INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 10, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: R. CONRAD COOPER

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Cooper's office, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's begin, sir, by identifying you for the transcriber's purpose. You're R. Conrad Cooper and during the Johnson Administration--I guess throughout the Johnson Administration--you were vice president for Personnel Relations of the United States Steel Corporation.

C: I was executive vice president.

M: Right.

C: Personnel Services.

M: And you were, at the same time, chief labor negotiator for both your company and what they call the Group of Ten. Is that correct?

C: Coordinating committee of the Steel companies.

M: Right. Did you know Mr. Johnson at all before the time he became president?

C: No.

M: You never had any contact with him in his private [life], in his senatorial days, or so on?

C: No.

M: What about during the 1962 steel price difficulties with President Kennedy? To your knowledge, did Mr. Johnson get involved in that at all?

C: I have no knowledge of it.

M: Couldn't contact with him?

C: I mean that I have no knowledge that he was involved.

M: Your first contact, then, arose in the fairly well-publicized 1965 union difficulties with the steel industry.

C: Right.

M: I wonder if you could just describe the role you and he played in that.

C: Well, I think that as the end of August was approaching, it was quite clear that we had not reached an agreement and the possibility of not being able to do so and thus having a strike was emerging publicly. And he phoned--I can't recall precisely. I haven't gone into great detail.

M: That's okay. That's verifiable.

C: But the first personal contact I had with him was when he phoned me one morning. My recollection is it would be either August 20 or 27, I've forgotten which. I think it was the twentieth. He phoned and indicated his great concern with the problem [and] his high hope that we might be able to settle it ourselves and not have to involve the government in it. In other words, it was a very pleasant, brief, considerate telephone call.

M: He talked to you personally, not one of his staff people.

C: No. He talked to me. When he called me I had no knowledge that he was going to call and it was an interesting surprise. But that was the first personal contact I had had with him. I had heard

him make speeches and things of that sort in meetings I had been in, but never had I had any personal dealings with him. The phone call, as I remember it, I believe it would check out about August 20. A week before, really, the crisis time, was when he called. As I said, he just called to say he was greatly concerned with the problem [and] hoped that we could deal with it ourselves. That's my recollection.

M: How did he follow that up?

C: The reason I believe that this was the twentieth--I'm quite positive of the date--it was on August 28, a Saturday, [that] we received word that President Johnson was sending a trio of people to represent him [and] to sit with us and see if they could be of any help. This was Senator Wayne Morse as the chairman and LeRoy Collins. The third one slips my mind.

M: That's verifiable, too, without too much trouble.

C: Yes. Well, he was sending this trio of people.

M: They came here to Pittsburgh? And then did they deal for him for the balance of the time?

C: Well, they came simply as a form of . . . Well, what they said they were going to try to do was to mediate, try to help us, try to find out what the situation was and, if possible, be of some service. Bill Simkin was in the group. We met with the trio Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, Sunday, Sunday night. They had various meetings in which we met with them jointly with the union, or separately. And they left around a late hour Sunday night to report to the President

on Monday morning. That would be Monday morning, August 30.

M: Right. They were still reporting at that time, "No settlement."

C: They met with him to report that we were not going to be able to get together, that there was no help they could give us, that it looked like we were going to have to strike. They reported to him, so we were told, early on the Monday morning of August 31. And promptly thereafter, about nine o'clock, I got a telephone call from Secretary [John T.] Connor, saying that the President would appreciate it if the negotiating team would hop on down to Washington and meet with him.

M: Did he send the plane for you?

C: Connor said that a presidential jet would be here within half an hour or less, and we would be accommodated and all that sort of thing. I don't know how much of the sidelights you want.

M: Oh, that's what we're really interested in--the sidelight-type things that aren't in print elsewhere, you see.

C: Well, we responded. We said we'd be happy to be there, but as a matter of our own convenience, we'd prefer to come in our own transportation, that our four-man bargaining team had files, records, things to bring and that it would give us an opportunity in transit to confer about what was impending and we'd prefer to come on our own plane. And this was arranged, that we would come in our own plane, provided we would land at Andrews Air Force Base. What the reasons for that were, I was never quite clear [on], but I think it became quite obvious. A presidential plane--I mean one

sent by the President--did arrive at the airport, and the union people came down on that. I suppose it might not have looked too good to have a plane just come up for the union people but nevertheless--

M: That's right. I can see. . . .

C: That didn't become public, because we landed at Andrews Air Force Base and were held there for fifteen or twenty minutes until the other plane landed and the union people arrived. There were six of them, as I remember. And we were quickly brought together and boarded the presidential helicopter, which took us to the lawn there--

M: South Lawn of the White House.

C: The South Lawn. You're from Washington?

M: Yes, sir. We've lived in Washington.

You just went, then, right from the airport to the White House?

C: Yes, right from the airport to the South Lawn. There were limousines lined up there and so far as any public knowledge was concerned, we'd been seen to arrive together.

M: Did the President meet you himself then?

C: No. The limousines were lined up, and we were quickly escorted into the White House and into the Cabinet Room. And there was Secretary [W. Willard] Wirtz and there was Secretary [John T.] Connor. Secretary Wirtz and Secretary Connor of Commerce were in the Cabinet Room when we all trooped in. We waited a few minutes, maybe four or five minutes, when the President came in and made

the rounds and personally greeted everybody. Then he sat down at his customary position at the Cabinet table with a few brief notes in front of him--I'd say maybe two or three pages. With some outline, notes to talk from, not text, he talked for about forty-five minutes, I would estimate.

M: Forty-five minutes? That's a rather complex topic. Had he mastered some of the details?

C: No. He talked for about fifteen minutes I would say on the economics of the steel industry. In short, he advanced to the union the company's case. And then with a gleeful smile on his face, he said, "Now, let's talk about the union's case." As I recall his words, I wouldn't be exact, he said, "Abe and I both know the problems arising from winning the close election."

M: This is "Abe" I. W. Abel, not Abe Fortas?

C: I. W. Abel. After everybody had a little chuckle on that one, then he proceeded from that point. He had implied that the union has a political problem internally themselves. There are limits to what they can do and what they can't do. And for, I'd say, roughly fifteen minutes, he gave us what the union would want to say about its case.

Then he said, "I have problems of my own." And he proceeded to talk for--I'm just guessing the time factors--roughly fifteen minutes about his own concerns: the Vietnam War, the impossibility in the face of that of countenancing a steel strike. He talked about inflation and the balance of payments situation--really all

of it to the reasons why he was so vitally concerned that we settle our problem and not have a strike.

That was a very impressive, persuasive performance. I was dumbfounded that any man with the great responsibilities that he had could have been so well-versed, so well-briefed and posted on the entire situation. He was evidently completely posted on the essential elements of the issue, the important factors, and in all respects, except one--I've got to straighten this date out for you because it's very critical. I said this was September--this was August 31. Because, he evidently was not posted, and apparently the two Secretaries had missed the point because when he concluded this discussion he asked us to kindly proceed into the Executive Building next and make an agreement before midnight. Having been working on it only for nine or ten months, this wasn't an easy assignment. Well, I mention that point because he apparently thought that if we had an agreement by midnight, August 31, that that would preclude a strike. The thing he didn't know or didn't disclose knowledge of, nor did the Secretaries, was the fact that the strike was almost in full process at that point.

M: Already, at the time he was talking?

C: Yes. This was roughly eleven or twelve o'clock on Monday morning, August 31. You see, in steel you can't just shut it down like this. Progressively, starting three days ahead, two days, one day, various pieces of the steel operation had to be shut down if you're going to have a complete shut-down as of the strike notice point, which was

midnight of August 31. So [this was] the only apparent blind spot in this, or maybe he just didn't mention it for reasons of his own. This was the only thing that seemed to me that he hadn't been fully posted on. And that was a very critical piece of fact in the situation, because a strike, as of midnight, would have been in full effect.

We proceeded, as requested, over into the Executive Office Building. There were some very grim aspects of that and some humorous aspects of it. The conference room that we were assigned as the joint conference room was, I believe, the office that he had occupied as vice president before becoming president and it was right directly across from the White House. You could look out of the windows down on the west end of the White House in the back lawn. That was a very nice room. We were assigned individual rooms: one for the management people, one for the union people. They were less well appointed. I don't think they had been swept out for two years.

M: I had an office there last fall myself. I think I must have had one of those. (Laughter)

C: They were well protected with, actually, uniformed, armed Marine guards, said to be there for the purpose of protecting our privacy. But it could easily be looked upon as being there for seeing that we stayed put. All of this provoked a lot of concern. We were not in a position where we could confer with our superiors.

M: You didn't have telephonic communication with your superiors?

C: We couldn't have any communication. There we were.

M: Of course, labor had their top people.

C: They were there.

M: Mr. Abel was there, wasn't he?

C: Yes. Of course, he had his executive committee and he was not able to confer with them any more than we were with our executive associates. We were the representatives, not the principals.

Well, we were talking. I don't want to spend a lot of time on things that don't run directly to the inquiry. They run to the President. So I must say that his opening of the meeting, the way he handled it, was just dumbfounding. That anybody could be so burdened with so many great problems but to be as well-informed and as capable of acting in this kind of situation. His great urgency was that we settled it ourselves. They didn't want to do it, for obvious reasons, but the fact is that we were there.

M: Did he send some of his staff people over to the Executive Office Building with you? The Secretaries or. . . ?

C: He sent the two Secretaries, or as we fondly referred to them, our den mothers.

M: They were with you, then, throughout the course of your meetings?

C: They escorted us over: Connor with the management people, Wirtz with the labor people. They took us over to the joint conference room and had a little talk. They asked that we be kind enough to stay in the building. They wanted to have continuous meetings. They wanted to meet that night. They wanted us to stay in the

building while this was [in progress]. I don't recall whether it was joint instruction, or separate.

But in any event, as we went over, we had decided that the President had not mentioned the fact that the strike was almost an actuality, and neither had either of the Secretaries, and that this was the key point. If they had in mind the possibility of making an agreement between that hour and midnight on the total settlement, it was a physical impossibility, and that the really important thing we should address ourselves to immediately, if they wanted to create an atmosphere where negotiation could take place, [was that] there should be some action taken to call the strike off. We couldn't possibly do anything more in the immediate hours than to get down to some agreement extending the current agreement and therefore deferring the strike.

We advanced that thought to the Secretaries and it was considered. There were conferences back and forth between the Secretaries and ourselves and the labor people and it finally evolved in the afternoon that the union would not suggest an extension. There had been an extension negotiated from May 1 until August 31. That would be four months, wouldn't it? That had been very unpopular, and the union leaders, Abel and his people, would not suggest an extension. They wouldn't even consider one, unless it were a matter of routine that we had suggested and the President had endorsed it and requested that they accept it. So all these niceties of negotiation were accommodated. We agreed that

they could say we had suggested it. They'd have to determine themselves whether the President would indicate his desire that it be done. But in any event--whatever went on, I don't know--at roughly six o'clock, I'd say, on that first day, we had arrived at this extension--eight days or ten days, I don't remember.

M: But this would keep the industry open in the interim?

C: This would call the strike off, although millions of dollars had been wastefully expended by shutting down the operations. But if there was going to be any chance to negotiate sensibly, we ought to extend it and call it off, which is what happened at about six o'clock. As I remember, it was an eight-day extension. There was some witticism, someone says, "How did the eight days come up?" and I think it was related to the fact that the space flight had just been completed in eight days. And incidentally, the two men on the plane--one was named Conrad and one was named Cooper.

M: (Laughter) That's right. Simultaneous. . . .

C: They usually mentioned that Cooper, Gordon Cooper [first] and [Charles] Conrad [second]. And one newspaper came out that was reversed: "Conrad Cooper Ordered to Take Rest." In a few days one of my friends sent me one of those. I have it on a little placard, which I hang on my door once in a while.

M: (Laughter)

C: You know this is beside the point.

M: That's okay. That's what we like to get.

C: Well, at six o'clock, or roughly that, the moment we signed this

extension, the telephone rang and one of the government people that were with us--Wirtz, Connor, Reedy.

M: George Reedy?

C: George Reedy. He was crippled at the moment.

M: Yes.

C: And [Joseph] Califano. They were with us most of the time. They were in the room as of the time we signed this. There was a telephone conversation. The word was that the President would like to see Abel and me and have us tell him about this accomplishment.

So we were escorted over into the White House and we waited in the Fish Room. Wirtz and Connor were with us as I recall and we waited in the Fish Room. And time went on and time went on. In the meantime, the rest of the group was requested to stay right where they were and requested to make no telephone conversations, no telephone calls. This was a great irritation from the company standpoint because if it could be known that we had agreed to an extension, the shutting down of the operations could have terminated at six o'clock, instead of going on until some later hours.

M: You did explain this to Califano and Reedy, or to somebody?

C: Oh, yes.

M: But it was still forbidden.

C: That's right. It just wasn't permitted that anything could be done. Abel and I--with Connor and Wirtz with us most of the time,

as I recall as we sat in the Fish Room--could see movements through the hall of the equipment to the end that it became clear that something was going to take place in the way of a national television announcement. At maybe eight o'clock or something like that, we were then invited in. And we met with the President and reported to him what we had done in the way of this extension. We had called the strike off to get us in the position where we could at least, within a few days, a week maybe, have a chance to negotiate a settlement. We had a nice period of time with him.

Again, I was amazed at the interest he could devote to this, when he was constantly being brought this message or that message and constantly looking at something on the telephone, or having to devote other attentions to other things every minute.

But shortly before nine o'clock, he said that they were going to announce this on the television. And so the four of us joined with the President [and] followed him around through the Rose Garden to the theatre. And he made the announcement that this extension had been executed and the strike was called off for the period of the extension.

The ones that were behind us--I mean our joint teams, sitting in this office, were finally, at nine o'clock, or five minutes to nine, told that they could make a phone call. We could call our principals and tell them to watch the television at nine o'clock.

M: That's how the principals found out about it, then.

C: That's how they found out about it.

M: Was there any explanation as to why it was done this way? Just the President's desire?

C: It was never even imputed to the President.

M: At this meeting where he talked to you about the extension, did he give you any further orders as to what would transpire afterwards?

C: No.

M: Was there ever any veiled threat, as far as what the government's action might be under Taft-Hartley or something if the strike did go into effect?

C: No. I should have said that in his opening remarks, in documenting the case of the government, [he said] that they simply could not have a strike, that it was just unthinkable in light of the Vietnam War and world problems and the problems of the United States. He referred to the reports he had had from the Defense Department and from other agencies of the government, and he never inferred anything with respect to those facts. But it was perfectly clear to us, and I assume it was equally clear to the union, that the groundwork was all laid, that a strike wouldn't be permitted, that if we didn't do something about it ourselves, there could be immediate action. This is the inference. There was never any veiled reference to it or anything other than a statement. But to us it was clear enough--I think it was to them--that all of the procedural detail, including the fact that the trio had come up here to make an on-the-scene check and do a report to him, we thought it could have met all of the conditions of the Taft-Hartley proceedings.

Well, he was, of course, greatly pleased, greatly elated at the extension agreement, and then he urged us to get on with it and reach a conclusion.

Having had the announcement, the request was made by Connor or Wirtz or both that we have a further meeting that evening. We could go to our hotel and get something to eat, but then meet again afterwards, later on, to get it going. We took the position on both sides that there's no sense to this business. This around-the-clock action is not productive. It just exhausts people and causes mistakes, and we haven't operated that way. But if, for public appearance, they wanted us to be seen coming and going and in action, well, we'd do that. So we went back after the nine o'clock announcement. I'd say about ten o'clock, we went back and met with our principal and had some dinner. Then right after that I, with one other member of our team, met with Abel and one of his people and with Wirtz and Connor for a little chitchat and went our way.

M: Good public appearances.

C: It must have been great stuff to know that we were locked up there. The public was eating it up that it was an around-the-clock job, which was nauseating. A nauseating figment of people's imagination. We started action on Tuesday morning, and this was a very serious business.

M: Still in Washington then?

C: Oh, yes. Then we were in the Executive Office Building. So

that you'll understand, everything I'm saying now, from then until Friday night, all of these things were conducted in the Executive Office Building or in the White House.

We started operations in the early morning of Tuesday, having had this extension executed, and I went through a routine of, "Here are the issues as we see them. These are the union positions." And with the two of these Secretaries going back and forth, we would indicate, "Well, we will do this, if they will do these things." They would come back and say, "Well, they will do some of these things, but they want this."

M: Right.

C: This went on until Friday morning. We did have some night meetings. We had quite a fanfare. I can't remember whether it was on Tuesday or Wednesday, but in any event, it became public knowledge that we were confined to the Executive Office Building and taking our meals there. The first meal we had was a lunch and it was a beauty, steaks--my God, you couldn't eat half, beautiful big steak--for lunch. We didn't have dinners there; we went back to our respective places but we'd come back for night meetings if we had them. The lunches thereafter became cold sandwiches and soup.

We went through this business. At one point--I forget what day, maybe midstream, when we were in one of our joint sessions, and one of the difficult ones--the word came that we were going to have a visitor. The President came in and he again asked for a report

as to where we stood respectively. He again recited the great urgencies, the need for a solution, the unthinkable damages to the country if we were to have a strike. Always, of course, the plea was that we do it ourselves and they not have to even recommend to us. And that's for the obvious reason that whatever came out of it would be the responsibility of the parties and if it were an inflationary settlement, why, we would have on the company side the responsibility for it ourselves and the same way on the union side. Well, I suppose he must have spent, again, a half to three-quarters of an hour. And it was just a very pleasant but urgent plea that we do the job, that he had to have this help, we had to do this for our country, and that sort of thing. That's the third time that I saw him.

Then from that time until Friday morning, as I recall it, we had gotten the situation down to three or four basic difficulties on which neither side would budge. There was great activity between the two Secretaries, and I think Gardner Ackley was with them. It was reported--although we didn't see him--that the President had been with them. In any event, they came to both sides at around four-thirty, or something like that, on Friday, as I remember, September 3. And they said what they would recommend, with respect to the solution of these things. They recommended in our favor on one or two of them. And the real key thing--the matter of retirement after thirty years service, which we just wouldn't touch voluntarily--they recommended that we yield this.

They held that we were over-pricing, and they didn't know a damned thing more about it than we did. There's no actuarial basis to know about it in our judgment.

M: It was an estimation based on experience in your case.

C: Based on guesstimating in the future as to what might happen. They guesstimated that we were over-guesstimating. All that sort of thing.

This was brought to us, I'd say, about four o'clock, and we said, "Well, we're at the end of the road, and we will not make a decision. We will not make a decision one way or another except as we go consult with our principals." And they said, "How long will that take you?" We said, "Maybe half an hour."

So we did. We went and consulted with our principals and concluded that it was a very, very unhappy decision to have to make, but that as a choice between this, which was apparently available on the one hand, and having the strike, the long, prolonged difficulty, we concluded that--I should say the chief executives concluded unanimously--that this was as a better course, much as we disliked it. So we went back on that basis, and met with the two Secretaries, and said that we would accept this if the union would. We had developed some humor and rapport with these fellows and had our own way of talking in hieroglyphics. When we reached this point with Wirtz and Connor, to announce to them that we had decided we would accept it if the union would, I told them the little story that we were reminded of the case of the boy who

picked a girl up in his car. I don't think this ought to be recorded.

M: Oh, you can edit it out or restrict it, either one.

C: [He] drove a few blocks and said, "I'm a man of few words. Will you or won't you?" And she said, "Where?" So they knew what we were saying. We said, seriously, that we would do this if the union would.

Within two or three minutes the door opened and in came the union fellows and obviously they had already said they would, because they came in with their hands out to shake hands. So we had an agreement. That is, we had an understanding on the basis of which an agreement could be made.

Now for your appreciation of what followed, I think you should know that to have a settlement agreement, I mean to have a meeting of the minds on fundamental issues is one thing. Then the next step, a very, very difficult step, is to negotiate a settlement agreement.

M: A specific contract.

C: No, a specific settlement agreement for eleven companies with all these ramified operations, which says that with respect to this issue this shall be done, with respect to the various things. And then it comes to the point of another provision that requires each of the eleven companies--management and union representatives--to alter their specific labor agreement in such a fashion as to embody all of these things, these agreements being different in

some respects as between all the companies. And then there has to be the period of very difficult, intense negotiations between each of the eleven companies to finally wind it up by a certain date.

Well, we had a meeting of the minds. We hadn't yet gone through the negotiation of the settlement agreement. We had to do that. We had to go on through the negotiation thereafter, so that it was a very delicate period of time and a very strenuous one. And again, inversely like the strike, the end of it marking the completion of it, instead of the beginning of it. The meeting of the minds just marked the beginning of it. The end of it is God knows what yet has to be done.

Immediately [after] we had made this decision we were all invited--the two negotiating teams, the Secretaries, and so on--over to the White House. We met in the Fish Room. In due course, we were ushered into the President's presence. He was, of course, elated and in very high spirits, congratulating everybody and periodically being interrupted with some message, probably of great consequence. But his devotion to this moment was, again, very impressive.

It was made clear that this was going to be announced on a national hook-up. It would take place at a certain time. I think it was seven o'clock or eight o'clock. But, in any event, there was quite a bit of time in between. And we jollified around in the Oval Room and out on the lawn. He took us out on the lawn; had lots of pictures taken. We each got one, two, or three specific

photographs. I have one in which he and I are in his study room, his little rest room, and he's sitting in the chair and I'm sitting on a loveseat with his hand up on my knee. It's the perfect one for him to write the caption, "Come now [and let us reason together"].

M: (Laughter) That's the caption he wrote?

C: Then he has a couple of others that are very nice photographs that they took. But he arranged to do this with the whole group.

I should go back for a minute. Every time we looked around there was a little [photographer], I think he was a Filipino--

M: [Y. R.] Okamoto.

C: --back of the President that was always snapping.

M: They've got those things down in Austin at the Library. There must be hundreds of thousands of them all together. I can't imagine. They're keeping them all. He's probably got copies of the ones he sent to you, too.

C: Oh, sure. Well, this was going on all the time, and out on the lawn. He, of course, was in very high spirits. This was a tremendous, tremendous load off his back because it could have been very critical. He came to a point where he wanted us to sit down. This was in the Oval Room. He has his chair here and there are two loveseats here, fireplace, here. And there the fellows were. We were sitting here, and he was sitting here. And he said, "I'm going to make this statement and I want to read this to you and have your counsel, if you have any counsel left to give on it." That was the statement that announced the settlement

and his great pleasure that it had been done and the constructive efforts of the parties. Then he had in [it] a part that was this not inflationary. He put it to us that he wanted our counsel. Having read through that, I knew that if he made that statement he would touch off [controversy]. It's just something that shouldn't be said because it wasn't true. It was an inflationary settlement. At least from every yardstick, in our judgment, it was and to make such a statement would be contrary to the interests of the companies.

M: It would almost commit you to future action.

C: It would almost.

M: Or non-action in that case.

C: It could. It just was something that, in light of the circumstances, shouldn't be said and I knew that it would create great controversy and it would compel responding statements and we'd have another difficult time.

So I said to him and this is true, "Well, you asked for our counsel." This is roughly my words. I don't remember my words, but I know the substance. I said, "I would suggest that your use of the term non-inflationary is not well advised, that it will undoubtedly provoke controversy. We can't afford to have controversy. Bear in mind that we have not concluded these negotiations. We have simply a meeting of the minds on the basis. We have to proceed from here immediately to negotiate a settlement agreement. We've only got a few days in which to do it because the extension is only for eight

days. The union has to get a ratification and we simply cannot, in this period of time, afford to have controversy. It could unravel everything we've got, and we'd still have a strike."

He perked up like nobody's business and he snapped his fingers, as I recall. (Snaps figners) At least, he immediately called Ackley, Connor, and Wirtz. They were in the room, but I mean he summoned them. They were at attention and one of the union fellows--not Abel--I've forgotten which one. I believe it was Brethoff.

M: What was that name?

C: Brethoff, Elliot Brethoff. I believe he was the one. He spoke up and he said, "Mr. President, I think that he has a point. We can't afford to have controversy in something like this." Well, in a twinkly, he told them to make the change. He didn't tell him what to do, but he told him to do something.

M: To meet your objection, in other words.

C: Yes. Oh, he made the changes. The changes were made, and his statement on the television embodied the changes. But one of the major newspaper lines carried all of the stories from the television statement, but they had already issued the advanced copies to the press. They were already gone. They couldn't make corrections. So a very few of the newspaper chains used the advance copy, but they didn't get much notice. It was the official television text that got the attention, because this was in fact what he said.

That was really an impressive thing to me, that at that moment,

to have all of this done and then to have the sensitivity to recognize that, well, here's a pitfall and if those words were used it could create controversy and all the good work would be unraveled. To act on it on that short notice was really impressive.

Well, we continued these discussions around the Oval Room, waiting until time to go to the theatre. Then we went there and he made his announcement and the great steel strike, he said, as far as he was concerned, was history.

Being of the bubbling-over kind of a person he was or is, he led us back through the Rose Garden with the whole gamut of newspaper photographers, news media, cameras, all of them in front of us, backing up to take pictures of the walk through the Rose Garden, and he joshed with the press. I remember particularly, he said that when the word got out that he was feeding us in the White House or in the Executive Office Building Lady Bird became quite concerned because that was on her budget. He said he told her that he fed us good only once; not to worry, that it was inexpensive, that he fed us well only once and that it was very meager. He wanted us to stay awake.

M: If you hadn't agreed when you did, it'd have been bread and water the second week. (Laughter)

C: Yes. That's about it. Anyway, he joked at this business. Then after an amount of it, he went back to the Oval Room. The party was scaled down then to the exclusion of the press. Just as we came in the door off of the Rose Garden, why, his secretary said that Mrs.

Johnson wanted him to call her. She was on the phone in Texas. He had been brought back from his vacation. He was on vacation out there, but this issue had forced him to come back and be there these days. So there was concern about getting him aboard his plane to get back to Texas. So she was on the phone.

Well, he grabbed me and Abel, and he said, "Come with me. I want you to speak to her." So again he was sitting in this little room, with Abel on one side and me on the other. And he's talked with her and talked about he'd be leaving in twenty minutes or so and it would take him an hour or two hours to be in Texas, "Let's go to a certain place for dinner," and "Let's have fish for dinner," and "let's have"--he named friends that he wanted with him. It was--

M: Very domestic?

C: --very domestic. Then he said he wanted to introduce a couple of old friends that were here with him. And he said, "They're a couple of old friends. I want you to meet Conrad Cooper, the president of the United Steelworkers Union." Great laughter in the room just exploded, and then he said, "No, I'll put them on alphabetically. Mr. Abel, president of the Steelworkers Union." And he corrected himself definitely by switching to the alphabetical. Well, we each talked to her briefly. Then again, [there were] some more photographs and various arrangements which he conducted.

In due course we were out of there, I guess, maybe by nine o'clock or so, rushing to our various accommodations to get back to

Pittsburgh that night. [We had] started a hell of an undertaking with this business.

M: But the President's role was over then.

C: It was over.

C: I'm sure some of the things I've been saying won't print. But I think it would serve your purpose to have me read to you this September 9 letter that I wrote to the President:

"Dear Mr. President:

After leaving the White House last Friday evening, the steel company and union negotiators devoted their entire energies on Saturday, Sunday and Monday to the task at hand. We officially executed an overall settlement agreement about an hour before midnight, Monday, September 6, Labor Day in every sense of the word. This agreement calls for the development of individual labor contracts for each of the ten companies, such to be completed on or before Friday, September 10.

Having arrived where conclusion of the negotiations can be foreseen, I hasten to convey some thoughts regarding our experiences in the White House. Speaking for the steel companies, I can summarize these experiences this way. During the opening discussion in the Cabinet Room, you conveyed to all of us a sense of national urgency involved and your great desire that the issues be resolved by collective bargaining. Thereafter, Secretary Connor and Secretary Wirtz exerted every possible effort, objectively and impartially, to help the parties resolve the issue by collective bargaining.

Progress was made, but an impasse was reached on certain remaining issues. In an extreme effort to be helpful, Secretary Wirtz and Secretary Connor then made recommendations with respect to each such issue. These recommendations were presented as proposals to be accepted or rejected by either party.

Reluctantly, we agreed to accept the proposals if the union would also accept them. We chose this course in preference to the apparent alternatives of a devastating, costly steel strike, official governmental intervention with prolonged and injurious public controversy or some other form of third party participation with ultimate resolution entailing consequences of unknown magnitude.

Now we are back at home. Our thoughts turn to the future and the central question of how to avoid the deplorable situation of last week--a collective bargaining controversy of such consequences as to invoke overtaxing the attentions of the President and two members of his Cabinet. We appreciate and thank all three of you for your dedicated, tireless, and even-handed efforts to have the parties settle the issues through the process of free collective bargaining. I believe you know that those of us representing the companies exerted every effort to this end, to the avoidance of any issues finally inviting third-party recommendation.

We know you share our conviction that we must find ways to avoid repetitions of the circumstances which produced last week's crisis. You may be assured that we on our side will be dedicating ourselves to that end. We came home with a better appreciation

of the burdens which rest upon the presidential shoulders. We hope that the actions taken last week may contribute in some way to a lightening of that burden.

Thank you for the many courtesies you extended to us in the White House."

M: You used even-handed and impartial a couple of times in there. You really believe that White House participation in that kind of difficulty turns out to be, in fact, even-handed?

C: Let's delineate between whether the circumstance can permit equity. Let's put that aside and distinguish, and this is what I was saying, between that and the people involved. They can be even-handed, fair, unbiased, and this is what I said.

M: Did you feel like that the Commerce Department adequately represented the viewpoint of your side? Was it equipped to do so? It had the facts, and so on?

C: They shouldn't be called on to do that. We adequately represented our side. The Secretary of Commerce was extremely understanding and extremely skillful in seeing that the facts, as we adduced them, the circumstances as we adduced them, got a proper hearing. Likewise, Wirtz. He could no more represent the union than the man in the moon, I mean effectively, such as they effectively presented their own case.

M: I see.

C: But as between people that are trying to be helpful with the sense of truly desiring to help the parties do the job themselves

and to not be throwing curves that puts one or another in a bind, this is the kind of a thing that we felt was all anybody could ask.

Now, to validate the judgment, for whatever means, in the record, I'm a Republican. I never voted for Lyndon Johnson. I have had much difference with him, in my own judgment, with the things that have transpired under [a] Democratic regime. But so far as a man who, in a great crisis with which we had great concern--whether he should have been in it at all is an entirely different subject, but being in it under the circumstances that he was, and with the concerns that he had for the national welfare--I say what I said in that letter with real conviction.

M: Did you have any subsequent dealings with him on future labor troubles in the steel industry, or in any other way?

C: No.

M: You were not one of the businessmen that he called on general matters as a matter of course?

C: No.

M: Perhaps this is a good way to summarize as a conclusion here. Could you make an estimation as to what Mr. Johnson thought--this is kind of a difficult question; it's subjective, I agree--about businessmen and what businessmen thought about Mr. Johnson as a kind of a generalization among the circles in which you move with executives?

C: Well, you're talking about this episode?

M: Well, yes. This is the only contact that you had. Did he trust businessmen, for example?

C: I have to confine myself to this central thing.

M: Yes, surely.

C: I have the distinct impression, acquired through chief executives that we were representing, that he went out of his way to make clear his feeling of great appreciation. He was very complimentary as to the attitude of them, and as represented by us, in trying to solve this problem.

M: And you mentioned his taking of your counsel in the critical instance at the end. He valued your judgment there.

C: I think he did.

M: I don't want to cut you off. Is there anything else you want to add? You've been very patient and kind to give us this much time in the morning.

C: No.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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Harry A. Thompson, II
Donor — Vice President

September 9, 1983
Date

Archivist of the United States

September 30, 1983
Date