yes, both of them would have been short-run. But what I was hoping that by bringing Harding over, we could have dovetailed most of OEO into HEW. But Johnson didn't want to do that. And he also wanted to leave Harding where he was. He wanted McCrocklin to have the job. I believe he offered the job first to Terry Sanford as Under Secretary. He at least said that to me. And Terry Sanford turned it down. And then he went to McCrocklin. He asked me, however, if I would concur in McCrocklin's appointment. He didn't do it *ex parte*; he was very conscientious and sensitive and my knowing that it was going to be short-run, I agreed to it although I did not know

McCrocklin's problems in regard to his thesis. If I had known it, I doubt that I would have been willing to do it.

M: On these appointments such as that of McCrocklin, what role does partisan politics play?

C: Well, in that particular case, I don't think that partisan politics played any role at all. I think it was, you might say, personal politics. That is, the President tended always to go to somebody that he knew and that he knew was somebody who would understand him and that he would understand and that he would have good personal relationship with. The President was very, very personal in his relationships. And even though he didn't see a man a lot, he thought that the man had to have confidence in him and he had to have confidence in the man. And he had to have a working relationship with him so that I think it was more that than anything else.

M: Are you convinced that Lyndon Johnson was a hard-working president?

C: Oh, I think that's one of his difficulties. I think a major difficulty was he was too hardworking. He didn't take time off, let's say, like Kennedy did. Kennedy took time off to listen to Pablo Casals play the cello. I think that Johnson was President twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, all of the time, which a President has to be. But I don't think he has to pay attention as much to every sparrow that falls in the forest. And I think that's what Johnson did. He was very hardworking, too much hardworking. He didn't, in my opinion, take enough time off--time off in terms of sheer relaxation. He liked to go to the Ranch and he liked to do things, but I remember even swimming with him in the pool and while he was swimming in the pool, he was working! I mean, he had two or three other people there swimming and his assistants. And he's swimming and he's telling

them things to do and working while he's swimming! In other words, he almost never took any time off.

H: The books and people that write about him and so forth say that he was almost a completely political animal--that this was his whole life. That he talked about politics constantly and talked about little else. Is this true?

C: Well, I'm not in a position to affirm or deny that all the time. I think he talked about the role of the presidency all the time when he was president. Just like I think probably when he was majority leader, he talked about the role of the majority leader. He was a man who, whatever his responsibilities were, I think did a twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week. Some people call that compulsive. In a way, I think he was a compulsive person, but he was the kind of a man who threw himself wholeheartedly into his responsibility and there was no half-way about him. I don't think it was that he was political. I think that he was concerned about the problems that fell within his responsibility. And he wanted to work on them all the time and he wanted to do more than a human being could possibly do. Perhaps that's the point that I would say.

Not every human problem is susceptible to being handled by the president of the United States. I think the president of the United States has to select from a wide range or problems and a wide range of difficulties and a wide range of alternatives those in which he can uniquely make a contribution. And Lyndon Johnson worked on everything. And he felt that everything was something that could be worked on and anything that he worked on could be subject to change. Now I think that as Ted Sorensen or President Kennedy said, "You find when you're president of the United States"--or maybe it was

Truman--"that not everything will change or modify just because as president of the United States you think it ought to change." And so in the role of the presidency, I think you ultimately find out that there are forces and factors that can be changed in the short run; there are some that can be changed in the long run; there are some that can't be changed either in the short run or the long run as easily as you think. You only have a short period of time in office; you've got to work through a lot of different people and institutions, and you've got to find out what it is that you can do and what you can't do. And the only way you find that out is by trial and error. And consequently you find out that there are some things that you can't do.

H: Does this mean that you think that he perhaps took on too much and tried to do too much?

C: Yes, I do.

M: And that he would be better off to have done less perhaps?

C: Well, I think there are two reasons for that. One, that he tried to do too much and work too hard at it with too many small things mixed up in with the big. But I don't think the American people can handle so much in one time. In other words, Lyndon Johnson's aspirations for what he wanted of America and wanted for the United States of America and what he wanted to achieve involved him in doing things in such a short period of time that the average person was unable to comprehend. It was too big; it was too much for them to swallow all at once, even though everything he did needed to be done, and much more. I think his major problem was that he was not able to persuade most of the American people that this needed to be done, and yet he knew it had to be done. Take for

instance his difficulties in the whole matter of the civil rights program, desegregation of schools. I think President Johnson did more in that area than any president of the United States has done since Lincoln. And yet, it's the very factor that partially caused his downfall. I mean, the more he did in that area, the more he alienated the South, the more he alienated the ethnic minorities, the more he alienated the rednecks; the more he alienated the lower middle-class, and the net result is he lost that part of the base that Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy had. And I think he knew this. I think he knew it in 1965. I remember a conversation of his that he had with a number of us. I think he knew that, and yet he knew that he couldn't do otherwise.

M: Why couldn't he back off?

C: Well, because I think he had a sense of history. And I think he had a sense of what needed to be done. And he knew if he backed off, then the criticism against him would even be greater from the people who felt that he--after all, he wanted to be a great president! He didn't want to be a small man. He didn't want to be an ordinary president. He wanted to tackle the big problems of our time. And quite frankly, contrary to most other people, I think that probably if he had done less on the desegregation and certain other areas despite the Vietnam War, I think there would have been an outside chance that he could have been re-nominated and reelected. I know that's not the-- And probably maybe he couldn't have. But what I'm saying is that the things he did in the desegregation program and in the poverty program, in the net I think lost him votes, and lost him support. Certainly the poverty program didn't win him support from the lower middle-class people. Most of these people thought the poverty program was wasteful and

inefficient and certainly from the desegregation program, they thought that he was cow-towing too much to the Negroes. He lost the Southern votes. And these were the people who had backed him all the time--had backed the Democratic Party. And yet in a sense as I look back on it, he had no other alternative. Even I recognized these things when I was secretary--there was no turning back. In a way sometimes history is so much larger than the man. The man or the political party. There was no turning back. Even though you knew you were losing political support.

H: You mentioned a conversation that he had with a group of you in 1965. Do you recall any of the details of that?

C: Yes, I recall it very well. It was a meeting we had shortly after he was elected--I'd say it was the end of January, probably the beginning of February 1965, when he called all the people who were handling legislation in the various departments together. I was then the assistant secretary for legislation. And he said in that meeting to about thirty or fifty of us in the Fish Room, he said, "Now, look. I've just been reelected by the overwhelming majority. And I just want to tell you that every day while I'm in office, I'm going to lose votes. I'm going to alienate somebody." And then he took about twenty minutes and traced the history of other presidents, including Franklin D. Roosevelt in connection with his 1936 campaign and the court-packing plan; he traced Wilson and other people. And he says, "The president begins to lose power fast once he has been reelected, and I'm going to do that too. It's going to be something. It's going to either be Vietnam or it's going to be this or it's going to be that, but it's going to be something." And he said, "We've got to get this legislation fast. You've got to get it during my honeymoon." And

as you know, that was the period in 1965 in which there was the greatest degree of performance, and he used that period of four or five months to just push us as hard as possible. I never worked so hard in my life between February of 1965 and June of 1965, in which we got the elementary and secondary education bill, the Medicare bill, and a whole host of other bills. He knew what he was doing. And even though he knew he was making people angry and annoyed by his rush tactics, he had a sense of the history of the presidency in which he said if he didn't get it then, he probably wouldn't get it.

M: Do you think he was correct in that now?

C: And I think generally he was correct in that. I might have slowed it up just a little bit more myself, but again in April 1965 just before the Easter recess, he sent Larry O'Brien up on the Hill. And I met Larry O'Brien in [Majority Leader Mike] Mansfield's office right outside the Senate floor, in which Larry O'Brien and I were working to get several bills passed that day in what I think is probably one of the most unusual and phenomenal periods in history in which we were trying to set a record. Now, many people thought that what Johnson was trying to do was to get a lot of bills passed before the Easter recess in order to have some short-run effect. That wasn't it. He was very conscious of the fact of getting it while the time was right, and Larry and I sat in Mansfield's office and we alternately kind of laughed and commiserated with each other on the business of getting more bills passed that afternoon. And he was talking with the President on the phone, and the President would say, "Well, can't you get another one or two yet this afternoon?" And Larry would say, "No, I think we've done as much, Mr. President, as we can."

He said, "Well, you can get another one or two yet this afternoon. How about this

bill or that?" And so those two experiences in February of 1965 and April 1965 have led me to believe that the President had a historical understanding of the role of the presidency in terms of legislative developments. And he realized that he had to exploit the historical moment to get that legislation, and he did.

Now, the problem is of course the American people generally--they thought that [t?]his was all going too fast and too far. They couldn't understand all this rush of legislation and the individual bills. And I do think that it will only be, you know, twenty years from now when the historians write the history books, that Lyndon Johnson will get credit for what he did, and not the people at the time who really understood it. As a matter of fact, most of the people have forgotten it already. They didn't know it passed at the time; they don't know yet what's in it, and even though much more needed to be done, I think that part of his record will only be truly understood in the course of historical perspective.

M: Now, what does all this rush of legislation do to Congress? Does it strain them as well?

C: Well, I don't think the congressional people felt either good or bad about it. I don't think it really destroyed any of his relationships in Congress; it made people work faster than ever before. And you have to recognize that Congress is an institution that has been built to slow things down. That's the nature of the congressional performance--the reason our framers of the Constitution made two houses and all the various steps that are involved in legislation was to slow down the process of legislation in case there was a King George III again. That's what motivated them. So Lyndon B. Johnson knew all of the places where you could falter as you went along, and he tried to push it along. He had good

help, but I do think that the members of Congress--some of them--felt that things were going too fast, and maybe in one sense they were going too fast. But I don't think at that particular moment that endangered his relationships with the members of his own party, or even some of the others.

M: Now, you mentioned he had good help. Does that mean good staff men or what?

C: Well, Lyndon Johnson had a number of people helping him. On the whole, all of them were very able people. But none of them really enjoyed the kind of relationship Ted Sorensen and Mike Feldman had with Kennedy. And this always made for some degree of anxiety all the way around.

M: Now, will you explain that?

C: My general feeling was that when you dealt with Ted Sorensen and you agreed on something, you were 9,999 times agreeing with the President. You knew that that was it. However, with [Joe] Califano and with some of the others, they always had to put a caveat in, "Well, don't do anything until we let you know." And the President would reverse them many times or delay, or the President would consult with someone else. And this injected a note of uncertainty into the whole relationship. I've always felt that if you wanted to work with staff, that the staff had to have the almost complete confidence and authority of the principal, or otherwise they not only felt a sense of uncertainty, but you did. While I worked a good deal with Joe Califano, and I found my working relationship with Joe Califano very good, I always felt that Joe was a little unsure himself about whether he could get the President to approve something. And that was a little bit of a hesitant quality. The same thing was true in my relationship with Doug Cater. Both

of these men were intelligent and able men that I dealt with, and their assistants--Jim Gaither and Larry Levinson, but I did not find that the relationship worked out 100 per cent.

One of the last controversies I had with the President had to do with the matter of the declaration of income of welfare. And the President asked me why I announced such a policy without consulting with him. And I said I had cleared it with Jim Gaither. And he said, "Well, clearing it with Jim Gaither is not clearing it with me." I said, "Well, I've cleared it with one of your assistants, and I assumed that that's all right." And he said, "Well, why didn't you clear it with me?" He said, "You can always come to see me." I said, "Mr. President, that is not correct. I can't always come to see you on everything." He said, "Absolutely you can. You know your relationship with me is such that you can come to see me." I said, "Mr. President, you're a very busy man, and I can't come to see you even though you think I can." And he said, "Yes, you can." We got into quite an argument about this. And he said, "Well, you said Jim Gaither--" So he got Jim Gaither on the phone and he just bawled him out on the telephone in this way that is generally reported of how he critically criticized one of his own staff assistants, who, I think, had done a very good job. But obviously the President had not known about it nor had been consulted and he felt that I was doing something that I had not checked with him. Well, I think that this kind of a staff relationship is not very good.

M: You, as a Cabinet secretary, would always be unsure then of the information you got from a staff man?

C: Well, yes and no. I mean, it depends on what the problem was. Now, I went blithely

ahead on that particular one, thinking that the President had approved it or knew about it, in any case. I don't mean to say he knew about the policy in any detail. He hadn't. He didn't. And the President and I had quite a number of conversations subsequently on this matter, and I was only able to ultimately solve the situation by suggesting to him that I would work out a compromise with Secretary-designate Finch, which I was able to do; and I was therefore able to have my policy ultimately adopted, but not because it was originally approved by the White House, but because I did what was typically a Lyndon Johnson type experience. I got Finch to agree with my compromise; whereas, as you know in the issues between Wirtz and Udall, they were not able to do that in the last few days.

But back on the staff side of the President, I always felt a sense of uncertainty. And although I do not know the details of the relationship between Doug Cater and John Gardner, I feel in my own heart that something about the relationship between Cater, Gardner, and the President had a large part to do in precipitating Gardner's resignation at the time he resigned. I think he was going to resign anyway, but I think the White House relationship between Cater and the President and Gardner exacerbated it or certainly didn't help it, although the major problem was the relationship of the President and Gardner. This third factor of the staff did not help. And although I talked to Gardner and Cater many, many times, both of them were rather reluctant to discuss it in any detail which merely confirms in my mind that something happened between Cater and Gardner and the President which I made up my mind I wouldn't let happen to me. Therefore, on several occasions I went directly to the President without telling the White House staff.

This was my solution to the problem. When I felt that the White House staff, while I was Secretary, was going to make the situation very difficult, I did not tell them what I was going to do and I went directly to the President.

I guess I'm just repeating myself, but I think the key difference was that the White House staff had a greater sense of confidence in working with Kennedy; that is, Sorensen and Feldman had that sense of confidence in their relationship with Kennedy and Kennedy with them which didn't bring this uncertainty into the relationship.

M: Was there any change in the work of the White House staff in its thoroughness as time went by?

C: No, I don't think so. If anything, I think they did more and more staff work as time went on. I think Johnson believed in a lot of staff work. Now, I think there's one other major difference that accounts for it. Like when I was working with Sorensen and Feldman and Kennedy, they would bring me into direct relationship with Kennedy when the project was closed. But this hardly ever happened with Johnson. Johnson would stay away from the principal; he liked his staff people to do the work and tie everything up and then tell them the decision which would be told you in a sense indirectly. Now, of course, the situation was a little bit different. I was an assistant secretary in the Kennedy Administration, but I had more contact with Kennedy as an assistant secretary for legislation than I had with Johnson when I was either assistant secretary or secretary or under secretary on legislation. Johnson kept a separateness about his relationship that he worked through the staff which I think again made that kind of separation an anxiety and uncertainty more present. Also, there was more change of personnel during the course of

time until Joe Califano and Cater really took the major responsibility.

M: Is there any significance in the change of personnel?

C: Well, getting acquainted and just time consuming. I don't think there was anything particularly important in that, but, you know, with Kennedy knowing Sorensen ahead of time and Feldman, I was able to start working with them. On January 21-22, we were working as if we'd worked ten years before. There was no lack of time. I forget when Kennedy's first message went up, but we were just chugging away at a great speed. And I just think that Johnson, again, had this triangulation theory. He would very, very rarely do what you suggested right when you suggested it. He wanted to take it back and have somebody else look at it and then have another person look at it. And then if they all agreed, then he would sort of consider it.

H: Did he ever just neglect to give you a decision?

C: Yes. There were times when he would say, "Well, let me have that and I'll let you know." And then you would have to push on it to get a decision.

M: Do you suppose this was a tactic that he--

C: Well--

M: didn't want to make a decision?

C: Well, sometimes, but unless it was something that was important to him, what was important to you came down in the scale of events. And this was particularly true in the latter days of his office when I was secretary. And I would just keep browbeating him until I got at least his attention. But there were many times I made suggestions to him, and one or two suggestions he accepted and he never told me, again, about them. For

instance, I was the one who suggested to him that you ought to put the money coming from shale oil reserves into education. I gave him a memo on that. But he just took it and he never said anything more to me, and the next thing I know, about a week or two later, he came out and he announced that. He never said anything to me that it was a good idea or a bad idea. So he'd take some things and others he wouldn't.

He made his own priorities, so that the staff work in the White House was very good in the sense that they worked hard. Califano, Gaither, Cater, all those people worked hard and long, but they didn't always win the complete enthusiasm and support of the executive branch because there was a kind of a standoffish relationship. However, I would like to say this, that my relationship to them was much better than, let's say, Wirtz's. I am not in a position to know or grade all the secretaries, but the relationship between Wirtz and the White House staff in my opinion got into a very serious difficulty for a couple of years. Even though Wirtz was closer to the President in many ways than I was, his relationship to the White House staff was much more uncertain. They viewed him as a much more man of emotional uncertainty. And I can't say how the different secretaries worked with the White House staff, but on the whole my relationship with the White House staff was very good.

M: Can you draw any comparisons between the way Kennedy dealt with Congress and the way Johnson dealt with Congress?

C: Oh, yes. Kennedy dealt with Congress in a sense that he had that kind of respect that goes from having been a rather junior member of the establishment. Kennedy was never part of "the inner circle," or "the club" when he was in Congress. And he always acted

just like he previously did that he was on the outside looking in. Johnson always acted like he was still on the inside looking out, and like he was still running Congress. There was a big difference. I've been in Johnson's office when he was on the telephone for an hour or two with members of Congress, talking with them, and cajoling with them, and persuading with them and so on. And if any man spent a lot of time with the members of Congress, it was Johnson. So there was a big difference in temperament and approach, and I think that's one of the reasons he got more out of them. But also, you've got to remember one thing: familiarity breeds contempt. And the more Johnson dealt with them and the more he pushed them and the more he compromised and the more he cajoled with them, the more their natural animosity and antagonism grew; and this is natural with all presidents and Congress.

I think it was Woodrow Wilson who pointed out that there's an inborn friction between the legislative branch and a powerful chief executive. Johnson exacerbated what would normally have been that kind of relationship because he pushed them, he cajoled with them, and he worked with them on their own level of political compromise and personality and the things that they felt they knew. And so I think that there was that feeling. Now, with Kennedy I think the members of Congress felt that Kennedy didn't know how to use Congress, so that I think there were two extremes. The Congressmen looked upon Kennedy as a nice boy, but not a guy who could get what he wanted. I think by and large with Johnson, they looked upon him as a man who was able to outdo them at their same tricks, and therefore that familiarity bred contempt. So there's no really harmonic mean in the matter of the legislative relationship or the relationship of the chief

executive to the Congress. It must always, in my opinion, be fraught with difficulties. And somewhat I look upon it like a marriage. You're going to live together, but you're always sort of criticizing the other partner for something he didn't do or she didn't do or could have done better, and different personalities and different emphases. And yet the children of the marriage are your legislation, and so you decide to stay together for the interests of the legislation, and you keep on working even though you have a lot of criticisms about individual small details.

H: Do you agree with the analysis that some of the historians and political writers are putting out that Johnson was able to put into legislation what Kennedy could not.

C: Yes, I do.

M: And is this because of Kennedy's death and his martyr-like reputation that allowed Johnson to take advantage of this and do it, or was it due to Johnson's own political expertise?

C: No, I think it was primarily because Barry Goldwater ran against Johnson. In other words, it was the election. Now, I think Kennedy assumed and wanted Barry Goldwater to run against him, and he felt that he would beat him pretty much like Johnson beat him, and then he'd have four years to carry out his legislative program. And no one will ever know. But I tend to think that the results would have been pretty much the same, assuming Goldwater running against Kennedy, although I don't think Kennedy would have driven as hard as Johnson did. Instead of getting 138 bills in my area, maybe Kennedy'd have only gotten 125 or something like that.

M: Also, sort of a contemporary question that has come up due to Eric Goldman's book

about Lyndon Johnson [*The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*]--was Lyndon Johnson alienated from the so-called intellectual community? At least, you've got one foot in the intellectual community.

C: Well, yes, I think that there was an inability of Johnson and the intellectuals to discuss the same problems in the same terms. And I think that Johnson made a very serious mistake by trying to woo the intellectuals through people like Goldman. If I could coin a phrase, Goldman was the wrong man at the wrong time at the wrong place, because Johnson shouldn't have made an effort to do what was unnatural to him and to his environment and to his background. It could have been better left unsaid and undone. But he tried and he constantly felt therefore that as this went on, that the intellectuals were against him because he was a Texan and because he wasn't from the Ivy League and he wasn't a Harvard man and all of that thing. And that just kept blowing up bigger and bigger and bigger.

Now, I think that would have probably happened anyway because of the Vietnam War. But if there had been no Vietnam War, I still think that many of the intellectuals wouldn't have liked Johnson, but they could have been persuaded that his legislative accomplishments on the domestic scene were great. And I think, you might say, the situation might have been a draw. But again I think that his big mistake, recognizing who he was and what he was going to do, was having [Arthur?] Schlesinger and Goldman on his staff. Because that created a false impression of being able to work with the intellectuals and under the circumstances, he couldn't do that. Now, I don't know that the answer to that is--I do think that there is this problem that many of the people in the

academic area are much more interested in style than they are in accomplishments. And this is one of the weaknesses of the academic community that when they come to appraise the accomplishment, the way you do it, the process that you do it, the means that you do it, is as important to them as the end result. And to some even more. So that Johnson's means and methods which were more earthy and more robust and more unconventional and less suitable to the intellectuals were bound to get him into difficulty. I believe that this was an area fraught with great difficulty.

M: Now, you apparently had a close relationship with Hubert Humphrey.

C: Yes.

M: He was the one who swore you in.

C: Yes.

M: As secretary. And you also did some campaign work for him.

C: Yes, I did.

M: Was that relationship with Hubert Humphrey, or did that relationship cause any stress or strain between you and the President?

C: Not that I'm aware of. The President joked with me. Now, may I point this out. I did not pick Hubert Humphrey to swear me in without going to the President and asking him whether it was okay. In other words, I used my own political judgment that I didn't want the President to feel that I was picking Hubert in order to be on the good side of Hubert in the campaign as against Lyndon B. Johnson. And I didn't know how he'd feel, so I went to him and I said, "Now, I would like Hubert to swear me in if that's satisfactory with you."

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And he said, "Absolutely." He was genuine and spontaneous. But I wouldn't have done a thing like that without consulting with the President because that's a kind of a sensitive problem that the President would have felt very strongly about. If I'd have asked somebody to swear me in that he didn't like, that would have been a very important matter. But it was genuine and I do not know of any relationship I had with Hubert Humphrey that in any way acted adversely to me or anyone else about it because of that.

M: Was there a presidential order during the campaign--Humphrey's campaign--restricting executive department people from campaigning or supporting Humphrey?

C: No, not during the campaign. The President had said, prior to the nomination, that we were not to get involved because you'll recall when my appointment was made, I came out and said that I was for Humphrey at the time I made my Press Club speech. And the President was very annoyed about that, and then issued the instruction that no Cabinet officer should get involved in politics. Again, the President didn't talk to me about that though. That word came to me from somebody in the White House. I knew that it was authentic, but he didn't talk to me. Well, that was all over, and I didn't do anything until the campaign. And then the President said, at a Cabinet meeting, that we were all to use our judgment in how we helped. I did; I went out and campaigned very vigorously for Humphrey, and worked with him. I worked with Bob Nathan in the writing of practically every one of the task force reports, the statements that were made in Health, Education, and Welfare, and I attended the eight o'clock meetings that Orville Freeman had in the basement of the Agriculture Department. And I know of no way that that in any way affected my relationship.

M: Do you have any impressions or insight or ideas or thoughts about Mrs. Johnson as First Lady?

C: Well, Mrs. Cohen and I have only the greatest, greatest respect and admiration for Mrs. Johnson. We think that she is a very, very great lady. I would also add that I think the President has great respect for Mrs. Johnson. He was always, every time I saw him, most considerate of Mrs. Johnson; he was most attentive. And she conducted herself with the decorum and respect of a First Lady that I think was admirable. Mrs. Cohen and I went to the see the Johnsons on the night of March 31st when he did announce his retirement and of course Mrs. Johnson was exceedingly happy about being able to go back to Texas. I think she was genuinely of the opinion that she and the President ought not to continue in Washington, and the whole conflict was too great, and she was very, very happy about it. Mrs. Cohen did campaign and went with Mrs. Johnson during the latter weeks and months of the campaign and got to know her quite well and liked her very much.

M: Which campaign?

C: The Humphrey campaign. And we went with Mrs. Johnson on her final trip to New Orleans together. And we had a fine time with her. I just think that she is a great lady and she was able to thread her way in the whole problem so that she didn't get the kind of criticism Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt did for getting involved in issues. She picked something like beautification that it was very difficult for people to be critical about, so she played her role as First Lady without getting herself deeply involved in politics. And I have the impression from what people say that Mrs. Johnson was very influential with President Johnson as being correct--that she was someone he trusted and ultimately he

did a lot of things she said. Incidentally, there were three women that I think were more influential with Johnson than almost any other three people, and they are all women. They are Mrs. Johnson first and foremost-- No, I'd say four women. Secondly, Mrs. Mary Lasker; third, Mrs. Arthur Krim; and fourth, Mrs. Florence Mahoney. Those four women, if you really want to find out how things got done in the Johnson Administration, you've got to find out from those four women. Because when other things couldn't be done and when I couldn't get something done, I worked through those four women. I was more successful in working through those four women than I was with the White House staff. That's an interesting observation to you, isn't it. Why don't we go into that the next time?

M: Yes.

End of Interview II

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